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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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## ARISTOPHANES THE DEMOCRAT

This book provides a new interpretation of the nature of Old Comedy and its place at the heart of Athenian democratic politics. Professor Sidwell argues that Aristophanes and his rivals belonged to opposing political groups, each with their own political agenda. Through disguised caricature and parody of their rivals' work, the poets expressed and fuelled the political conflict between their factions. Professor Sidwell rereads the principal texts of Aristophanes and the fragmented remains of the work of his rivals in the light of his arguments for the political foundations of the genre.

KEITH SIDWELL is Adjunct Professor in the Department of Greek and Roman Studies, University of Calgary. He has written on Greek drama, later Greek literature – including, most recently, *Lucian: Chattering Courtesans and Other Sardonic Sketches* (2004) – and on Neo-Latin writing, and is a co-author of the Reading Greek and Reading Latin series, and author of *Reading Medieval Latin* (1995).

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*The Politics of Satirical Comedy during  
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University of Calgary*



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## *Illustration*

Figure 1 Mid-fourth century Apulian bell-crater, perhaps illustrating Cratinus' *Pytine*. Formerly Berlin, Staatliche Museum F3047 (lost during World War II). Taken from T. Panofka, 'Komödienscenen auf Thongefässen', *Archäologische Zeitung* 7 (1849), Tafel iv. Used by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

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## *Preface*

The reader may reasonably enquire, ‘Why (yet) another book on Old Comedy?’ I sympathise. We have for some time been pretty well equipped with texts and commentaries and scholars have recently raced to pack the bookshelves with volumes devoted to the interpretation of Aristophanes, of Eupolis and of the genre as a whole. Yet I have felt obliged to add to this stockpile because I think that still we have not reached any real understanding of several crucial matters which relate to the context and impact of satirical comedy in the fifth century, and that I have discovered a new way to resolve them. In the welter of severe ignorance which pervades the study even of Aristophanes, to say nothing of his fragmentary rivals, this may seem like a bold claim. Nonetheless, since what I have to say arises in the first instance from an authorial address (the revised parabasis of *Clouds*) and then from external evidence, I feel that it is worth proceeding, even if the journey ahead is parlous and fraught with lacunae.

I begin by challenging the general assumption (for which see among others Ste Croix, Sommerstein, Henderson and Edwards) that insofar as we can know where Aristophanes stood politically, it was on the ‘right’ of Athenian politics. A new interpretation of the context envisaged for the *Clouds* revision, together with a reexamination of some external evidence, points in a very different direction, towards an Aristophanes whose ideological anchor is at the radical end of the democratic spectrum. This same context, together with some meagre, but important and neglected, evidence for Eupolis will suggest equally that Aristophanes’ main rival set up his political stall at the opposite extreme. It is the stark contrast between these findings and the usual inferences from the interpretation of Aristophanic plots which impels a reevaluation of the role of irony in these plays and thence of the modes of satire employed in the pieces.

The basic proposition that we can begin our study of Aristophanes and Eupolis from the premiss that they were politically opposed, but in a way previously unthought of, not only provides a new key into the political agenda of the surviving and fragmentary plays, but also helps us gain a new

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handle on the ‘poets’ war’, that series of attacks and counter-attacks which can be seen in various parabolic comments and is most prominent in our evidence in relation to the *Knights*. And here too, reinterpretation of the *Clouds* parabasis both casts new light upon the attitude of Aristophanes towards politically oriented poetic rivals like Eupolis, and also reveals the possible existence of a satirical method – metacomedy – which brings into play a whole swathe of lost dramas by competitors which will have been reused, in full expectation of audience recognition, in order to subvert and satirise rival poets’ earlier political satires. The role of metacomical intertexts in Aristophanic drama especially, when examined via a process for detection of them decocted from parabolic statements, reveals in fact that Aristophanes appears to have conducted a campaign against Eupolis which continued (despite Eupolis’ absence from the comic competitions after around 411) right down to the end of the war.

The same text, the *Clouds* parabasis, may reveal a third tool for reinterpretation of Old Comedies. For in the course of determining what it is that Aristophanes can possibly be defending as he stresses his rivals’ repetitiveness versus his own originality *in a play which is clearly a repeat*, and attacks some of them for their attacks on Hyperbolus, it becomes a reasonable inference that he regards the central satirical device available to him (and his rivals) as *on-stage caricature of real individuals*. Since the main characters in his *Clouds* apart from Socrates are not given real names, it appears that the type of subterfuge we can detect in Paphlagon/Cleon or Labes/Laches because it is blatant was in fact the norm, except that it is (for some reason) normally textually understated. Once this aperçu is applied to the on-stage representation of comic poets (as with the main character of Cratinus’ *Pytine*, Ephialtes and his mentor in Eupolis’ *Autolycus*, and Dicaeopolis in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*), we can begin to locate the main lines of the poetic-ideological debates of the war period, and to suggest new interpretations of Aristophanic dramas, together with reconstructions of the rival plays which they often parody and subvert. The book thus proceeds from detailed re-examination of a single – authorial – statement towards a reconsideration of the author’s politics, relationships with his rivals and their plays, and modes of satirical engagement, to a detailed reconsideration of the meanings of individual plays and their avatars.

