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The Comedy of Crowds: Aristophanes and the Voice of the People—or the Poet

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Abstract: Aristophanes in his comedy the *Acharnians* educates the crowd that he creates as a character on stage, as well as the crowd gathered to watch his comedy, about what is truly in their interest: the peace that allows them to be happy by satisfying their longings for good food and frequent sex. I suggest, invoking the medieval language of *vox populi vox dei*, that Aristophanes (like the politicians and demagogues of today) competes to become the one who gives the people their voice. His comedy imagines that both the crowd in the play and the audience in the theater learn through the action of the comedy the value of peace for private happiness. The crowd so educated will give voice to Aristophanes’s wisdom when they vote in their democratic assemblies about what seems best to the people.

Introduction

The fantasies of Aristophanes, the great comic playwright of fifth-century Athens, present on stage characters and crowds enmeshed in the world of their democratic polity. Political leaders are mocked, imagined characters fly to heaven on dung beetles or build a wall between earth and heaven, gods appear as timorous fools, women rebel and take over political institutions. Nothing is outside Aristophanes’s imagination or critical gaze. Amid the absurd antics on stage, we find crowds in the form of the choruses, interacting with the main characters or speaking directly to the audience, moving and commenting on the action. These are the crowds on which I focus, crowds that in their comic and absurd presence raise questions about the nature of the

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people's voice and how it is to be constituted and/or tamed. For the purposes of this article, I take the crowd to be any group that is constituted to intervene in the political activities of the city by making a claim to speak for the interests of the whole city or, in the case I discuss below, the *dēme*, one of the administrative regions of ancient Athens, as well as the whole city. The audience of the comedies constitutes a crowd as well and will appear as such at a later moment in my discussion.

Athens as a democracy fostered the voice of the crowd in its assemblies and courtrooms. This was the *ochlos* (the mob), *hoi polloi* (the many), the *plēthos* (the multitude), the *ponēroi* (the worthless), as they would be called by a particularly acerbic author known as the Old Oligarch. While praising the democratic regime of the Athenians insofar as it is designed to serve the purposes of the many (those who are "worst" and "worthless"), this writer nevertheless comments: "And everywhere on earth the best element is opposed to democracy. For among the best people there is minimal wantonness and injustice but a maximum of scrupulous care for what is good, whereas among the people [*dēmos*] there is a maximum of ignorance, disorder, and wickedness."¹ It is the people, the disordered and ignorant crowd, according to this anonymous author, who make the decisions in the democratic assembly, the *ekklēsia*, that serve the interests of those who are "worthless."

Or listen to the Athenian general Cleon speaking before the assembly in Thucydides's *History*, castigating the crowd of citizens attending the assembly for becoming "used to being spectators of words and listening to deeds" and for judging "the feasibility of future projects from the performances of good speakers . . . preferring to believe in what you hear rather than in the deeds you can actually witness." The assembled Athenians, according to Cleon, are "slaves" to "fashions for the extraordinary and sceptics of the familiar," overcome as they are by "the pleasure of listening," instead of "men deliberating about matters of state."² Or Plato has his Socrates describe the Athenian assembly as a "common meeting of a multitude [*plēthous*]" who "with a great deal of uproar, blame some of the things said or done, and praise others, both in excess, shouting and clapping; and, besides, the rocks and the very place surrounding them echo and redouble the uproar of blame and praise."³

In contrast, Aristophanes's crowds often appear as defenders of the polity acting to preserve or improve the political life of the city. But as we shall see,

¹"Old Oligarch," *On the Constitution of the Athenians*, trans. E. C. Marchant, available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0158%3Achapter%3D1>, section 5.

²Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 3.38.4–7. In *Thucydides: The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, trans. Jeremy Mynott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³Plato, *Republic* 492bc. In *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Basic Books, 1991).

private—not public—concerns ground the speeches and acts of Aristophanes’s crowd. By revealing these motivations, Aristophanes captures the comedy of the crowds who try to cover their desire for sex and food with noble language and elevated speeches about the justice of revenge and the welfare of the city. The Chorus’s all-too-human motivations make a mockery of their pretensions to their stated noble goals. Aristophanes, however, aims to teach his crowds to understand how their claims to act in the interest of the city, their claims to defend the city, hinder the acquisition of what is truly dear to them: individual happiness. He corrects the crowd’s misunderstanding of itself, educating its members about the unity of public and private interests; he shows them that to achieve their private interests they must attend to the welfare of the whole—or rather that by attending to the welfare of the whole, they serve as well their private interests.⁴ He becomes the source of what they ought to express as participants in a democratic regime. In so educating the crowd, the comic poet becomes the savior of the city, its true benefactor, who can tame the crowd and give grounding to the voice of the demos, the voice that will decide in the *ekklēsia* what serves the city and the individual wants of its citizens at the same time.

Eleni Panagiotarakou has treated the *Acharnians* as one of Aristophanes’s antiwar efforts,⁵ while Helene Foley⁶ and Alan H. Sommerstein⁷ see it as highlighting the conflict between Aristophanes and Cleon. Gwendolyn Compton-Engle discusses the motivations and personality of its protagonist Dikaiopolis.⁸ From a more theoretical perspective, Leo Strauss explores what the comedy tells us about Socrates and therefore focuses primarily on Dikaiopolis in comparison to the Socrates of the *Clouds*.⁹ John Zumbrunnen looks at the comedy’s exploration of the “agonal democracy” and “the rebellion of ordinary citizens” with Dikaiopolis exemplifying the ordinary citizen.¹⁰ Paul Ludwig uses the play to examine the relationship between

⁴Cf. Pericles’s efforts to reconcile attention to private goods and the public good in the speeches attributed to him by Thucydides, especially at 2.60. We could envision Aristophanes as a comic Pericles, eager to educate the populace about the relation between the two goods. I owe this suggestion to Seth Jaffe.

