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## PROLOGUE AS A STRUCTURAL ELEMENT IN THE COMEDIES OF ARISTOPHANES

**Аннотация.** В статье предпринимается попытка дать определение пролога в древнеаттической комедии, основанное на его функции в структуре комедии в целом. Понимание функции пролога возможно через разложение его на структурные элементы и анализ каждого из них. Предлагается обзор работ Поля Мазона и Октава Наварра, которые предложили варианты деления комического пролога на части. Мазон выделяет три части пролога: шествие или «открывающая сцена»; обращение к зрителю или изложение; развитие комической темы в драматическом действии. Наварр полагает, что комический пролог включает в себя два элемента трагической структуры: трагический пролог и первый эпизод, что обуславливает большую продолжительность пролога в комедии по сравнению с трагедией. В завершении статьи дается определение пролога через его функциональную роль в структуре и композиции комедии. Пролог — это целая часть комедии, которая содержит экспозицию и завязку сюжета пьесы. Функция пролога двойная: с одной стороны, пролог призван заинтересовать зрителя (это достигается с помощью шуток и сатиры), с другой — изложить всю необходимую информацию о герое, препятствии или проблеме, с которой он сталкивается, и о способе решения этой проблемы, который у него появляется.

**Ключевые слова:** Аристофан, античная комедия, структура комедии, пролог, Поль Мазон

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## PROLOGUE AS A STRUCTURAL ELEMENT IN THE COMEDIES OF ARISTOPHANES

**Abstract.** The article explores the concept of comic prologue in Ancient Greek comedy, examining its function and significance within the structure of the comedy as a whole. The function of the prologue can be understood by breaking it down into structural elements and analyzing each of them. The article examines the works of scholars Paul Mazon and Octave Navarre who have put forward different perspectives on segmenting the comic prologue. Mazon suggests that the comic prologue can be divided into three parts: a procession or playful “opening scene”, an address to the viewer or recitation, and development of the comic theme in a scene of dramatic action. Navarre focuses on the origin of the comic prologue, its connection with the structure of tragedy, and the comparison of the prologue’s greater length in comedy than in tragedy. The article concludes with a definition of the comic prologue as the first part of a play that contains an exposition, including the representation of main character(s), the problem to be solved, the plan to overcome it, and the first stage of implementation of this plan before the chorus joins in. The function of the prologue is twofold: to engage the audience through jokes and satire, and to provide all necessary information for plot development.

**Keywords:** Aristophanes, ancient comedy, structure of comedy, prologue, Paul Mazon

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Aristotle in his *Poetics* described a tragic prologue as μέρος ὅλον τραγῳδίας τὸ πρὸ χοροῦ παρόδου (Aristot. *Poet.* 1452b. 19–20), “the whole of that part of a tragedy which precedes the entrance of the chorus”<sup>1</sup>. Since then, the same definition has been adopted for comedy. But what is it exactly, τὸ μέρος ὅλον? As for the second part, it is clear that the prologue is not a choral part and does precede the first choral song.

Aristotle’s definition does not help us define the comic prologue, given its function in the comedy’s structure and the function of the comic plot. Nonetheless, there is a need for such a definition in regard to creating a commentary on ancient comedy. A commentary may consider different levels of a text: the level of a single word, of a phrase or metaphor, of a passage or a fragment, and finally the level of a structural element. By structural element, I mean a complete part of a play that is separated from others by its content, metrics, or other feature. Any structural element has its specifics and plays a certain role in the composition of a play, in the development of a plot, or in the communication between the poet and the citizens (as parabasis does). I believe that we can understand and interpret a particular verse, joke, or fragment better considering the structural element to which they belong.

The prologue as a structural element of comedy has not received enough attention from scholars. Otherwise, the choral parts have been studied attentively since the monograph by Theodor Zieliński, “Die Gliederung der altattischen Komödie” [Zieliński 1885], who summed up the previous research, up to the study by Gregory Sifakis, “Parabasis and Animal Choruses: A Contribution to the History of Attic Comedy” [Sifakis 1971]. Some observations on the comic prologue were made by French scholars Paul Mazon and Octave Navarre, but their works do not deal exclusively with the structure of a comic prologue.

In this article, I’m going to review the approaches of Mazon and Navarre. I believe that their ideas are right, but they might be supplemented with further details. Defining the function of a comic prologue will help formulate a comprehensive definition of a comic prologue.

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In his “Essai sur la composition des comédies d’Aristophane” [Mazon 1904], Paul Mazon made the first attempt to divide the comic prologue into genuine elements inherent to the Old Comedy. He suggested that the prologue should be divided into three parts.

