“Aristophanes and Politics” – Abstracts

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‘Politics in the street: some citizen encounters in Aristophanes’

(Stephen Halliwell, University of St Andrews)

Interwoven with its institutional, legal and procedural structures, Athenian democracy possessed a system of social values which purported to regulate general relations between its citizens. In ideal terms, this was a culture of tolerance, *laissez-faire*, and individual freedom. But in practice shared values and self-interest could not so easily be harmonised. Aristophanic comedy exposes and manipulates tensions in the democratic value-system. This paper will offer selective analysis of some Aristophanic scenes (in the conference presentation itself, from *Clouds* and *Ecclesiazusae*) involving face-to-face encounters between citizens who are not members of a political élite. By tracing a sort of dialectic between foreground absurdism and background realism in such scenes, the paper will try to tease out an ironic Aristophanic awareness of the paradoxes that arise from democracy’s ideology of freedom.

Patterns of Avoidance and Indirection in Athenian Political Satire

Jeffrey Henderson

Since Hellenistic times, explicit personal mockery has been seen as an essential feature of fifth-century comedy, central to the project of defining the genre and characterizing the era, and thus to a significant extent determining which authors and plays would be chosen as canonical. Its ubiquity and apparently unlimited range have suggested that it enjoyed some sort of special freedom and/or was merely a game, and so also political satire if it was merely a subset of the general mockery.

In this scenario we hardly expect to find areas of restraint, indirection, or outright avoidance, so there has been little inclination to look. But as Sherlock Holmes discovered in *Silver Blaze*, dogs that *didn't* bark in the night can be significant clues, and it turns out that in Old Comedy we can find salient patterns of restraint, indirection, and avoidance: in the practice of individual poets; as regards categories of mockery; and in the orientation or bias of political satire at the thematic level, something that is actually quite distinct from incidental mockery, relatively infrequent, practiced by only a handful of poets, and appearing only in certain political environments. For one reason or another – the law, custom, fear, self-restraint, popular demand, or personal preference – there were satirical places where some or all of the comic poets didn't bark, and there were some categories of Athenians who had little to fear from the comic stage no matter how notorious they were. I will offer a brief survey of these quiet dogs in hopes of encouraging further investigation.

Carina de Klerk
Speaking like a Slave in Aristophanes

Aristophanic comedy just "glitters with linguistic variation" (Willi, 2). As Andreas Willi explains, linguistic varieties refer to "'sets of communicative forms', which are restricted to a particular group of speakers, situational context, or thematic environment" (2). Scholars like Andreas Willi (2003), Stephen Colvin (1999), and Alan Sommerstein (1995) have helped to bring the glitter of Aristophanes' language to a real shine, by uncovering the features of linguistic varieties like colloquial speech, dialect, register, barbarian Greek, and the speech of women. Recently, however, Alan Sommerstein has argued for an absence of linguistic variation in one group of speakers, that of slaves. More precisely, Sommerstein claims that "there is no clear evidence that the language of slaves differs in any systematic way from that of free persons of the same gender" (2009: 144). This claim is part of Sommerstein's larger argument that Aristophanic comedy "consistently negates and subverts" the status distinctions between freemen and slaves and those between freemen and metics (2009: 138).

In this paper, I assess Sommerstein's claim for the negation and subversion of status distinctions and I take up his challenge to try and spot the difference between the language of freemen and slaves. In a comic turn, and in honor of his fine scholarship on Old Comedy, I apply Sommerstein's work on gender-based differentiation in Aristophanes to prove that the status distinctions between slaves and freemen are *maintained* in language–slaves do in fact speak differently from freemen. But attention to how difference is only maintained, like attention to how difference is only negated, is poorly equipped to deal with a comedy like the *Frogs*, where the distinctions between slave and freeman are transgressed and played with. Take, for example, the following line attributed to the slave Xanthias and addressed to his master, Dionysus: "Oh man, I'm so unlucky. Why wasn't I fighting in the sea battle? Then I'd be ordering you to wail long" (οἴμοι κακοδαίμων· τί γὰρ ἐγὼ οὐκ ἐναυμάχουν;/ ἦ τἄν σε κωκύειν ἂν ἐκέλευον μακρά, 33-4).[1] Xanthias here refers to the promise of freedom granted to the slaves who fought at the naval battle of Arginusae, a battle which he missed, home sick with some eye disease (Ar. *Ran.* 192). With this line, Xanthias both draws attention to the limits of his speech *as* a slave and breaks those limits in the same breath, by effectively telling Dionysus to go to hell through wishing that he could do so. Thus, with the *Frogs*, I conclude my paper by making a case for reading on the margins, between myself and Sommerstein. By attending to how the status distinctions of slaves and freemen are maintained in language, but also negated, *and* blurred, I hope to lend a little polish to one area in which Aristophanes' language also glitters–the language of slaves.

