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978-0-521-51998-4 - Aristophanes the Democrat: The Politics of Satirical Comedy during the Peloponnesian War

Keith Sidwell

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PART I

*Setting the stage*

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## CHAPTER I

*Getting to grips with the  
politics of Old Comedy*

[W]e must never consider in isolation a few lines in a comedy or even the speech in which they occur, but look at the play as a whole and indeed the dramatist's entire output, in so far as it is known to us.

G. E. M. de Ste Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*, 369

Ideally . . . one would wish to find some kind of external control, evidence independent of our reading of the plays that would help us to calibrate our estimation of their tone or mood. Evidence about the poet, for example, might usefully restrict the range of intentions which could plausibly be ascribed to him; evidence about his audience might help us to reconstruct the expectations and preferences with which he had to reckon, and so indicate the kinds of response and effect which he might have intended to achieve; evidence about the context in which a play was composed and received, and the consequent constraints on poet and audience, might also help us to determine their respective intentions and receptive dispositions . . . [E]vidence of this kind is, by and large, not forthcoming . . .

Malcolm Heath, *Political Comedy in Aristophanes*, 8

Finding a way into the politics of Old Comedy is not easy. Starting from the plays requires the assumption that we can rely on our interpretations of them (a simple case of *petitio principii*?). If we nonetheless take this route (as for example does Ste Croix) and are tempted to take any individual utterance from a play at face value, we will be instantly reminded by others that it is bounded by its dramatic context: it is after all spoken by a *character* and not directly by the author and its political meaning will thus depend crucially upon a much wider context (including the now inaccessible original performance). Even if we were to accept the Croixian 'sandwich' hypothesis (that serious material is inserted into comedy like meat in a panino),<sup>1</sup> we would have to admit that we are thus made over-reliant on modern judgements of what is funny and may be missing

<sup>1</sup> Ste Croix 1972, 234, 357.

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something fundamental which would have made even such an utterance amusing for its original audience. But if we attempt to approach the wider context, whether the individual play or the ‘dramatist’s entire output’, we are again faced with apparently insuperable difficulties. If *Acharnians* is a ‘peace-play’, in the sense that it argues for peace with Sparta, why does the chorus in the parabasis (653–5) ask the Athenians to reject Spartan peace overtures? If Lamachus is a target in *Acharnians* (566f.) and *Peace* (304, 473–4, 1290–4), why is he praised in *Thesmophoriazousai* (841) and *Frogs* (1039)? It is not that answers of some kind cannot be found to such problems, merely that they are all speculative and not the stuff of which consensus is made.

Heath’s starting point is, theoretically speaking, more satisfactory. The problem is that there is in the first place hardly any external evidence against which to test the plays’ political stance or tone, and where there is, scholars again disagree fundamentally about its meaning and validity. If *Knights* satirises the *demos*, one might ask how this squares with the *Old Oligarch*’s contention ([Xen.] *Ath Pol.* 2.18) that satire of the *demos* was forbidden. On the other hand, since we do not know precisely when the *Athenian Constitution* was composed, nor by whom, we may wish to deny the validity of such a question (which would provide a severe challenge to conventional views of *Knights*). If the parabolic advice of the chorus of *Frogs* is taken seriously, one might wonder at the apparently positive response of the *demos* to its palpably aristocratic ideology (the civic crown and right of reperformance awarded to the poet).<sup>2</sup> But since we can only conjecture about the date of this award of the crown (and do so on the basis of the assumption that the advice in the parabasis was offered directly and seriously on the poet’s behalf),<sup>3</sup> even this palpably external piece of evidence cannot be used as a solid basis for assessing political intent. Heath himself chooses to focus on the contradiction between the interpretation of *Clouds* as an attack on Socrates and the fact that Plato has Aristophanes on such apparently friendly terms with his victim in *Symposium* as external evidence for a sceptical treatment of Aristophanic political intent. To do so, of course, also involves a basic assumption, that we really do know what is going on in Plato, that we can judge *his* tone accurately, and also that we can trust the historical accuracy of his representation (as though he might not have had some motive for inventing this encounter).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Dover 1993, 114, Hypothesis 1(c); *Life of Aristophanes* (PCGT1) 35–9.