⁵Eleni Panagiotarakou, “Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*: Pursuing Peace with an Iambic Peitho” (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2009).

⁶Helene Foley, “Tragedy and Politics in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 108 (1988): 33–47.

⁷Alan H. Sommerstein, “Harassing the Satirist: The Alleged Attempts to Prosecute Aristophanes,” in *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity*, ed. I. Sluiter and Ralph Rosen (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 145–74.

⁸Gwendolyn Compton-Engle, “From Country to City: The Persona of Dicaeopolis in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*,” *Classical Journal* 94, no. 4 (1999): 359–73.

⁹See his chapter on Acharnians in Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 57–79.

¹⁰John Zumbrunnen, *Aristophanic Comedy and the Challenge of Democratic Citizenship* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2012), 81.

self-interest rightly understood, anger, and justice, as well as the artist's role in communication that relationship to his community.¹¹ I focus, by contrast, on the *Acharnians* to bring out the character of Aristophanes's intervention into Athenian democratic politics.

Other Aristophanic comedies such as the *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae* are ripe for similar analyses insofar as they too have crowds torn between acting for the welfare of the whole and pursuing the private interests of those who make up the crowd, with the crowd thereby failing to understand the connections between and the prior importance of the concern with public welfare. Scholars such as John Lombardini,¹² John Zumbrunnen,¹³ and the authors in the volume edited by Jeremy Mhire and Bryan-Paul Frost¹⁴ have examined these plays. I analyze the *Acharnians* because here we witness the direct intervention of the playwright as a character in the play. This article also contributes to the wider scholarly debate about ancient tragedy's connection to ancient Athenian democracy, which has led to some tumultuous debates.¹⁵ Before turning to my analysis, I make a detour to the Middle Ages to establish a point of contrast between one aspect of medieval thought and Aristophanes's comedy of the crowd to illuminate the larger issues that I argue Aristophanes's treatment of the crowd presents. This, in turn, enables me to tie his analysis more vividly to contemporary democratic theory.

1. *Vox populi*

I begin with the phrase *vox populi vox dei*: The voice of the people is the voice of God. In a classic work from the 1960s, Walter Ullmann associates the phrase with what he dubs the "ascending" theory of political power, according to which power ascends from below to whoever rules in the polity so that

¹¹Pail Ludwig, "A Portrait of the Artist in Politics: Justice and Self-Interest in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 3: (2007): 479–92.

¹²John Lombardini, "Comic Authority in Aristophanes' *Knights*," *Polis* 29, no. 1 (2012): 21–39.

¹³Zumbrunnen, *Aristophanic Comedy*.

¹⁴Jeremy J. Mhire and Bryan-Paul Frost, eds., *The Political Theory of Aristophanes: Explorations in Poetic Wisdom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014).

¹⁵See Simon Goldhill, "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107 (1987): 58–76, and esp. P. J. Rhodes, "Nothing to Do with Democracy: Athenian Drama and the Polis," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 123 (2003):104–19. See P. Wilson, "Tragic Honours and Democracy: Neglected Evidence for the Politics of the Athenian Dionysia," *Classical Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2009): 8–29, for a summary of the literature on this topic. For a less contentious consideration, see J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), and the essays in his edited volume *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

the ruler or rulers express the voice of God by listening to the voice of the people. Ullmann distinguishes the ascending theory of power from the “descending” theory whereby power descends directly from God above to those who rule.¹⁶ In both theories, power derives from God and his laws control the exercise of political power. The difference is simply that God employs a different vessel to communicate his laws. Though the descending theory of power, or the divine right of kings theory (as it is commonly referred to), dominated the thought of the Middle Ages, Ullmann writes about the spread of the ascending theory from the second half of the thirteenth century on. The ascending theory foreshadows democratic theory where legitimate rule depends for its legitimacy on the voice of those who are ruled.

Aristotle dominates this part of Ullmann’s story, leading Ullmann to refer to the “Aristotelian avalanche” underlying the ascending theory. He explores the changes in medieval political life that “prepar[ed] the soil for the receptivity of Aristotelian ideas [so] that the manifestations of a practical medieval *populism* became historically significant.”¹⁷ After detailing the social transformations that enabled this conceptual revolution, such that the “people” (albeit inadequately defined) rather than the singular ruler determined the nature of political life, Ullmann concludes: “In vital respects Aristotle provided the theory for what was observed in practice.”¹⁸ Aristotle’s pervasive influence on the theoretical basis for the ascending theory comes from his affirmation of “man’s reasoning power” by which “the laws of nature were to be expressed” through and transformed into “a common will.”¹⁹ Ullmann may be shoehorning Aristotle into language that applies more properly to the world of medieval Europe, but the underlying notion that laws and communal decision-making came from below, the “populism” that marked this perspective, captures the alternative orientation to the descending theory. Not the king but the people through their communal decision-making, according to the ascending theory, expressed and implemented the natural laws discovered through their reason.