The first one is a playful opening scene meant to arouse curiosity in the audience. It is accompanied by jokes and actions which are often not relevant to the comedy’s plot. Examples include the satire on playwrights and musicians at the beginning of *The Acharnians* or political satire in the form of the dream interpretation in *The Wasps*. To describe this part, Mazon employs the term *la parade* (parade as flaunting) because he considers it to be the analogy of burlesque scenes performed by buffons (*nos parade foraines*) [Mazon 1904: 170].

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<sup>1</sup> Trans. by W. H. Fyfe [Aristotle 1965: 43].

However, for the beginning of a comedy, the entrance of the characters on stage is not the only possible feature. True, in some comedies characters are walking for quite a long time: e. g., in *Thesmophoriazusae* Euripides and the Relative enter the stage and then walk until they reach Agathon's house (around 38 verses long); in *The Birds*, two heroes are in the middle of a journey guided by two birds, and their travel ends around verse 50, way longer than the end of the opening in 26; in *The Frogs* the journey to the underworld covers not only the opening scene, not only the entire prologue but also the first song of the chorus. But in other comedies the opening might be organized differently. In *Ecclesiazusae* and *The Acharnians* the opening scene corresponds to the soliloquy spoken by a single character, and the parade (entrance of the other characters) happens after the opening scene has come to an end. In *The Knights*, *The Wasps*, and *Peace* the action took place in a household, in a yard somewhere before the house, and the slaves appearing in the opening scene remain there. In *Wealth* the parade happens before the comedy starts: by the time of Carion's first remark, three characters have already been on stage for some time.

The term chosen by Mazon seems to have a limited scope since it doesn't fully describe the opening scenes in all eleven comedies. Probably this was clear to Mazon himself because he uses other terms for describing this first part of a comedy: *une exhibition piquante* (a piquant performance); *tableau imprévu et dialogue plaisant* (unexpected scene and pleasant dialogue); *le tableau d'entrée* (the opening scene); *un tableau imprévu* (an unexpected scene).

As we can see from this range of descriptions, the opening scene might be characterized by two features: pleasantness and unexpectedness. As for the former, the opening scene should contain nice jokes or clever satire to entertain spectators who might get bored. However, the latter feature seems to me even more important: the opening scene should create suspense so that spectators can't take their eyes off the stage. This suspense, the intrigue of the comedy's plot, is possible insofar as the audience knows very little about it. Unlike the tragic plays, whose story and subject are well known from mythology and preliminarily announced during the *proagon*, the comic plot seems to be unexpected for the spectators.

Since the audience is almost completely ignorant, the poet has an opportunity to surprise or shock the spectators and thus catch their attention. As William Geoffrey Arnott put it, "Aristophanes intends his audience to be puzzled; the puzzlement nails an observer's attention to the scene and makes him concentrate on the play's opening words at least until an explanation of the diverting scene is divulged" [Arnott 1993: 16]. In the opening scenes of the surviving plays some unusual, crazy, or unexplainable actions take place. It might be something extraordinary (someone catches a mad master, or women from all over Greece hold a meeting), satirical (primarily paratragic, like the soliloquies of Dikaiopolis, Strepsiades, or Praxagora), or funny (slaves feed dung to a beetle, Xanthius and Dionysus argue about hackneyed jokes). But for some time, the audience does not understand what's going on and why. This bewilderment might cause

boredom, so for the poet it is necessary not to lose the spectators' benevolence. In *Peace*, Aristophanes considers the bewilderment that might arise and anticipates it:

Οὐκοῦν ἄν ἤδη τῶν θεατῶν τις λέγοι  
νεανίας δοκησίσσος· «Τόδε πράγμα τί;  
Ὁ κἄνθαρος δὲ πρὸς τί;»  
(*Pax* 43–45 [Wilson 2007: 284])

But perhaps some spectator, some beardless  
youth, who thinks himself a sage, will say,  
“What is this? What does the beetle mean?”<sup>2</sup>

This remark reveals the scope of possible audience reactions to the theatrical performance. Aristophanes supposes that somebody might feel bored (but the only reason for that is the insolent nature of that person) and start to talk to the neighbor who might also be involved in the conversation. Of course, Aristophanes uses this passage not for its own sake but for introducing a political joke in 45–49.

Therefore, in opening scenes, Aristophanes ought to keep the balance between entertainment and surprise. Inevitably, this culminates in a transition to the second part — to the revelation of the comic plot.