<sup>3</sup> Sommerstein 1996a, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Ancient commentators were more willing than are modern to suggest that the portrait of Aristophanes is satirical (Olymp. *Vit. Pl.* 3, Ath. 187c). The poet is, however, addicted to wine and sex (177d–e)

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In the absence of any unequivocal external evidence, we might be tempted to begin our enquiries by looking at the parabases. After all, these interruptions of the play's plot often purport to present authorial perspectives directly to their audience (e.g. *Wasps* 1016, *Peace* 738). But this direct approach is confined to *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Clouds*, *Wasps* and *Peace* and the results from such an enquiry are not generally thought satisfactory. What are we to make, for example, of the contradiction between *Acharnians* 629 and *Knights* 513, from the first of which it appears the poet is a long-standing and experienced *didaskalos* and from the second is taking his first solo plunge into comic production? Or of the critique of the circumcised phallus (*Clouds* 538–9) versus its use at *Acharnians* 158f.? Or that of the cry *ἰοῦ ἰοῦ* at *Clouds* 543 with its use at line 1 of the same play? Indeed, so problematic do these utterances appear to Silk that in his recent monograph he even asserts that the parabases are not in any way helpful to our quest for a true understanding of Aristophanes' art: 'Aristophanes' characterisation of his comic practice or his comic ideals are in the end calculated to frustrate us: they are uncommunicative, almost as repeated instances of a conventional formula are uncommunicative.'<sup>5</sup>

This judgement does seem unduly pessimistic. Just because the instances of this group of texts do not appear to communicate anything substantive and coherent to us, this is no guarantee that they did not do so for the audiences for whom they were designed and who would have been possessed by their historical position of everything we lack through ours, an instinctive knowledge of the context of the drama (in every sense) and an awareness of the nuances of the contemporary language and its references. And Silk does not take into account similar material from other comic poets (e.g. Cratin. fr. 213, Eup. fr. 89) where the poet apparently made comments (sometimes in the first person) about his own and his rivals' work. We might, in fact, get somewhere by taking as our primary assumption the exact opposite of Silk's finding, namely that authorial statements were intended to be – and actually *were* – coherent and informative at some level, and our impression that they produce at best inconsistent and at worst downright self-contradictory impressions of the dramatist's understanding of his art and its social role and aesthetic standards suggests rather that we are missing something pretty crucial which the original audience would have known

and overindulges in food at the party (185 c–e), neither positive traits for an ancient audience (see Davidson 1997 *passim*). Moreover, his defence of homosexual intercourse (192a) reflects not only the view of his own Unjust Argument (*Clouds* 1084–1104), but also that of Prodicus' Kakkia (D-K fr. 7 = Xen. *Mem.* 2.1.24).

<sup>5</sup> Silk 2000, 47–8.

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without being told. But in order to approach the question of what sort of information we might glean from them, we must be slightly more circumspect than is usual in our primary analysis of their role and function.