There is, however, at least one significant difference that Ullmann slides over as he connects the Aristotle of the Middle Ages and the Aristotle of ancient Greece. The collective body of the people about whom Ullmann’s Aristotle speaks used their reasoning power to discover and express laws that came from God. Thus, *vox populi vox dei*. The *politai* (or citizens) of Aristotle’s polity were by nature political animals because they possessed *logos* (reason/speech), debating the just and the unjust, the expedient and the inexpedient, without the voice of a divine being speaking through their

¹⁶Walter Ullmann, *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 159, emphasis added.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 168.

reason.²⁰ This difference is critical for the development of democratic theory out of the ascending theory of power. With the emergence of social contract theory as a reaction against the descending theory, the connection with the voice of God as the justification for the power of the people fades or remains behind the scenes. Individual reasoning and subjectivity replace the uniform voice of God, and the voice of the people transforms into the aggregation of opinions, not the articulation of an objective statement of God's laws or moral truths. Not only is the voice of the people no longer necessarily attached to those moral laws of the universe accessible to humans through their reason; it is no longer necessarily attached to the reason on which Aristotle (and Ullmann) rely to define the distinctiveness of the human community.

As Walter Lippmann wrote in the early twentieth century, "Once you touch the biographies of human beings, the notion that political beliefs are logically determined collapses like a pricked balloon."²¹ In the democratic theory that dominates today's discourse, the *vox populi* has become detached from that divine voice or the voice of a superior other, morphing from the *vox dei* to the *vox* of the people in the aggregate without any assessment of the rationality or justice of the beliefs and commitments that constitute it. Once the *vox* is dissociated from an objectively accessible moral law decreed by God's natural laws or the Aristotelian logos, the challenge surfaces as to how to determine its content, discern its sources, and train that voice so it benefits the political whole.

This is where the challenge of populism comes into play today, with the modern demagogue claiming to ventriloquize the *vox populi*, but aiming to fill the vacuum left when God and logos disappear. Aristophanes makes no claims about ventriloquizing the people, but seeks through comedy to play the role of the medieval God by infusing the populace of democratic Athens with the understandings that ought to guide their political actions. The crowd in the Aristophanic comedy begins as a unified body with a single misguided goal. Aristophanes's self-appointed task is to become the "divine" *vox* behind that crowd educating them. So tamed and educated, the crowd then can give voice in their assemblies to the wisdom he has taught.

When decisions were made in the Athenian *ekklesia*, the phrase "It seems best to the people" (*dēmōi dokei*) affirmed the people's vote. That locution, however, does not ensure that what seems best as voted on by the people is indeed best. The verb *dokein* is related to the noun *doxa*, opinion, not knowledge or wisdom. Plato's *Gorgias*, for example, highlights this problem when Gorgias praises the power of rhetoric to persuade the assembled many (*plēthē*, 452e) and then argues that the trained orator would be far more persuasive among the mass of people (*en plēthēi*, 456c) than any craftsman

²⁰Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a7–18.

²¹Cited in Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 10.

with knowledge of his craft. Similarly, Plato sets the *Symposium* in the home of the tragic poet Agathon who is celebrating his victory at the theater of Dionysus. Socrates explains to his companion that he had avoided the earlier festivities “fearing the crowd [*ochlon*]” (174a), but he gladly attends the intimate dinner at Agathon’s home. In a brief interchange with Agathon before the playwright’s speech in praise of eros, Socrates undermines Agathon’s victory before the many. He is certain that Agathon cares more about success with a few thoughtful men than before the many (*tōn pollōn*, 194c). For Plato’s Socrates the many, subject to manipulation by the orators and playwrights, care only for what seems best and in their democratic assemblies make decisions without the knowledge of what is best. Unlike Aristophanes, Plato’s Socrates aims to educate through private conversations, not through performances before the crowds. Those who find fault with the many, the *plēthos*, the *ochlos*, however, as Aristophanes presents it, fail to recognize the power of laughter to educate.²²

Aristotle tries to address the adequacy of decisions made by the many who may not be wise, who have no “voice” informing them of what ought to be, by investigating the so-called theory of “wisdom of the many,” whereby “the many [*tous pollous*] of whom none is individually an excellent man, nevertheless can when joined together be better—not as individuals but altogether.”²³ Thus, through aggregation of individual views, Aristotle considers the possibility of a good outcome given the absence of a prior voice informing the crowd of what is best. Although Aristotle—as he often does—leaves the question hanging, his investigation expresses the concern with the opposition between what appears best to the many and what is best when there is no voice to inform the many of what ought to be. Jeremy Waldron has tried to rework Aristotle’s theory of the wisdom of the many by suggesting that we think of the Aristotelian “many” gathered in the assembly (or any democratic congregation) as engaging in deliberation rather than simply aggregating preferences.²⁴ But even with the move from aggregation to deliberation, Waldron’s revisioning of Aristotle illustrates the challenges posed by a lack

²²Plato’s Socrates, of course, criticizes Aristophanes as the educator of the many when he cites Aristophanes’s *Clouds* in the *Apology* as the source of the “old slanders” (18d). And in the *Republic*, he denies his guardians the opportunity to laugh (388e). One must question, though, whether the latter restriction is itself not laughable and whether the comic elements of Callipolis are not part of the education Plato offers there. (Plato, of course, has Socrates claim that the same man could have the skills to write both comedy and tragedy: *Symposium* 223d). See Arlene W. Saxonhouse, “Comedy in Callipolis: Animal Imagery in the *Republic*,” *American Political Science Review* 72, no. 4 (1978): 888–901.

