

ARISTOPHANES AND POLITICS

RALPH M. ROSEN & HELENE P. FOLEY (eds.), *Aristophanes and Politics: New Studies*, Leiden/Boston 2020. Pp. 296. ISBN: 9789004424456.

ARISTOPHANES is a thoroughly political poet (1), hence there is no need to excuse the publication of another book, and any future book, on this complex topic. The work consists of eleven chapters, complemented by a slim introduction and an afterward, and an eight-page index. Most contributors are leading scholars in the field, but what is perhaps more compelling is that “politics” is understood in a specific, per chapter, and reasonably narrow sense —against the unfortunate tendency to appropriate this label to mean, more or less, anything pertinent to human society. In their introduction, the editors summarise the subsequent chapters and aptly note that it is “the lure of the subjective *I* that peeks through some of Aristophanes’ parabases” that make even the most literary-centred readers of the playwright admit some political purport (1, 8). This idea is elaborated in Ralph Rosen’s *Prolegomena* (chapter 1), a chapter which deals with the “meta-questions” of surveying Aristophanes’ politics (12). The most characteristic one: even if we could interview the dramatist about his political views, would that actually make his political message clearer? Rosen’s response is negative; the “comedic process” of the genre “tends to complicate, rather than clarify, anything resembling an agenda” (21).

Robin Osborne (chapter 2) argues that people do not know what they laugh at, in the sense that a funny passage is funny for various reasons. Thus it is unwise to make historical claims based on Aristophanes’ political jokes, e.g. to assume that a phenomenon was actually common because it is satirised (34), or to pursue a typology of mutually exclusive categories of laughter (36–7). The complex nature of jokes means that humour lies in the political *themes*, rather than in particular jokes or attacks on individuals. Such themes,

e.g. the relationship between advisers and assembly, were compatible with both democrats' and oligarchs' concerns (40). Osborne applies this theoretical frame to *Knights*, suggesting that identifying Paphlagon with Cleon circumscribes the catholicity of the political theme of the play (39).

Jeffrey Henderson (chapter 3) focuses on what comedy *avoids* satirising. First, that comic poets had their favoured targets of mockery automatically means that they neglected some others, e.g. Alcibiades. Second, they avoided the *aporrhêta*, i.e. charges that would jeopardise the targets' civil rights; jabs at individuals were rather generic. Third, comedies entirely dedicated to the mockery of politicians were infrequent and, before *Knights*, veiled in mythology. Finally, comedy avoided criticising the traditional Right — a bias which should not be attributed to coincidence in the surviving corpus. There is no straightforward explanation for this, but the spectators “were apparently content with the poets' rightist bias” (56).

Isabel Ruffell (chapter 4) discusses populist debate. She starts with a historical framing, explaining that Thucydides' idealised account of the Athenians speaking rationally should be supplemented by Aristophanes' and others' testimonies on populist rhetoric. The latest concept reconciles comedy's conservative and democrat elements: even conservative elements (e.g. Bdelycleon's agon speech) exploit “a populist mode of argument” (74). There is also an opportunistic abuse of politicians (77) and formation of temporary cross-class alliances (79) in the plays. Therefore, Aristophanes cannot fit in Right-or-Left boxes, and comic poets are, in their technique, not unlike the populist politicians whom they satirise (81). I struggled to follow the coherence of this chapter.

Olimpia Imperio (chapter 5) evaluates Aristophanes' claim in the parabasis of *Clouds* that he invented “demagogue comedy”. Not only was Aristophanes *not* the first poet to launch such a satire — Cratinus had attacked Pericles in *Dionysalexandros* — but he also rushed to abandon demagogue comedy after *Knights*. Why was that? Perhaps because the play won the first prize but failed in political terms — Cleon was re-elected as *stratêgos* — or because Aristophanes was now more cautious than his colleagues who attacked the new powerful men. Anecdotally, Alcibiades drowned Eupolis for his mockery in *Baptai*!