For example, quite apart from the problem of poetic voice already mentioned between the parabasis of *Acharnians* and *Knights* (which MacDowell sensibly resolves by attributing the overt authorship of *Acharnians* to Callistratus),<sup>6</sup> it is important to note some crucial differences between the parabases. First of all, only five parabases (those of *Ach.*, *Knights*, *Clouds*, *Wasps* and *Peace*) purport to be representing – directly or indirectly – the author's own views. The parabases of *Birds*, *Thesmophoriazusai*, and *Frogs* are all made in the persona of the chorus (*Birds* 688, *Thesm.* 786, *Frogs* 686).<sup>7</sup> More importantly, there is no reference in them to the poet or his views, in complete contrast to the parabases of *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Clouds*, *Wasps* and *Peace*, which might be characterised as quite specifically defences of the author's comedy (often in contrast to that of his rivals). However, even these five parabases are not on all fours with each other. We have already mentioned the distinction in voice between that of *Acharnians* and the rest. What is not usually noticed is that four of the five (*Ach.*, *Knights*, *Wasps* and *Peace*) belong to plays which were produced at a major festival (three Lenaea and one Dionysia), while that of *Clouds* is a revised version made for a performance which is generally agreed not to have occurred at a major festival (if it was performed at all). Moreover, and this substantiates the reality of this distinction, although each of the five parabases contains allusions to rival comic poets and attacks on politicians, the specificity of reference is much more pronounced in the *Clouds* parabasis. Only *Acharnians* apart from *Clouds* gives the name of a politician (Cleon at 659) and then not as someone attacked in a comedy. Only *Knights* apart from *Clouds* actually names contemporary rivals (Cratinus 526, Crates 537 – with the earlier poet Magnes mentioned at 520) and then in what on the surface at least is not an absolutely negative manner (unlike the attacks on unnamed rivals at *Ach.* 657–8 and *Peace* 739f.). In *Clouds*, however, we hear the names of Cleon and Hyperbolus (549, 551, 557, 558), and of Eupolis (553), Phrynichus (556) and Hermippus (557). Finally, we may point out that the poet's individual voice is heard only briefly in the other parabases (*Ach.* 659–64, *Peace* 754–74), but the whole of the *Clouds* parabasis is in the first

<sup>6</sup> MacDowell 1982, 1995, 39. See further below pp. 14, 111 for a slightly different solution.

<sup>7</sup> The arguments rehearsed by Dover 1993 68–9 (cf. Sommerstein 1996, 215–16) denying that the words χορῶν ἱερῶν at *Frogs* 674 and τὸν ἱερὸν χορὸν at 686 are a 'deliberate reminder of the chorus' role as initiates' are weak, as is tacitly admitted when he remarks of this sobriquet's use for a chorus that '[i]t happens not to be called so elsewhere in comedy'.



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*sophoi* (intellectuals?), for whose sake I was taking such trouble. But even so I shall not willingly betray the theatre-buffs among you. For ever since in this place my 'chaste and bugged boys' were praised by men whose names it is a pleasure even to pronounce, and I – since I was still unmarried and not yet allowed to give birth – exposed the child, and another girl took it and claimed it as her own, and you gave her a noble upbringing and education, since then I have oaths from you staking your good opinion of me. So now, just like that Electra, this comedy has come looking to see if she can chance upon spectators as clever as those were. I can tell you, she will recognise her brother's lock of hair, if she sees it.

The *Clouds* parabasis stands out from the other known examples of the form in two important respects: (1) it comes from a revision, perhaps in its surviving form one not amenable to what we envisage as the production values of the state festivals; (2) this revised version was never produced at a state festival. These pieces of information, though they amount only to inferences, in the first case from the mention by the parabasis of the play's first production (522–3) and from the absence of a crucial choral ode (after 888) and the retention of an (apparently) out-of-date attack on Cleon (575–94), in the second from the criticism by Eratosthenes of Callimachus' inference that the didaskalic records were wrong to place *Clouds* before *Marikas*, are generally accepted and seem to me to be incontrovertible points of departure.<sup>8</sup> And yet, even if the play was not in a condition to be produced at a state festival and was not so produced, nonetheless the revision had reached a stage at which Aristophanes could envisage an audience to whom he wished to show it (ὧ θεῶμενοι 'members of the audience' 518) well enough for him to write a parabasis that is at once the most personal and the most theatrically and politically explicit (in terms of the naming of names) of all those in the surviving plays and the one in which he appears close enough to his projected spectators (521, 535) to mark out groups among them (525–7). We must surely infer from this that the play in its surviving form was at least *near* to some form of production and that the poet had remodelled the play with an audience in mind.<sup>9</sup>

The problem comes at the next step. Despite the fact that the play was never produced at a state festival, scholars tend to assume (though with some discomfort, given the actual language of the text) that the audience envisaged would nonetheless have been the audience of a Lenaea

<sup>8</sup> Dover 1968, lxxx–lxxxi. The only possible objection might be that the revision appeared under a different title, but that, since its *contents* appeared to be the same as those of *Clouds*, the Alexandrian scholars chose to call the revised play by the title *Clouds*. However, that would in its turn require that the play had come down without a title (not impossible, but perhaps unlikely?).