²³Aristotle, *Politics* 3.11 1281a41. In *Aristotle: The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 101.

²⁴Jeremy Waldron, “The Wisdom of the Multitude: Some Reflections on Book III Chapter 11 of Aristotle’s *Politics*,” in *Aristotle’s “Politics”: Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Kraut and Steven Skultety (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 145–65.

of the theological and moral grounding that the medieval phrase *vox populi vox dei* with its underlying assertion that the voice of the people is imbued with the voice of God.

The modern world faces the challenge of demagogues in democratic societies competing to be the source of that *vox*. The demos in Athens (as today) left on its own to discern what seems best was subject to the manipulation of the skillful orators and demagogues Plato criticized. His Socrates preferred intimate conversations to speeches before the many as the way to infuse his interlocutors with a concern with what is best. Aristophanes does not retreat into the private realm. He enters the fray, competing through his comedy to become the voice that informs the decisions of the many, that tames the crowd and educates it to express what is best. He is the one who, in the medieval world of the ascending theory, would serve as God, giving the populace the voice to express what is best for the city—and indeed all of Greece—while they benefit themselves. He challenges demagogic orators like Cleon. In the fantasy of his own comedy, he is the victor and the crowds he creates sing his songs, enact what is best (as he sees it), so that they can enjoy a life of peace and bodily pleasures to which their natures move them.

I turn to Aristophanes's first comedy, performed in 425 BCE, the *Acharnians*. In this work he explores the potential for taming and educating the crowd that constitutes the comedy's Chorus—as well as the crowd attending the Dionysiac festival at which the comedy was performed. His voice onstage is to go beyond the stage, though, so that he can become the voice underlying the political decisions made in the *ekklēsia*. Aristophanes exposes the folly of the Chorus's initial claim to act in the public interest, motivated as they are by private desires, while also mocking those desires that lack the nobility they would like to ascribe to themselves. He does so as the god who creates them as a character in his play and then, in a late choral ode, in his own voice when he speaks directly to the many attending the theater. Eager to replace unscrupulous orators like Cleon, Aristophanes structures his comedy to suggest the potential comedy has to reorient the voice of the crowd so that it will defend what is best and not only what seems best when it votes in the democratic assembly. This voice he gives to the many does not express the moral dictates of the divine being of the medieval *vox populi vox dei*, but rather directs them to policies that allow for sexual and gustatorial gratification. After all, Aristophanes writes a comedy.

2. The *Acharnians*

As with several Aristophanic comedies written and performed during the Peloponnesian War, the *Acharnians*²⁵ is unabashedly an antiwar diatribe,

²⁵ *Acharnians* will be cited parenthetically by line number. The text used here is found in *Aristophanes: Acharnians, Knights*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Henderson, Loeb Classical

highlighting all the delights the Athenians have abandoned because of what Aristophanes portrays as their mindless concern with honor and expansionist ambitions. The Chorus of the *Acharnians* does not represent the entire city; it is a collection of individuals hailing from a coal-producing deme outside Athens, but they are motivated by a common and deep hatred of the Spartans with whom the Athenians are at war.²⁶ As the comedy proceeds, though, their longing for tasty food and lots of sex (not to mention financial security) comes to prevail over their hostility to the Spartans and the desire for revenge. Revenge, the desire for “justice,” and the defense of the city yield to the more pressing desires of the flesh. This does not offend Aristophanes, but he seeks to teach that to satisfy their more compelling desires, they must seek peace.

Dikaiopolis (whose name means “just city”) introduces the comedy. He is anxiously waiting for the Athenian citizens to arrive for a meeting of the *ekklēsia*. Previously he had been frustrated in his efforts to address the body of citizens, eager as he is to argue for peace with Sparta. When the assembly finally convenes, it ignores Dikaiopolis’s concerns, instead criticizing current political leaders and attending to possible alliances with Persia and Thracian mercenaries before adjourning without discussing peace. Relief for Dikaiopolis, though, comes with the appearance of a certain Amphiheus offering for sale a sampling of treaties with Sparta. A mob-like Chorus of Acharnians, however, are pursuing Amphiheus, threatening to stone him to death, angry that he brings treaties from the Spartans, the enemies who have trampled their vineyards. After Dikaiopolis buys a thirty-year treaty, the Acharnians turn their anger against him. But Dikaiopolis, with the thirty-year treaty in hand, prepares to delight in the sweet smell of nectar and the ambrosia that he can enjoy now that he has secured peace for himself (197). Courtesy of his treaty, he can return to the country, leaving the city and its assemblies behind in order to enjoy his own rural Dionysiac festival. Amphiheus, the treaty salesman, flees as the stone-wielding Chorus advance and appear on stage.

From the discordant language of the choral ode that follows, we must imagine the members of the Chorus racing helter-skelter across the stage in pursuit of the man who dares to sell treaties, entreating everyone—including the audience—to search for this man, “for the sake of the city [*tēi polēi gar axion*]” (205). The Acharnians comprising the Chorus are old men and

Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). All translations are my own, aided by reference to Henderson’s translation.