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[1] My translation.

Olimpia Imperio, ‘Aristophanes' political comedies and (bad?) imitations’

In the parabasis of *Clouds* II, speaking about the treatment reserved for Cleon in the *Knights*, Aristophanes implicitly presents himself as pioneer and champion of the so-called ‘demagogue-comedy’. But we know that this is not exactly the case: al least an important precedent is Cratinus’ *Dionysalexandros*, a mythological comedy in which the protagonist was an allegorical representation of Pericles. Moreover, Aristophanes is not totally original in his choosing to devote the whole play to a demagogue still at the peak of his powers*:* few years after the performance of *Knights*, Eupolis had made a Persian slave, *Marikas*, into the *alter ego* of Hyperbolos who, after Cleon’s death, had taken over the leadership of the radical Athenian democracy. Furthermore, Hyperbolos is the eponymous protagonist of a comedy by Plato Comicus, who is also author of two other ‘demagogue-comedies’: *Peisandros* and *Cleophon*. What, then, are we to make of Aristophanes’ hyperbolic claim? That is the question which this paper will deal with, while attempting to investigate the origins and limited success of this peculiar subgenre of Athenian political comedy.

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"Clouds and the Battle of Delium"
Aristophanes & Politics, Columbia University, September 30-October 1, 2016.

Might the disastrous and humiliating Athenian defeat at Delium in the autumn of 424 be an important context for the interpretation of Clouds ? I propose that Aristophanes' selection of Socrates as the target of ridicule in this play first performed in 423 indicates that it is. I recall that Socrates was well-known in his day not only for his personal oddities and unceasing philosophical conversations but also for endurance while on military campaigns and in particular for exceptional steadfastness and valor as a hoplite during the grisly retreat of the Athenian forces at Delium. I suggest that Clouds may do more than mock new intellectual fashions and the generational gap, the two themes that dominate the scholarship on this play. It may be a bracingly bold effort to lampoon Athenian militarism and Socratic philosophy's relation to it.

Robin Osborne

Antiquarian abuses and historical uses of Aristophanes *Knights*

This paper falls into two parts: a) how not to do it; b) let's do it.
It starts from the contention that no one knows how to read comedy. They didn't know in antiquity and we are no better now. It explores how our ignorance of how to read comedy has licenced all sorts of readings, and contends that even if we don't know how to read, we can be sure that there are some ways not to read. It explores this both for political and non-political aspects of *Knights*.
But we can do better than rule things out, we can rule some things in. We know more about ancient Greek humour than those who write about it generally allow. In the second part of the paper I attempt to show what those is ruled in and how what is ruled in affects the possibility of using a play like *Knights* historically.

Nina Papathanasopoulou
Visions of the *Oikos* in Aristophanes' *Wasps*

The visual creativity, spectacular scenes, and rapid changes of scenery in Aristophanes' comedies have often been praised. The spatial unity of *Wasps* is noteworthy, and in this feature it resembles a tragedy more than a comedy, since tragic dramas are usually set in one unchanging location. In his study on Aristophanic "spacecraft," Lowe 2006 argues that *Wasps* is the only play of Aristophanes that displays a tragedy-like 'unity of place', with the *skene* and its door representing the same building with the same owner throughout. For Lowe, the entire play is constructed around a single spatial dynamic familiar from tragedy, namely the attempt of a main character (here Philocleon) to leave the stage and exit from an *eisodos*.

I argue that, even though the *skene* does indeed represent the same building with the same owner throughout the play, creating the illusion of spatial unity, in fact the comedy exhibits visual creativity by inviting spectators to 'see' this single space through several different lenses. The identity of the building does not change, but the perspective through which we see it changes in significant ways. The opposing perceptions of Philocleon and his fellow jurors on the one hand, and Bdelycleon and the household slaves on the other, are distinguished by the characters' attitudes and spatial movements around and towards the *skene*, and invite the audience to consider this *oikos* by turns as a home, a fortress, a prison, or enemy territory. Furthermore, these different perspectives on Philocleon's *oikos* become vital for our interpretation of the play's characters. Bdelycleon's disposition towards the *oikos* suggests that he views his father as a woman who needs to be contained within the domestic sphere, while Philocleon sees himself in a masculine role, the role of the cunning hero Odysseus, who needs to escape from the Eastern despot of the house, and assert himself as a member of the civic community.

