

Democracy in debate – Athenian theatre

Questions :

- 1/ Describe the three documents (nature and topic, author, date and historical background, who it is meant for). Documents 1, 2 and 3
- 2/ What are the two regimes defended by each character ? Use quotations.
Document 1
- 3/ What is the suggestion of the author to solve the troubles of democracy? Why were Athenians supposed to laugh at this proposition ? Document 2
- 4/ What is the danger that threatened democracy according to Euripides ? Use quotations. Documents 1
- 5/ Demonstrate that Aristophanes is using irony to reinforce his argumentation. Use quotations. Documents 2 and 3
- 6/ Make a list of the arguments for and against democracy. Use the documents and your own knowledge about Democracy in Ancient Greece.

Document 1

Theseus, the mythical founder of Athens, answers to the Theban herald (ambassador). Thebes is another Greek city.

Theseus : [...] Athens, the free city, is not governed by one man, but the people rules in succession year by year. No preference is allowed, and the poor and the rich man are equal.

Theban Herald : The city where I come from is ruled by one man only, not by multitudes. There's no crafty orator with specious words to turn the minds of inhabitants for his own interests. [...] Besides, how the people, incapable of proper judgments, could guide a city ?

Theseus : [...] There's nothing more grievous for a city than a tyrant. For first, no laws exist to bind the whole community. Law is the exclusive property of the tyrant, equality doesn't exist. But under written laws, the poor and the rich are equal. Even the poorest man can answer to the prosperous man's insults. [...] How can a city be administrated with more equality ?

Euripides, *The suppliants*, 423 BC

Vocabulary list

- to bast : to prepare a sausage (word use in pork butchery)
- crafty : clever, ingenious
- a demagogue : a politician using false arguments to convince people
- drunk : excited or confused by alcoholic drink
- garland : crown
- grievous : seriously dangerous
- grieved : to feel grief
- harsh : unpleasantly severe
- inebriation : state of a drunk man/woman
- to jumble up : to mix things or ideas in order to create confusion
- to make a hash of : to cut something in small pieces

Document 2

The play concerns a group of women, the leader of which is Praxagora. She has decided that the women must convince the men to give them control of Athens, because they could rule it better than they have been. The women then institute a totalitarian-like government in which the state feeds, houses, and generally takes care of every Athenian. They enforce an idea of equality by allowing every man to sleep with every woman, but that the man must sleep with an ugly woman before he may sleep with a beautiful one.

Praxagora : Who'd like to speak?

Woman : Me.

Praxagora : Crown thee and may chance be with you.

Woman : Before I've had a drink ?

Praxagora : A drink ?

Woman : But surely, they drink there too ! [...] I swear they really do, and it's unmixed too ! Well, think of their decisions. The kind of things they bring themselves to do. Their craziness suggests inebriation ! What's more, they're always pouring out libations. Why else, if not to help themselves to wine ? And then, they swap abuse abuse just like real drunks, and the archers to carry the worst ones out.

Praxagora : I've had enough of you as well : sit down ! [...] This land belongs to me as well as you, my citizens. I'm vexed and grieved to see the poor conditions the city's affairs are in. I notice how she always has as leaders the rotten types. If one of them is decent, for once whole day, he's rotten then for ten. [...] You should leave the government of the city to women. We already are rulers and treasurers of our homes.

Aristophanes, *The Assemblywomen*, 392 BC

Document 3

Demos, a character that is the embodiment of the people, is under the domination of a demagogue who rules the state using lies and cajolery. A Demos' slave proposes to a pork butcher to replace the demagogue.

In this play, Aristophanes criticized the power of Cléon, a rich and powerful Athenian man, a very good speaker, who dominated the political life in Athens during seven years until he died in 422 BC.

Aristophanes denounced the power of demagogues over the Athenian democratic government.

Demos' Slave : You lucky dog. You're the very man for the place.

The Pork Butcher : But my good fellow, I've got no education. I just know my letters, and that very imperfectly.

Demos' Slave : Ah, that's against you. You ought not even to know your letters at all. The leadership of the people is no more meant for an educated man than it is for one good character. It goes naturally to an uneducated villain.

The Pork Butcher : But what I can't quite make out is, how I am qualified to manage the people?

Demos' Slave : Bless you, it's the easiest thing in the world. Just do what you're doing now. Jumble up and make a hash of the things. Get the people on your side by basting them well with a few culinary expressions, and there you are. All the other accomplishments of a demagogue you possess – a harsh voice, low birth, and connection with the market place. You've really got every qualification for political life.

Aristophanes, *The Knights*, 424 BC