²⁶During the first year of the war in 431 BCE, Pericles arranged for those living outside the city walls to abandon their homesteads and come into the city. Thucydides (2.14–17) offers a moving description of the anguish this causes those forced to leave their familiar lifestyles and helplessly watch the destruction of their farms from within the crowded city.

hindered (they admit) by the “wretchedness of [their] years” (209–10). So encumbered they do not catch the treaty salesman, but they explain their anger. Taking on the mantle of patriotic defenders of their homeland, they had initially claimed that they were chasing Amphiheus “for the sake of the city,” but now they shout that they will make war upon the man who makes peace with the detestable enemy who has ruined their property, their estates, their land (227). From a defense of the city, the crowd changes focus to revenge for harms they have suffered. Dikaiopolis, seeking the pleasures of a quiet country life, cares neither about public welfare nor revenge. He recognizes that to satisfy his bodily desires, he must make peace with the city Athens has defined as its enemy. He shows no passion for revenge; who needs revenge or an overwrought patriotism to be happy? It provides neither luscious young girls nor delicious meals. As the Chorus rants against the treaty maker, their language becomes violent, affirming that they will never tire of throwing stones at Dikaiopolis for his willingness to treat with the Spartans.

Dikaiopolis reappears following the Chorus’s song of vengeance, and they hear him envision all the delights that will accompany his private peace. Bidding adieu to the life of a soldier, he colorfully (indeed, crudely) anticipates fulfilling the sexual fantasies that the six years of war have denied him. The Chorus, though, still filled with anger arising from the focus on revenge, continues to affirm their desire to destroy him, shouting: “This is the one, here he is / Throw [the stones], throw, throw, throw / Strike, strike the wretch” (280–82). Repeated words capture the intensity of the crowd’s fury. When Dikaiopolis meekly asks these “most ancient men” (286) why they want to destroy him, the Chorus refuses to listen. They call him loathsome, disgusting, and a traitor to the fatherland (*patridos*, 289). Caught up in the rhetoric of their common anger, they again portray themselves as defenders of the fatherland. As the comedy progresses, concern for the fatherland recedes before a concern with protecting their property and ultimately the same delights Dikaiopolis has acquired for himself with his thirty-year treaty.

Dikaiopolis with his private treaty stands outside the city, acting as an impartial observer not bound by the Chorus’s professed vengeful patriotism. As he sensibly explains, the Spartans alone were not the cause (*aitious*) of the “affair, the disturbance” (*pragmatōn*) between the two cities (310). Dikaiopolis, for sure, is an absurd comic character, but the words Aristophanes gives him suggest a reasonableness lacking in the crazed and angry crowd. The Athenians share the blame for the war, Dikaiopolis claims, since they harmed the Spartans in many ways before war broke out. Though he assures the Chorus that he too “violently” hates the Spartans, he nevertheless recognizes the complex causes of the war and questions the value of assigning blame and seeking revenge. Reasonableness belongs to the comic character who is not guided by a thoughtless patriotism. Though focused on his own desires for bodily pleasures in much the same way as the Chorus will show

themselves to be, he exists at this point in the comedy apart from the crowd. He sees beyond his city to what unites all men—bodies in pursuit of pleasure—and what is necessary to enjoy their gratification.

Still, the Chorus continues to portray itself as the defenders of the city and the justice of revenge. Calling Dikaiopolis's analysis of the causes of the war "dreadful" and "heart-troubling" (315), they threaten him with death unless he can persuade them that the Athenians are even partially responsible for the war and the destruction of their property. Yet, consistent with the inconsistency of comedy, while they insist on being persuaded, they also refuse to listen to him. Such is the illogic of crowds in Aristophanes's comedy. Nevertheless, despite the threats, Dikaiopolis dares to speak, earning the Chorus's judgment that he is a complete evildoer who deserves a terrible death by stoning. And so, after asking him to persuade them and yet refusing to listen to him, they chant: "You shall die now" (324). Efforts to assuage the crowd's anger only turn that anger against the speaker rather than Sparta as he becomes the object of their fury.

This being a comedy, Dikaiopolis is not stoned to death. Instead, he takes hostage a basket of coal, a commodity dear to the economic heart of the Acharnians. When Dikaiopolis threatens to "kill" the coal (whatever that may mean), the crowd whimpers and cowers in fear that they will be destroyed, and forgive Dikaiopolis for whatever he had said on behalf of the enemies of Athens. Now they ask him to speak "what seems best to you" (*soi dokei*) (338). Terrified about the fate of their beloved coal, the Chorus listens. What was perfidy a moment earlier becomes irrelevant. This fickle crowd is guided by its attachment to that by which they live, not by the noble love of the city as they initially claimed, or even by their revenge-based anger.

Free to say what seems best to him, Dikaiopolis chastises the Chorus for refusing to hear him speak on behalf of the Spartans and complains about the crowd's *thumos*, the spirited anger that provoked them to throw stones at him, but he also brings democratic practices into his defense. Driven by their passions, he tells them, they were unwilling to listen "equal to equal" (354). Though they claim to defend Athens, they reject a central institution of its democratic regime—a regime of equality and of free speech. Central to the practices of Athenian democracy were *isēgoria* (the equal opportunity to speak in the *ekklēsia*) and *parrhēsia* (freedom of speech).²⁷ Though bred in a regime where the opportunity to speak freely among citizens was a treasured and defining characteristic, neither the crowd that came to the assembly at the very beginning of the comedy nor the one that threatens Dikaiopolis with stoning in the midst of the play's action allows Dikaiopolis the opportunity to speak. Claiming to act on behalf of their city, one that does no wrong and could not be responsible even in part for the destructive war with Sparta,

²⁷Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chap. 4.

the crowd as the supposed defenders of Athens do not value or practice what makes Athens worthy of defense. In their anger—not unlike the crowds of the contemporary world—they forget the principles underlying what they claim to protect. Instead, they speak and act for themselves, unwilling to hear how their perceptions of what is in their interest and the interest of the city might be mistaken. Unwilling to engage in the deliberations that are supposed to be part of the democratic assembly, they fail to learn how a concern with a shared good, peace, might serve their own interests more fully. Now that Dikaiopolis holds hostage that bucket of coal, they long to hear whatever he thinks, or (as they phrase it) whatever will save the life of their beloved coal.

