

Monica FLORENCE

In Search of the Melting Pot: Athenian Ethnic Identity in Old Comedy

This paper addresses the construction of Athenian ethnic identity in Old Comedy. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that Aristophanes does not, like other comic poets, distance the Athenians from the Ionian *ethnos*. Instead, he collapses this boundary for comic effect. In four different comedies, Aristophanes associates Athenian characters with the term "Ionian" (*Akharnians* 102-122; *Peace* 930-936; *Thesmophoriazousai* 159-165; *Ekklesiazousai* 877-883, 918-920), and he twice puts the Ionic dialect into the mouths of Attic speakers (*Thesmophoriazousai* 101-103; frag. 556). In fact, only once in extant Aristophanic comedy is the term "Ionian" not associated with an Athenian character (*Peace* 46). As I argue, this temporary ethnic ambiguity functions as reinforcement of Athenian cultural and ethnic superiority.

Recent studies have shown that fifth-century Athenian literature and art increasingly emphasized a distinct Athenian identity (Hall 2002, 1997; Cohen 2000; Shapiro 1999; Mills 1997; Rosivach *CQ* 1987), but no one has evaluated comprehensively the comic instances of the term "Ionian" and its significance in the articulation of Athenian ethnic identity. Like other comic poets, Aristophanes employs the label to denote effeminate, extravagant, sophistic, and pusillanimous behavior; however, his targets are prominent Athenian ambassadors, assemblymen, and sophists rather than the expected Ionian islanders. In *Akharnians* for example, a Persian character, speaking gibberish Greek, reduces a powerful Athenian ambassador to the role of an effeminate "Ionian" supplicant (103). Yet Aristophanes only superficially blurs the boundaries of the ambassador's Athenian identity. The ambassador speaks Attic, rather than Ionic, Greek and no mention is made of "Ionian" manners or attire. Indeed, the Athenian comic hero reveals that both ambassadors sent to Persia, far from Ionian "eunuchs", are in fact the politician Kleisthenes and the wrestler Straton (115-122). Similarly in *Peace*, a slave suggests to Trygaios a scheme to frighten the Athenian assemblymen into speaking in the Ionic dialect (930-936). The clear implication is that Ionians are cowardly and the Athenians would be startled into acting momentarily like the Ionians. These ethnic jokes work because comedy generally presents the Athenians as superior to other Greeks and the assumed alternate ethnic identity is only temporary. So in *Peace*, the god War begins to pound all the different Greek groups together to make a single dish (230-288), but the Athenian comic hero, as leader, prevents this ethnic stew by browbeating the diverse groups into excavating the goddess Peace (296-300, 458-519).

Kallias has inquired: "why is Ionia effeminate and full of feasts?" (frag. 8). As this paper reveals, Aristophanes redirects the same question inwards --against public figures within Athens itself. Ultimately such playful reversals do not create a melting pot. Instead, the comic reversals create a comparison that reinforced the belief that Athenians were both culturally dominant and ethnically distinct among the Greeks.