For the second part, Mazon uses several terms. The first is *le boniment* (a praise speech addressed to the audience). According to the researcher, one of the characters speaks to the spectators and explains the plot, or more precisely, *le thème comique* — the comic theme of the play. However, this term doesn't cover all the possible ways to explain the plot. Such a speech addressed to the audience can be found only in *The Knights*, *The Wasps*, *Peace*, and *The Birds*. These four prologues have a common feature: we see two characters of equal status (two slaves of one household in the former three plays, and two ex-citizens in *The Birds*) who are equally aware of the situation (that is, of the plot). No third character appears on stage to whom they could explain their problem or motivation<sup>3</sup>. Hence, the only one who needs any explanation of the situation is the spectator, and the poet is forced to use *le boniment*. The other term for the second part of the prologue is *le récit-prologue*, i. e. recitation [Whittaker 1935: 181]. This term is wider than the previous one, and *le boniment* is just a special case of *le récit-prologue*.

The main function of this part is to reveal the comic theme of the play. Analyzing the prologues of the extant comedies, Mazon mentions other possible content of the recitation. Firstly, the poet reveals the actors' characters, as in *The Knights* [Mazon 1904: 34]. Secondly, the recitation might include revealing the hero's plans and the discussion they've provoked, as in *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Lysistrata* [Mazon 1904: 111]. In some cases, the recitation might be changed

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<sup>2</sup> Trans. by Eugene O'Neill [Oates 1938: 672].

<sup>3</sup> Except for *The Birds*, where the heroes explain the purpose of their journey twice — first to the audience, later to the Hoopoe in more detail.

into a vivid dialogue, as in *The Frogs* [Mazon 1904: 141]. This analysis does not seem to be consistent enough.

I agree with Mazon that the second part of a prologue is meant to explain the comic plot to the audience. But its structure is very complicated. The most important information which is disclosed to the audience is the problem or obstacle which the hero encounters, and the hero's plan to overcome that problem. Implementation of the plan starts the real action, and the whole play will show the consequences of the hero's decision. The plan is usually fantastic or funny, whereas the problem itself might be familiar to every Athenian. Besides these two key pieces of information, the second part may have additional details: a backstory, a description of how the plan was invented, and some objections against the plan posed by other characters. For that reason, the second part of the prologue may be lengthy, inconsistent, and interrupted by occasional jokes. For example, Praxagora at the end of her soliloquy (*Ec.* 19–22) explains why she has come on stage with a lamp — because she is waiting for her late friends — but the true idea of the female conspiracy, the reason for their odd behavior (dressing up like men and intention to sneak into the Assembly) becomes clear only in Praxagora's speech in 169–240. That's when the audience learns the purpose of the heroines: they want to vote on the transition of power in the city to women.

For this part of the prologue, I would suggest the term *explicatio*. It aims to fill the audience in and relieve their anxiety provoked by an unexpected and incomprehensible opening scene.

Finally, the third part concludes the prologue. After revealing the comic plot, the poet puts in a scene that shows the comic theme in a specific form and starts the action [Mazon 1904: 172]. It might be not one scene, but a sequence of scenes (as in *The Acharnians* or *The Frogs*). Speaking of a function of this part, it shows the implementation of the plan invented or revealed in the *explicatio*.

Mazon does not apply his scheme consistently enough while analyzing the prologues. In my opinion, his scheme is a result of an attentive study and clever observation, but it needs further particularization. As it stands, the scheme fits quite well for the early comedies, including *The Birds*, but fails to fully describe the prologues of the later ones.

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Octave Navarre also wrote about the structure of the prologue in his article “Les origines et la structure de la comédie ancienne” [Navarre 1911]. He proposes a division of the comedy prologue into two parts.

The first is what exactly corresponds to the tragic prologue, a simple l'exposition du sujet [Navarre 1911: 269–70]. The second part is more extensive, full of action, which in tragedy corresponds to the first episode. This division is inspired by the tragedy's structure, but it may help to note some important features of the comic prologue. Navarre noted that in comedy the chorus participates in action actively, unlike in tragedy, but the chorus' intervention is required only after the action has developed a little [Navarre 1911: 270–71]. As we saw before, this function belongs to the third part of Mazon's scheme.

According to Navarre, the comic prologue was adopted from tragedy, while originally comedy did not have any prologue and began with the *parodos*. The appearance of a “preamble” — a monologue or dialogue, — i. e., its borrowing from tragedy, happened due to the transformation of comedy into a complex dramatic genre.