Following the comic logic of the play, Dikaiopolis decides that to be a more effective speaker, he must clothe himself in beggar's rags. This ploy creates the opportunity for Aristophanes to distinguish between the crowd of the Chorus and the crowd of citizens watching the comedy—and in doing so to appeal to the vanity of the theatergoers. Flattering the theatergoers, Aristophanes has Dikaiopolis tell them that they will have the wisdom to see beneath the disguise. Unlike the ignorant Chorus whom Dikaiopolis dismisses as a bunch of foolish men (*ēlithous*, 440–44), they will know (*eidennai*) who he is. So too will the audience know the Aristophanes who is behind the action and words spoken on the comic stage. Dikaiopolis—and therewith Aristophanes—praises the audience for its ability to distinguish between fantasy and what is real. The Chorus lacks any such faculty and requires the lessons Aristophanes is to force upon them. Lest the crowd that is the audience become ridiculous like the crowd that threatens Dikaiopolis, the audience-crowd will do well to listen to the Aristophanes they know to be behind the action and words of the comedy.

Once attired in the rags of a beggar, Dikaiopolis is ready to speak on behalf of the Spartans. Reassuring his own spirit (*thumos*), he tells himself: “Prepare to say whatever seems best to you [*soi dokēi*]” (487). He articulates his understanding of what seems best as opposed to the demos, the *plēthos*, whether it be those gathered in the assembly or the theater or those who threatened him with stoning. The Chorus urging him on emphasizes his singularity, how he stands against the crowd: “You intend to speak in opposition to all” (493). At this point Aristophanes himself enters. Taking advantage of the imaginative possibilities of comedy, he has Dikaiopolis transform himself into two people—Dikaiopolis and Aristophanes the author of the comedy—and he, one man as two, speaks directly to the crowd in the theater. This double man tells both the Chorus on stage and the audience in the theater that comedy knows what is just (*dikaion*) and as a result he will speak what is amazing (*deinon*) as well as just (*dikaia*, 500–501). Through the voice of Dikaiopolis (the “just city”), he spends many lines explaining the complicated causes of the Peloponnesian War, alluding to the Megarian Decree, Aspasia's prostitutes, the conflicts that the Athenians refused to resolve before resorting to war, all in support of Dikaiopolis's contention that the Athenians by their

decisions in the *ekklēsia* are partially to blame for the suffering of the Acharnians. The crowd, eager for the simplicity of revenge, has ignored the complexity of causes. By turning the crowd away from simplistic views that appeal to them, Aristophanes thereby helps them avoid their misguided actions.

Aristophanes's speech in the voice of Dikaiopolis divides the Chorus, one half still calling Dikaiopolis a disgusting beggar for saying such vile things in support of the Spartans, the other admitting that all that he says is true. Faced with the complexity of the real causes of the war (at least according to Aristophanes) and the even greater uncertainty about the meaning of justice, neither half speaks for the whole demos. Lacking a unified goal—whether to kill the traitor or recognize the justice of his speech—they are thrown into a state of confusion. That confusion within the Chorus continues until the general Lamachus appears and is asked by both Dikaiopolis and the bested half of the Chorus to use his resources to help each of them. This scene concludes with both Dikaiopolis and Lamachus leaving the stage and the Chorus reunited, but now acknowledging that Dikaiopolis has persuaded the people (*ton dēmon*, 626). The Chorus has revised its view of the treaties. Victory lies with Dikaiopolis. The Chorus no longer threatens to stone him to death. It has been tamed.

3. The Comic Poet Speaks to the Crowd

As often happens in Aristophanes's comedies, the Chorus standing alone on stage abandons its role in the story to speak directly to the audience in defense of and in the voice of the author of the comedy in which they are a character. The defense Aristophanes offers is a critique of the demos who, acting just as the Chorus of old men do, fail to see the benefits that would be theirs were they to listen to what Aristophanes (as Dikaiopolis) advises. Dikaiopolis had been threatened with stoning on stage; analogously Aristophanes had been threatened with slander by the political leader Cleon. Aristophanes praises the audience as wise and able to see beyond external appearances, just as Dikaiopolis had praised it for being able to see beyond the beggar's rags to his true self. Speaking through the Chorus, he criticizes the Athenians (the city and the demos) as being too quick to make judgments; they are arrogant, they are hubristic toward the comic poet. They (whom a moment ago he had praised as wise) are like the Chorus of the Acharnians ready to throw stones at those they dislike: unwilling to listen to their speeches, to follow the principles of *isēgoria* and *parrhēsia*, to engage in deliberation to the expedient and the inexpedient, the just and the unjust. For such an unreflective demos, the comic poet, Aristophanes tells them, is the cause of many good things. Specifically, the poet has protected them from being deceived by the contrived and novel speeches they hear in the *ekklēsia*; he has taught them to resist the orators' flattery. He also protects them from

being deceived by the shiny offerings and flattering words of ambassadors from abroad. It is he, the comic poet, who can save the city from itself, who can prevent the crowd of citizens from becoming the crazed stone-throwing Acharnians he has presented on stage. Were they to act as the stone throwers, they too might become the ridiculous objects of the city's laughter. As Dikaiopolis has said moments before, the comic poet teaches just things, *dikaia* (500–501, 661–62), while pouring disdain on the old, flustered coal-loving men.