Accessing and Understanding Aristophanic Politics

Ralph M. Rosen
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The connection between 'Aristophanes' and 'politics' can mean different things to different people, but sooner or later everyone must confront the question of Aristophanes' own politics. The genre itself demands that the question be asked: satirical poetry depends on an aggressive personal voice making specific claims about specific targets, and audiences must process, even if only unconsciously, its scrappy jumble of 'seriousness', irony and humor. *Political* satire complicates matters even further, since it implies, at least, an ideologically informed agenda rooted in the real world and directly relevant to the lives of audiences. Scholars have wrestled with 'Aristophanes' politics' for decades and have drawn any number of—often incompatible—conclusions. In this paper, I would like to take a step back to explore what it even means to worry about a comic/satirical author's 'politics'—what we are looking for, what we hope to 'know', and the question of whether 'seriousness' (a concept far less obvious than is usually supposed) is ever actually possible in comic satire. Scholars such as Gomme, de Ste Croix and others who have taken on the question of Aristophanes' politics tend to assume that everyone agrees what it means to speak of his 'politics' in the first place. Yet there remain serious methodological questions about how we can make the assertions we all like to make (pro or con) about the political 'seriousness' of Aristophanes', his 'political affiliation' or the efficacy (or not) of satire for real-world politics. I will offer some comparative examples from our own time to help us clarify what we are aiming for in our analyses of Aristophanic satire, how (or whether) we can ever access his politics in any meaningful manner, and whether it would matter if we could.

Ian Ruffell

Conservative and radical: Aristophanic comedy and populist debate in democratic Athens

Attempts to characterise the political stance of Aristophanes as an individual and of Old Comedy as a genre have long proved problematic or even paradoxical. Apparent conservatism in choice of political targets has to be reconciled with apparently dangerous thought-experiments. This paper traces the roots of this tension to three related phenomena: overly simplistic models of the political context in democratic Athens, in reductive and totalising views of the immediate performance context and in the foregrounding of one type of humour (*onomasti komoidein*) over other elements of the comic performance. Neither truly radical nor truly conservative, the politics of Aristophanes are best seen through the prism of populism, which explains both the choice of individual targets and the mode of comic argumentation. Populist political argument eschews logic and expertise and is suspicious of complexity. Old Comedy was well placed to to operate within those constraints and exploit them, and did so in the pursuit of a range of political arguments. In a world where populism is growing in force, the ability to pursue populist political argument is a democratic lesson we would do well to observe.

Suzanne Said

The Personifications of Democracy in the *Acharnians* and the *Knights*

Acharnians and *Knights* both portray the state (*polis*) as a house (*oikos*) in opposite ways. The leading character of *Acharnians*, Dicaeopolis [Just Citizen], becomes a personification of the just city with its festivals and open market as soon as he accepts the thirty years peace. In *Knights* the ugly Demos, who is first described through his slaves, Demosthenes, Nicias and above all Paphlagon, does not appear on stage until half-way to the play [l. 728] and is given about 100 lines. As portrayed in other plays of Aristophanes, Demos is mostly passive and embodies all the bad qualities of contemporary democracy – he is easily trapped by flattery, he cares only for its stomach, and he is a slave of the demagogues who confiscate his power by supplying it with the *misthos*, until he is miraculously rejuvenated at the end of the play and becomes again the glorious Old Athens, the monarch of Greece [l. 1330]

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Abstract for CAM conference, “Aristophanes and Politics,” September 30 – October 1, 2016:

“The Multiple Audiences of Aristophanes”

This paper examines how Aristophanes’ *Frogs* challenges the notion that the audience in the theater is a homogeneous group that responds to drama (tragedy as well as comedy) in uniform ways. From its opening scene, the comedy calls attention to the diverse tastes, interests, experiences, and reactions of spectators, and the concern for acknowledging the multiplicity behind the nominal unity of audiences is sustained throughout. The insights *Frogs* offers into audience-diversity are rendered more pointed, I suggest, by the ways in which the comedy qualifies the straightforward mappings of aesthetic preferences onto political allegiances that are proffered by some of its characters, and by its gestures toward significant complexities in the correlations of taste, experience, cultural outlook, social class, and political leaning.

These considerations of what *Frogs* appears to acknowledge about “multiple audiences” in the Theater of Dionysus have ramifications, I believe, for our understanding of how this and other Aristophanic comedies engage conceptions of communal identity. It has been persuasively argued that Aristophanes strives to “make” his audiences and thus shape his spectators’ responses to the political visions of his comedies (Slater, *AJP* 120 (1999)). But it is worth exploring how these comedies may acknowledge the indelible differences among Athenians that would have tugged at the seams of the sense of common civic identity, and how they accommodate the many perspectives and viewpoints of their “multiple audiences.”