<sup>9</sup> See also Revermann 2006, 326–32 (Appendix C).

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or Dionysia.<sup>10</sup> Here we must attend to the detail, with the crucial words italicised (521–5):

ὥς ὕμᾱς ἡγούμενος εἶναι θεατὰς δεξιούς  
καὶ ταύτην σοφώτατ' ἔχειν τῶν ἐμῶν κωμωδιῶν  
πρώτους ἡξίωσ' ἀναγεῦσ' ὕμᾱς ἢ παρέσχε μοι  
ἔργον πλείστον· εἴτ' ἀνεχώρουν ὑπ' ἀνδρῶν φορτικῶν  
ἡττηθεῖς, οὐκ ἄξιος ὢν.

It was because I thought you theatre-buffs and this to be the cleverest (most intellectual?) of my comedies that I thought you should have the *first* taste of it, since it cost me an enormous amount of labour. And *then* I had to retreat, defeated by vulgar men, although I did not deserve it.

Commentators have noticed the problem that is created, on the assumption of an Athenian festival audience, of the claim 'first' to have given the audience a taste and 'then' to have been defeated by 'vulgar men'. This looks like a *temporal* progression (as the use of πρῶτιστον 'very first' and εἴθ' 'then' at 553 and 557 below certainly is). The explanation favoured by both Dover and Sommerstein is that Aristophanes is implying that, like some tragic poets, he might have put his play on first in some other state and so is making a joke about his international reputation.<sup>11</sup> But this manifestly skews the detail of the text, since what happened is represented as *fact* and there is not the slightest hint (though one must obviously be careful about such claims) of anything amusing given the context of defeat and complaint that encompasses the lines. In particular, though, this explanation appears to elide the obvious chronological significance of πρώτους 'first' and εἴτ' 'then': *Clouds* was seen by *this* audience first, then produced at the state festival and defeated.<sup>12</sup> There is, then, a clear historical sequence expressed here of which we may be able to make sense, and which we should attend to before assuming that it is only part of an elaborate joke which scarcely fits the linguistic data.

<sup>10</sup> See Dover 1968 on 523: 'We may well ask how Ar. could speak of giving his audience the first taste of the play... as if it had been open to him to put on in some other state a comedy about contemporary Athenian life.' Sommerstein 1982 on 521–3: 'you seems to mean here "you Athenians"'. The only plausible alternative would be that it meant "the international audience at the City Dionysia" as opposed to the more homogeneous public who attended the Lenaea...; but it would then be impossible to explain "in this place" (528), since Dionysian and Lenaeian audiences were alike only to be found in one place, the Theatre of Dionysus. Ar. must therefore be claiming to have done the Athenians a favour by producing *Clouds* first at Athens rather than abroad ("this place" in 528 will then mean "Athens").'

<sup>11</sup> *Loc. cit.* previous note.

<sup>12</sup> As Dover points out (*loc. cit.* n. 10), we do not know what ἀναγεῦσαι really means. However, the temporal sequence appears to rule out 'taste for a second time', since the point of reference here must be *Clouds I* (524) and not the new version.



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Given that the revised play was not ever performed at a state festival in Athens, and that we know absolutely nothing about the process by which tragedies or comedies made their way from the dramatist's imagination and pen to that stage, it does not seem unreasonable (especially since there are other problematic things about the relationship implied between poet and *this* audience which never occur in other parabases) to suggest that Aristophanes may have had a quite different audience in mind from the one at the Lenaea or Dionysia when he wrote this parabasis. If so, it is an audience to whom Aristophanes presented a version of *Clouds I* *before* it was seen by the festival audience who voted it down at Dionysia 423. In any case, it is difficult to interpret ἐνθάδ 'here' in 528 as 'at the Lenaea/Dionysia', since logically it must be the same place in which the 'taster' of *Clouds I* was presented *before* its defeat at the festival. It will imply, then, 'the same place in which the current revision of *Clouds* and the *Banqueters* were produced *before* entering the state competitions'. The identity of this location, and its theatrical resources, will remain obscure to us, but the text does tell us that such a place existed and remained a fixture for such pre-festival performances over a period extending from 427 to (at least) 417, or whenever the second *Clouds* was revised.<sup>13</sup>

