



## Rude Talk in Athens: Ancient Rivals, the Birth of Comedy, and a Writer's Journey through Greece

**Mark Haskell Smith**

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*Rude Talk in Athens* is a spirited introduction to the all but forgotten work of the ancient Greek playwright Ariphrades. Since none of Ariphrades's work survives, the "all but" refers to mentions of the playwright in other plays, like those of his main rival, Aristophanes.

Ariphrades was called out for his fondness for a particular sexual act, and this serves as the spark for a deeper investigation into the man and his role in Athenian society. Mark Haskell Smith consults experts on Greek history and theater, and even writes fictional interludes depicting the playwright plotting his revenge. He postulates that Ariphrades made enemies because he fulfilled the duty of the Greek comedic playwright to humble politicians, generals, and other playwrights.

The book's larger focus isn't Ariphrades, per se, but rather the importance of artists as a check on power, in ancient Greece and today. Smith's style is freewheeling, and his sharp opinions on modern politics might offend some more than his blunt humor: here, for example, European Union austerity measures are "just another siege by barbarians from the north." But the book's provocative edge is softened by its humorous footnotes, personal anecdotes, and semi-scholarly examinations of Greek architecture, literature, and philosophy. Entertaining and informed, *Rude Talk in Athens* is a dispatch from Greece with much to discuss.

PETER DABBENE (July / August 2021)

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