To some, the book may seem under-theorised, especially in comparison to recent work (such as that of von Moellendorf (Bakhtinian analysis of the grotesque), Kloss (Pragmatics), Robson (Humour Theory), Revermann (Performance Theory) and Platter (Bakhtinian dialogism)). The work’s basic premiss, that we can recover something vital about fifth-century



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assumptions about the genre from Aristophanes' own words, disallows the application of theory in advance of the articulation of the consequences of this reorientation. In fact, however, the need to treat much fragmentary material, especially in the detailed second half, will necessitate the formulation of a clearly articulated methodology, which may stand as my contribution to such theorisation. Moreover, since part of the basic thrust of the work is to reveal how Aristophanes in particular (but his rivals too) made constant use of the fact that the audience for the dramatic festival was fairly consistent in order to make fun of verbal and visual material from their rivals' comedies to satirise them and their political coteries, it is clear that recent ideas about 'intertextuality' will be important to the argument. In particular, it is crucial at the outset that the reader be clear that what I mean by this term is specifically *the intended reuse by an author of an existing text (in the widest sense) known to the audience, as a tool with which the audience may construct the meaning of his own new text.*

One final point needs to be made in respect of intertextuality. In order to illuminate comic techniques – especially those involving visual intertextuality – I have occasionally had recourse (in footnotes) to modern examples (in particular from the TV cartoon series 'The Simpsons' and the now defunct satirical puppet-show 'Spitting Image'). In a modern drama we can actually know and, more importantly, *see* what is going on when such intertextuality is used – unlike in Old Comedy. For example where Homer Simpson is clubbed by baby Maggie in the basement of their home, the scene then unfolds visually and musically precisely in terms of Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The viewer who has not seen *Psycho* will still be able to follow the narrative and some of the humour, but the intertextual layer will escape her. Meanwhile, the dialogue itself makes no reference at all to the intertext. Readers should not infer that the use of such analogies is an *argument*: it is, rather, an *illustration of possibilities*. It is important to bear in mind that much of what I suggest here can readily be paralleled in modern culture.

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This book has taken a long time to write. This can be put down to a number of factors: the sheer difficulty of writing against the grain of modern scholarship on the subject, the amount of time spent (as it turns out *wasted*) in running a small department constantly under threat, and the development of other areas of research at the same time. Still, now it is done, I have many debts of gratitude to repay and I do so with great pleasure.

In the course of investigating the angle from which I approach Old Comedy, I have had the pleasure of conversations and correspondence with many exceptional scholars, including (but by no means listing exhaustively): Ewen Bowie, Chris Carey, Greg Dobrov, Simon Goldhill, Alan Griffiths, Eric Handley, David Harvey, Jeff Henderson, Nick Lowe, Antonia Marchiori, Toph Marshall, Susanna Morton-Braund, Robin Osborne, Martin Revermann, Ralph Rosen, Ian Ruffell, Michael Silk, Alan Sommerstein, Ian Storey, Oliver Taplin and John Wilkins. Among these I owe particular thanks to Jeff Henderson and Ralph Rosen, who invited me to give seminars at their respective universities (Boston University and the University of Pennsylvania), and to Michael Silk, who facilitated my appointment as a Visiting Lecturer at King's College London during a sabbatical in 1993–4. Three different universities have fostered my comic muse, Lancaster (1981–5), where my teaching commitments in tragedy and comedy sparked an interest in the politics of Greek drama, Maynooth (1985–1998), where I first published on this subject, and University College Cork (1998–2008), where I have brought the book to a conclusion. In Maynooth and Cork, periods of sabbatical leave in 1993–4, 2001 and 2008 (and a Senior Research Fellowship from the *IRCHSS* in 2004–5) have made the difference between finishing and not. My thanks are also due to the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada and to Peter Toohey, Head of the Department of Greek and Roman Studies, for inviting me as a Visiting Professor for the winter term of 2008, where I completed work on the manuscript.

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My final debts are personal, innumerable, and impossible to repay with so small a thing as even a very big book. Those who have supported me through this project and its many black moments know who they are. For their love and understanding I shall always be grateful.

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<i>CAH</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Cambridge Ancient History</i> , 2nd edn, Cambridge 1992–.
<i>CGFP</i>	<i>Comicorum Graecorum Fragmenta in Papyris Reperta</i> , ed. C. Austin, Berlin 1973.
Davies <i>APF</i>	J. K. Davies, <i>Athenian Propertied Families 600–300 BC</i> , Oxford 1971.
<i>DFA</i> <sup>2</sup>	A. Pickard-Cambridge, <i>The Dramatic Festivals of Athens</i> , 2nd edn, rev. J. Gould and D. M. Lewis, reissued with new suppl., Oxford 1988.
Gomme-Andrewes-Dover	W. Gomme, A. Andrewes and K. J. Dover, <i>A Historical Commentary on Thucydides</i> , 5 vols., Oxford 1959–81.
<i>IG II</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i> , vol. II <sup>2</sup> , ed. J. Kirchner, Berlin 1913–40.
K-A	Kassel and Austin: see <i>PCG</i> below.
Koster, <i>Prolegomena</i>	<i>Scholia in Aristophanem I. IA, Prolegomena de Comoedia</i> , ed. W. J. W. Koster, Groningen 1975.
<i>LGPN</i>	<i>A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names</i> , ed. P. M. Fraser and E. Matthews, Oxford 1987–.
<i>PA</i>	<i>Prosopographia Attica</i> , ed. J. Kirchner, Berlin 1901–3.
<i>PAA</i>	<i>Persons of Ancient Athens</i> , ed. J. S. Traill, Toronto 1994–.
<i>PCG</i>	<i>Poetae Comici Graeci</i> , ed. R. Kassel and C. Austin, Berlin 1983–.
<i>RE</i>	A. Pauly, G. Wissowa, and W. Kroll, <i>Real-Encyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> , 1893–.

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*Schol. Ar.*

*Scholia in Aristophanem*, ed. W. J. W. Koster and D. Holwerda, Groningen, 1960–2007.

*SEG*

*Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, Leiden 1923–.