Aristophanes portrays himself as the cause (*aitios*, 641) of such benefits. He has educated the demos within cities as to how they are to be governed democratically (*tous dēmous en tais polesin deixas hōs dēmokratountai*, 642). Having portrayed a crowd that rejected honest deliberation on stage when they initially denied Dikaiopolis the treasured democratic practice of *parrhēsia*, Aristophanes through the Chorus suggests that the demos, lacking the guidance of the poet but speaking for the city when they assert in their assembly what seems best, are simply a fickle crowd subject to the cunning and flattering words of manipulative speakers. They do not know what is best, what is just. They do not see what is hidden by the disguises with which men can readily attire themselves just as Dikaiopolis had tried to do with his beggar's rags.

This part of the Chorus's song defending their creator/teacher from the slander of Cleon concludes by reiterating the importance of the poet for the city. Aristophanes again insists that it is the poet writing his comedies who says just things (*ta dikaia*, 655), thereby ensuring that the city flourishes. He does so "not by flattery nor bribery nor deception nor evildoing but teaching what is best" (657–58), which he does by revealing the Athenians to themselves on stage. With his admirable courage, the comedian protects the crowd/the demos from itself, draining the anger that led them to attack the peace seeker.

We might say that Aristophanes proposes that *vox populi vox dei* be "the voice of the people the voice of the comic poet." The wisdom belonging to the people would come not from God or the gods—nor from what Aristophanes sees as the highly compromised deliberations in the *ekklēsia*—but from the theater. It would reside not in the angry crowd of Acharnians driven by revenge nor in the citizens who attend the assembly simply to get their daily obol; rather, it resides in the highly sophisticated performance of Aristophanic comedy. It is not the aggregated individuals who constitute the demos in the assembly, not the shifty, elegant orators addressing the citizenry, but the theatergoers taught by Aristophanes's comedies who ought to be the voice of the city. Aristophanes's voice does not express the platitudinous love of the fatherland of the stone-throwing Chorus; his voice is based on his understanding of human nature and how political life can attend to the needs of that nature by ensuring peace. He acknowledges the bodily desires and needs that drive human actions; these make humans comic characters fit for the comic stage. But he also recognizes that to satisfy those

desires there must be peace. The concern for revenge and martial glory hinders human happiness and the achievement of what is right and just. The just city and the character Just City are peaceful and happy. The city at war is not. The stone-throwing, angry, vengeful, or even patriotic crowd, blaming others for the ravages of war, forfeit the enjoyment for which the body longs. In a panhellenic plea for peace, Aristophanes speaks not only to the Athenians; he speaks to all of Greece.

The Chorus as the voice of Aristophanes has released the Chorus as actor in his comedy to express their dissatisfaction with Athenian politics. Now they declaim against the city that has allowed the young orators with their fancy verbal tricks to make the feeble graybeards who compose the Chorus suffer. It is not only the Spartans who cause them pain. It is their fellow citizens. They who once fought nobly for the city at Marathon receive no respect. As young men drag them into court, the heroic glory that was theirs at Marathon is forgotten. Military fame is transient. Happiness, instead, depends on following the poet in his efforts to free the city from those who champion war.

While the Chorus now praise Aristophanes as their benefactor and lament their lost stature, Dikaiopolis has taken advantage of his thirty-year treaty to open a marketplace, welcoming goods and customers from across Greece. His agora demonstrates the desirability of a panhellenic free market. When the Chorus observes the exchange of goods in Dikaiopolis's marketplace, they stop reminiscing about the heroic deeds performed during their soldiering days at Marathon; now this crowd of old, toothless, feeble, worn-out, muttering, deaf (the miserable adjectives pile up) men gripe about their joyless lives, mourning the loss of the quotidian delights that war has denied them, but are now for sale in Dikaiopolis's market. They resent the indignities they suffer from the sycophants who fleece them out of their meagre savings (676–701). Age, they claim, has transformed them—but has it?

Earlier in the comedy, the Chorus called Dikaiopolis a traitor and threatened him with stoning because he had treated with the enemy, but when their private lives were threatened as Dikaiopolis held hostage that bucket of coal, they no longer defended the city, only their own livelihoods. And while earlier they had called Dikaiopolis wretched, loathsome, disgusting, seeing him engaged in trade and enjoying the pleasures the market offers, they call him a man who is blessedly happy (*eudaimonei anthropos*, 836), one whose plans have materialized and who profits with delight from his market (837–38). The Chorus even refers to him now as a thoughtful and a most wise man (*ton phrominon andra ton hupersophon*, 971). Whereas moments before they had gloried in their role as warriors at Marathon, now as the result of Aristophanes's comedy, they say “never will they welcome War into their homes” (971). Instead, they will welcome love, harmony, friendship, and reconciliation, and even admit that they envy Dikaiopolis's good counsel (*tēs euboulías*, 1008). Even more than his good counsel, though, they envy the feasting that his private treaty has afforded

him (1009). The crowds streaming into Dikaiopolis's market are not an avenging angry mob; they are eager to enjoy the benefits of economic exchange that peace allows. This is what Aristophanes as the educator of the city aims to teach. It was not age that changed them; it was Aristophanes. By displaying the delights Dikaiopolis's peace affords, the poet has transformed the Chorus from vengeful, miserable old men to ones ready to enjoy life's pleasures, from stone throwers to peace lovers. Perhaps he hopes to have done the same for the crowd of theatergoers who as citizens of Athens will vote on war and peace as they decide on what seems best to the demos in the *ekklēsia*.