Navarre shows the dissimilarity of prologues in tragedy and comedy with a comparison of the prologues’ length. The comic prologue is twice as long as the tragic one [Navarre 1911: 268]. The average prologue length for Aristophanes is around 260 verses, while for Sophocles the average length of the prologue is 120 verses, for Euripides — 125.

I would like to add my calculations. The comparison of the absolute lengths is significant, but it might be interesting to compare the share of prologues concerning the whole extent of plays. However, it should be noted that such quantitative calculations will have an inevitable inaccuracy conditioned by the preservation of the texts and textological issues as well as an uncertainty in the formal distinction between prologue and *parodos*. But even with these considerations, the calculations might be insightful.

Author	Average	Min.	Max.
Sophocles	8.19%	6.5%	9.8%
Euripides	8.58%	3.32%	12.21%
Aristophanes	18.73% (Mazon’s estimation is 20.75%)	13.5%	24.01%

The share of prologues in the tragedies of Sophocles ranges from 6.5% (in *Oedipus at Colonus*) to 9.8% (in *Oedipus Rex*). The average is 8.19%. That is, the prologue — the part of the tragedy before the appearance of the chorus — takes up less than ten percent of the entire tragedy.

The share of prologues in the tragedies of Euripides ranges from 3.32% (in *The Suppliants*) to 12.21% (in *Electra*). The average is 8.58%, quite close to Sophocles. In six tragedies of Euripides, the prologue has a share of 10% or more (up to 12.21%) of the total length of the tragedy.

The share of prologues in Aristophanes’ comedies ranges from 13.5% (in *The Frogs*, before the appearance of the frog chorus, but there may be other estimates) to 24.01% (in *Ecclesiazusae*). The average is 18.73%. However, changing the boundary between the prologue and the *parodos* can give other values: based on Mazon’s estimates, the average value rises to 20.75%.

Thus, the prologue in comedy is longer and comprises a bigger part of the play. Hence, the comic prologue has greater importance in the structure of the play and the development of the plot. But why?

As Navarre showed, the comic prologue includes the exposition and the beginning of an action, the latter corresponds to the first episode in tragedy. Mazon’s scheme reflects almost the same division. So, does the length result from the fact that it should include exposition and then the first part of the action? Definitely yes, but I would like to add some details.

Plots in tragedy are based on myth. Thus, the audience was already aware of the sequence of events and the main heroes because the myths were well known. There should be some keys (name, place, or event) that allowed a spectator to guess the starting point of any play. Moreover, the basic information about the play, the poet, and the cast was revealed during the *proagon*. For the audience of tragedy, there was no need for lengthy beginnings: a brief exposition was enough for the proceeding to the choral song and the main action<sup>4</sup>.

The plot of a comedy, on the contrary, was never obvious to the audience. We do not have enough evidence on the *proagon* for the comedy, but some information about the plays which would be performed at a coming festival might be available to the citizens, probably, the names of the poets who had received the chorus, and maybe the play's title of some kind. In any case, the Great Idea of a comedy [Sommerstein 1980: 11–13] should not have been exposed before the performance. Otherwise, the brilliant suspense and intrigue of the prologue of *Lysistrata* or *Ecclesiazusae* would be spoiled.

A long prologue is necessary to reveal to the spectator the story about which he knows nothing, as well as to provide information about the hero or heroes and their motivations. Moreover, the essential feature of the comic genre is jokes, all sorts of satire, and physical comedy, which collectively cover a significant part of a comic prologue. Finally, the prologue ends with the announcement of the chorus' entrance in which the appearance and attitude of the chorus are explained. The chorus arrives at the moment when the hero or heroes have started to implement the invented plan which should help to solve the hero's problem, so the chorus becomes actively involved in action supporting or confronting the hero or heroes.

Thus, I would like to propose the definition of a comic prologue as follows. The prologue is the first part of the play that contains an exposition, i. e., the main character(s), the problem needed to be solved, the plan for its overcoming, and the first stage of the implementation of this plan before the chorus joins the action. The prologue in comedy has two functions: firstly, to engage the audience, and secondly, to provide the full exposition of the comedy's plot.

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<sup>4</sup> As far as I know, there are no special studies on the structure of the tragic prologues. They are mostly examined in relation to their form (monologic, dialogic, or mixed [Roberts 2005: 137]), number of scenes, expository function, dramatical effect, and relation to the themes and motives of the tragedy [Zimmerman 2011: 516–518]. Some features of a tragic prologue are determined by the fact that any tragedy was created as part of a trilogy [Spring 1917].

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