Donald Sells

Epinician Imagery in Aristophanic Comedy

There is little evidence for the production of new epinician poetry in late fifth-century Athens, but audiences of the city's dramatic festivals were quite familiar with the conventions of the victory ode and its most celebrated representatives. Laura Swift (2010) has explored the ironic presentation of epinician in tragedy, and Richard Rawles (2013), more recently, has outlined Aristophanes' tendentious presentation of such "classic" lyric poets.

This paper examines the imagery of epinician and its associated poets in Aristophanic comedy, particularly two plays of the late 420s that exploit its tropes at especially significant moments, *Knights* and *Peace*. While the presence of imagery drawn from athletic competition and victory in comedies featuring such rancorous and (especially in the case of *Knights*) vicious confrontation might seem predictable, Aristophanes' deployment of the genre's tropes in these conflicts and their resolutions is hardly straightforward. Although epinician's basic encomiastic function is preserved, it is recast to serve the distinctively popular aims of comedy: the *demos*, not the citizen, is the primary *laudandus* and praise comes with a heaping of blame. Aristophanes' interest in this particular genre of lyric is thus one more example of Old Comedy's omnivorous appropriation of other poetic forms.

Deborah Steiner

My paper focuses on a fragment from Aristophanes' *Babylonians*, the playwright's second drama of 427/6, in which a character, spotting some slaves emerging from a mill, remarks 'it's the *demos* of the Samians; how multi-lettered (*polugrammatos*)'. According to ancient commentators (although Plutarch supplies a different reading, also considered in the paper), the speaker is responding to the appearance of the chorus, whose members were in some way identified with the twenty-four letters of the Ionic alphabet; in the modern view, each letter form – including the several additional elements missing from the current Attic script – would most probably have been displayed on the mask worn by each participant in the twenty-four strong ensemble appearing on the Attic stage.

My discussion of the fragment is three-pronged. Part one asks what the line might tell us about the politics surrounding the act of inscription in Athens in the 420's, and how it might register and reflect the proliferation of documents in polis administration and Athens' organization of imperial affairs. What were the practical, symbolic and textual issues involved in the choice of one script over another and, more precisely, what were the implications of using the Ionic alphabet in place of the more traditional Attic letter forms in publicly displayed inscriptions erected by individuals and the state? Because of the heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory nature of the evidence available for responding to these questions, the paper's second part proposes locating the fragment and the scene of which it forms a part within a different framework. In this reading, Aristophanes' choice to present his chorus of Babylonians - the dramatic identity the individuals assume in the now consensus view – with masks displaying letters may have more to do both with the current intellectual climate, where it jibes with an ongoing interest in the shape and evolution of alphabetic writing and letter forms, and with a much more extended tradition of exchanges between graphology and choral dance and song in the musico-choral culture of archaic and classical Greece. In many respects, the Babylonians' scene anticipates the much better known *Letter Tragedy* (Γραμματικὴ Τραγῳδία) or *Letter Show* (Γραμματικὴ Θεορία) of Callias, whose chorus was similarly composed of women representing the twenty-four letters of the Ionic alphabet.

The paper's concluding remarks a third possible means of interpreting the fragment that more closely aligns politics, writing, and choral song and dance, and takes into consideration the *Babylonians*' pronounced naval orientation: in a tradition visible already in Homer's *Iliad* 2 as well as in archaic vase imagery, *choreia*, rowers and assemblages of ships, and the documentation of the makeup of the crews of naval armadas form a composite.

Mario Telò The *Birds* in the Light of the Political Theory of Jacques Rancière

In this paper, I consider the ideas of contemporary theorist Jacques Rancière as a way of offering a somewhat different political reading of Aristophanes' *Birds* involving language and sound, consent and dissent. In Rancière's works, the term *consensus* refers to the system of hierarchies through which liberal democracies bring people together but, at the same time, contain and police them by construing equality as conformity. In *Birds*, the alliance of Pisaeterus and Tereus creates a community that maintains its intrinsic inequality through the incorporating, cannibalistic power of consent, in line with the acts of mutilation and consumption in the Thracian king's past. The *consensus* that generates the city of birds depends on policed boundaries between language and non-language, human and non-human. The intruders who disturb the comic hero's utopian plot—the disabled New Musician Cinesias, a bookish oracle collector, Iris, a father-beater—momentarily disrupt these boundaries and the normative "distribution of the sensible" (in Rancière's phrase) that they demarcate. Calling into question the rules of who speaks and who does not, what should or should not be heard, these isolated, intense moments of disagreement and disordering (or *dis-sensus*)—regardless of the intruders' motivations—open gaps in *consensus*. Rancière sees such gaps as genuine democracy, a constant deferral of closure. More than just farcical interludes in the plot, the episodic intruder scenes correlate with interruptions of regimented democracy's perceptual (or aesthetic) hierarchies, in late-fifth-century Athens as well as in our own day.