As the play concludes, the comedy contrasts line against line the delicacies Dikaiopolis enjoys with the deprivations the general Lamachus, still on the edge of battle, endures. Happy, blessed Dikaiopolis, the *eudaimōn*, relishes his life. Lamenting his, Lamachus describes himself as damned by the gods, a *kakodaimōn*, reduced to eating onions and rotten fish, while Dikaiopolis enjoys stuffed fig leaves, thrushes, and pigeon meat. And while Lamachus oils his military gear, Dikaiopolis pours honey on the foods spread before him (1099–1106). As the contrast between the pleasures of the thirty-year-treaty holder and the agonies of the general plays out before the Chorus, its members are fully persuaded to abandon their anger at the "traitor" and their desire for revenge. Enlightened by the comic poet who created them, the Chorus concludes the comedy by joyfully following Dikaiopolis off stage—presumably to the marketplace of bodily delights.

The Chorus at the beginning of the comedy claimed to attack the treaty seller and Dikaiopolis for the sake of the city; at the end, they abandon their specious devotion to the city when tempted by sensual pleasures. As decrepit old men, they fantasize about their glorious youth as fighters at Marathon, but such reminiscences are undercut by the lives they now live in a city where the youth with their oratorical flourishes hoodwink them out of their possessions. The Chorus comes to understand that the way of life they defended at Marathon no longer exists—if it ever did. Better to abandon the focus on military success and eat pigeon meat instead of rotten fish. Insofar as they might be the *vox populi* that will decide the weighty matters of war and peace, Aristophanes educates them through humor as to what their *vox* must accomplish. It is the poet (not God), through what he creates for the stage, who provides the grounding for what the Chorus must articulate when they give common expression to what seems best.

In the first known democratic regime, Aristophanes writes a play where the comic poet provides the wisdom that is to inform the voice of the demos. He claims to do so by persuading the crowd—both the Chorus and his audience—through his comedy. The art of the comic poet modulates the *vox* of the demos so that it can express good and just things. The deliberative assembly of the collective demos expressing what seems best failed Dikaiopolis as they bickered at the beginning of the comedy without addressing the key issues of the day; it is Aristophanes who ultimately

saves him. But Aristophanes is not only Dikaiopolis's savior; he is the savior of all of Greece by teaching the crowd that what it desires comes with peace, not war.

Socrates in Plato's *Republic* introduces his proposal for a philosopher-ruler with the fear that it would be drowned in a sea of laughter. The immediate response by his interlocutor Glaucon is to agree as he, with comic exaggeration, imagines that a host of men would gather any weapon at hand ready to attack and do "amazing things" (473c–474a). Does Aristophanes imagine himself as the Comedian King who can rule as Plato's philosopher would?²⁸ Aristophanes certainly offers as exalted a vision of the comic poet as Socrates does of his philosopher-ruler. This may be his greatest fantasy, greater than the dung beetle who flies to heaven, greater than the women who take over the assembly and the city, greater than the men who found a city among the birds. On the comic stage, Aristophanes can be the tamer of crowds, ending his play happily with peace and prosperity for all. The tragedy, of course, is that this is a fantasy, and while Aristophanes imagines such a role for himself, he also portrays the madness of the crowd driven by unthinking hatred, unwilling to listen to argument, focused on beastly and crude pleasures—unable to become the *eudaimones*, happy and blessed men, they would be if they were to express his voice in the self-ruling democracy of ancient Athens.

Conclusion

The secularization of the *vox populi vox dei* of medieval thought in the modern world has left the *vox populi* without a firm grounding, dependent on individual subjective perspectives that are subject to manipulation by political leaders and demagogues ready to be that voice. In ancient Athens, Aristophanes competed with the demagogues of his time to serve as the source of the *vox populi*, eager to enlighten the crowds about what served the welfare of individuals, the city, and all of Greece. In the ascending theory of the medieval world there was one voice—God's—that spoke through the people's knowledge of God's laws. Today, as in ancient Athens, many competitors are eager to have the many give expression to their voice. We might even think of contemporary comedians dominating late-night television in the mode of Aristophanes, working to educate the crowds through humor, to replace the voice of politicians, the Cleons of today, with their own voice.²⁹ While we certainly cannot attribute to Aristophanes the ending of the Peloponnesian War, we can see in his

²⁸ Again, I am indebted to Seth Jaffe for this suggestion.

²⁹ See Peter Euben, "Aristophanes in America," in *Platonic Noise* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 64–84, on the TV show *The Simpsons*; and Ralph M. Rosen, "Efficacy and Meaning in Ancient and Modern Political Satire: Aristophanes, Lenny Bruce, and Jon Stewart," *Social Research* 79, no. 1 (2012): 1–32.

comedy the effort to educate the crowd to which he gives life on stage and the one that by watching his play can express its voice when they vote in the assembly. It may be as fantastical to imagine that modern-day comics could tame the crowds as it is for a treaty seller to suddenly appear with a thirty-year treaty for sale, but Aristophanes's fantasies may nevertheless offer an aspirational vision of the potential power of the comic artist to tame and teach the crowds to become a more just and pacific voice of the people despite themselves.