Stephen Halliwell (chapter 6) offers a close and political reading of three scenes: three encounters between non-elite citizens in the street. Such scenes “can spotlight areas of paradox within democracy's social ideology” (117). The negotiation between Strepsiades and his First Creditor in *Clouds*, the latter reasonably asking for his instalment and the former

playing the giddy goat, Philocleon's feigned offer in *Wasps* to compensate the man he assaulted, and the man in *Ecclesiazusae* who rather justly (Halliwell suggests against the *opinio communis*) hesitates to abandon his property for a common yet vague purpose, unlike his impulsive neighbour, entail "background realism". Athenian democracy did not lack clashing forms of civic behaviour, as the Thucydidean Pericles wants us to believe. This is the most literary centred piece of the volume.

Carina de Klerk (chapter 7) applies quantitative analysis to show that Aristophanes, rather than Euripides as it is claimed in *Frogs*, "democratised" the cast of Greek plays. Male characters speak 82% (free males 57%) and female characters 17% (free females 13%) of the Aristophanic extant corpus, compared to a 60-40% male-female proportion in tragedy. Tragedy represents women more than comedy, since tragic plots revolve around autocracy, hence the *oikos*, rather than democracy/the *polis*. In Athenian standards however, diversity was *not* democratic —also note the absence of the metic in Aristophanes. Readers with a passion for typologies and statistics, like myself, will find the methodology of this chapter exemplary: the author acknowledges *inter alia* the uncertain identity of some characters and the uncertain line attribution.

For Nina Papanathanasopoulou (chapter 8) *Acharnians* promotes the "interconnectedness, not the separateness, of *oikos* and *polis*" (167), in the sense that Dikaiopolis' detachment from a dysfunctional *polis* and then the thriving of his *oikos* provide a positive example for a renewed *polis*. I find this optimistic reading very simplistic; S. Nelson's *Aristophanes and his Tragic Muse*, Leiden/Boston 2016, 123–30, not taken into account by P., demonstrates that Dikaiopolis' escape is neither possible nor towards a better world. To appropriate Cavafy, *This city will always pursue you, Dikaiopolis!*

Edith Hall (chapter 9) presents a ground-breaking argument: that *Birds* is not an allegorical critique of the Sicilian expedition, which is the most longstanding of the political interpretations, but a satire on elite Athenians who opportunistically resorted to Thrace for further riches or as aspiring tyrants. Note that the comedy is full of Thrace-related references, topographies, themes (slavery, colonisation, tyranny) and characters (Tereus, Triballian). Peisistratos and Peisander are possible candidates as Aristophanes' specific targets, both having links to Thrace, but Peisetairos' name may also allude to the Thasian, i.e. of Athenian interests, colony of *Pistiros* in Thrace. I am thoroughly convinced, even though not ready to abandon the Sicilian allegory —why exclude a multi-purpose symbolism?

Mario Telò (chapter 10) reads the interloper scenes in *Birds* as a reflection upon the “democratic paradox”; democracy as a government is inherently undemocratic in that it suppresses (*polices*) the alternative voices (*dissensus*) in favour of the “sameness” forced by the majority (*consensus*). The exclusion from Cloudcuckooland of the interlopers by Peisetairos is required for the solidification of the *consensus* in the finale. A consistent, yet sometimes obsessive (e.g. 219–220), application of Rancière’s *consensus-dissensus* vocabulary, which does not offer much new to our understanding of Peisetairos’ tyrannical inclinations.

Deborah Steiner (chapter 11) concentrates on the chorus of Aristophanes’ *Babylonians*. Each member represented a letter of the Ionic alphabet (fr. 71 K-A), so they probably played the slaves-sailors: Babylonians forced to serve as rowers for the Athenian navy. The stigmatisation of the chorus could be intended as an attack on the tyrannical practices of Athenian hegemony, but this is too speculative. S. acknowledges (251, 257).

To conclude, I wish to address the claim implicitly made in the subtitle of the volume: to what extent do these “new studies” indeed shed new light on (our understanding of) Aristophanes’ politics? As with most edited volumes, one can find here pieces of different levels of thematic and/or interpretative originality, and of different styles. The strongest and most reader-friendly contributions are Halliwell’s, de Klerk’s, and Hall’s. The most noticeable deficit of the book as a whole is the unbalanced representation of the extant comedies: too much *Knights* and literally nothing about *Lysistrata*.

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