Now I can see no reason at all to deny that there might be opportunities for the performance of plays prior to their entry into competition. Indeed, at the very least rehearsals would have been necessary. But comparative evidence would suggest that the production of plays, with their costumes, music, masks and props, required financial assistance and though in Athens such funding was given to a few chosen ones by the state for the festival (through the *choregia*), that does not explain how the play and its playwright got to the stage of being chosen, unless we wish to rely on the assumption that the archon sat down with fifty manuscripts which he whittled down to three (or five).<sup>14</sup>

Once we have adumbrated this more literal interpretation of the lines, it at once becomes clear that some other things in the parabasis not only fit in with it, but also add to our understanding of precisely what the audience was there *for*. Halliwell has noted that 528–31 appears to refer to a specific group of Aristophanes' patrons, who had supported *Banqueters*.<sup>15</sup> The language allows us to go further, though. The play, like the revised *Clouds*, was first produced 'here' (i.e. before this audience, in this – perhaps

<sup>13</sup> Set by most scholars between 419 and 417. See further Kopff 1990 and Storey 1993b, and chapter six below for a different solution.

<sup>14</sup> See Luppe 1972 for discussion of the number of plays produced at each festival.

<sup>15</sup> Halliwell 1980, 42–3.

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private – theatrical space), *before* it was shown and judged at the state festival. This can be inferred both from the way in which the earlier play is brought into the discussion immediately after the first *Clouds* and from the fact that the audience is said to have ‘brought it up and educated it’, a process which surely looks forward to the consummation of marriage (i.e. metaphorically, production at the festival). The audience of which Aristophanes was thinking, then, when he revised the play and wrote the parabasis was the same group of patrons who had seen *Banqueters* through from its first rough draft presentation in a private theatrical space, and this applies whether or not the play as we have it represents that rehearsal production.

Another Aristophanic comedy is actually named at 554: ἐκστρέψας τοὺς ἡμετέρους Ἰππίας κακὸς κακῶς ‘a wicked refurbishment of our *Knights* by a wicked man’. A peculiar, and hitherto barely explained, aspect of this statement, the use of the plural form ἡμετέρους, can now be aligned with the newly won insight. Halliwell has commented, albeit somewhat reservedly, on the peculiarity of the plural possessive adjective and wondered whether it might not allude to Eupolis’ claim (*Baptai* fr. 89) to have co-written this play with Aristophanes.<sup>16</sup> Given the deeply critical language used of his rival in the same line (κακὸς κακῶς), this seems unlikely. Halliwell is correct, however, to claim that the word cannot be assumed to mean simply ‘mine’, since this does not accord with general Aristophanic practice. Moreover, it is specifically against the way he expresses himself later on in this parabasis when he wants to focus on the comic material from his pen. At 559 (τὰς εἰκοὺς . . . τὰς ἑμὰς), 560 (τοῖς ἑμοῖς) and 561 (ἑμοὶ καὶ τοῖσιν ἑμοῖς . . . εὐρήμασιν), he uses the singular. It is therefore difficult to deny ἡμετέρους a literal significance. Now that we have hypothesised a quite specific audience for the parabasis, however, it is possible for us to see what that is. Aristophanes is surely reminding the group he is addressing as a fundraising base for *Clouds II* that they had also been of material assistance in bringing the *Knights* to its state festival success. It is in this sense that *Knights* is not just ‘mine’, but ‘ours’. All sorts of inferences might flow from this, of course, not least (given the reference to the attack on Cleon in the play at 549) that the group from whom Aristophanes drew financial support had some sort of political agenda. I shall return to this issue in due course.

If the audience (or envisaged audience) of the revised parabasis is a cohesive and identifiable group, rather than a vast and undifferentiated

<sup>16</sup> Halliwell 1989, 524 n. 17. See Storey 2003, 287 for approval of this interpretation.