

BARTLETT (R.) **Against Demagogues: What Aristophanes Can Teach Us about the Perils of Populism and the Fate of Democracy. New Translations of the *Acharnians* and the *Knights***. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. Pp. viii + 284. US\$19.95. 9780520344105.

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The term *dēmagōgos* ('leader of the people') applied at first to any leader in a democracy; it was Aristophanes who endowed it with the meaning 'leader of the mob' or, in modern parlance, 'populist', in his attacks on the politician Cleon in a series of at least five plays produced between 426 and 422 BCE, of which three are extant: *Acharnians*, *Knights* and *Wasps*. These plays, especially the vehement and obsessively political *Knights*, are among Aristophanes' less well-known and least frequently translated, performed or commented works, but the recent success of Cleon-style populism in the United States and elsewhere has piqued fresh interest in the origins of the phenomenon and perhaps kindled hope that Aristophanes might provide insights into its perils and ultimate denouement. *Against Demagogues*, as its subtitle announces, aims both to facilitate the interest and to assess the hope. It succeeds better in the former aim, however, than in the latter: the translations are serviceable for non-specialists wishing to study two of these plays (alas no translation is provided for *Wasps*, whose portrayal of Cleon's manipulation of the courts and the sociopathy of his supporters supplies a crucial piece of the picture), but although the author is a political scientist who believes that Aristophanes 'deserves to be known not only as a great thinker but also as a great *political* thinker' (3), his interpretative analyses are limited in scope and diffuse, for the most part drawing attention to the play's political dimensions while reviewing the plot, rather like notes for a lecture class or seminar.

The volume comprises abbreviations of the editions, translations and commentaries consulted (vii–viii), not including the commentary on *Knights* by C.A. Anderson and T.K. Dix (Ann Arbor 2020), which appeared too late, but bizarrely including the amateurish edition of *Knights* by a Victorian crusader against democracy, Thomas Mitchell (London 1836), though fortunately this is cited only on a few technical points and Mitchell's *Acharnians* is ignored. This is followed by a brief introduction (1–11) focused on Aristophanes and his political comedy, the translations, with footnotes, of *Acharnians* and *Knights*, each followed by an interpretative essay (109–37 and 249–75, respectively), and an appendix consisting of the author's translation, uncommented, of Thucydides' report (3.37–40) of Cleon's speech to the Athenians in 427 regarding the punishment of the Mytileneans (277–82). There are also some closing suggestions for further reading consisting of only seven items (283–84), including Leo Strauss' *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York 1966), clearly an interpretative model. There is no index, which would have been useful in a work of this kind.

The translation is intended more for study than for enjoyment. It is in prose but set out as lines matching the lineation of the Greek as closely as possible; it is eclectic but conservative, usually deferring to the MSS even in inferior readings and in the assignment of speakers, where the MSS have no authority; and it makes no attempt to render the text poetically lest it 'sacrifice the clear meaning of the words or a sense of the playwright's intention' (9). The result is a translation that for the most part is clear enough (internal glosses in square brackets are added just in case) but often too literal, for example, the response to the Sausage Seller's assurance that he is of low birth: 'so great is the good you've got, with a view to [political] affairs' (*Knights* 187), where a natural and idiomatic rendering better conveys what is meant, for example, Alan Sommerstein's 'what an advantage you've got for political life!' in *Aristophanes' Knights* (Warminster 1981).

The running commentary format of the interpretative essays will assist students and non-specialists in reading and discussing the plays, but they lack a coherent approach, so

that we can both accept Aristophanes' claim in *Acharnians* to 'teach the just things' while 'making a comedy of the city', that is, 'to be a tough critic of democracy as well as a prudent advisor of it' (10) and at the same time consider him 'a teacher of justice who teaches us by lampooning everyone and everything – even justice' (124). And to focus on the political elements of the plays to the exclusion of their cultural, theatrical and poetic dimensions impoverishes and blinkers the analysis. For example, to view Dicaeopolis naturalistically as a man who opposes the war for private reasons, who then selfishly 'profit[s] ... from everyone else's war' (128) and by celebrating the joys of extramarital sex ceases to be a 'dutiful family man' is to miss his multiform role in the festival and poetic competition: as the traditional padded and phallic comic hero kaleidoscopically impersonating a member of the audience, a displaced farmer, an assemblyman, an infantryman, the tragic hero Telephus, Aristophanes as competitive poet, citizen and target of Cleon, and (as his name reveals) an embodiment of the Just City, who (much like Lysistrata later) withholds the blessings of peace from a city still committed to war. When he must make a persuasive political speech, he turns to a poet, much as Aristophanes advises from a vantage point outside the political arena proper.

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Aristophanes' comedies provide some of the most tantalizing evidence for Athenian democracy and attitudes towards it. Yet, as the papers in this collection of 'new studies' demonstrate, increasing critical sophistication in assessing these plays' dramatic and generic features has made questions about the poet's own political views harder to ask and to answer. Do they affect his depiction of Athens, and does he even hold any serious views of his own, or simply aim for apolitical laughs, more concerned with point-scoring against rival playwrights?

Co-editor Ralph Rosen sets out the current state of play carefully in his introduction, taking A.W. Gomme's influential 1938 article of the same title as a starting point ('Aristophanes and Politics', *CR* 52, 97–109), and developing its view that there is no simple relationship between author and context. Previous attempts to position Aristophanes as a 'conservative' or 'progressive' now seem unhelpful and anachronistic, as Isabel Ruffell's thoughtful chapter shows.

But the intersection of politics and humour cannot be ignored. What is funny about Aristophanic comedy? This question has also troubled modern readers and theatrical producers. Robin Osborne takes a comparative approach, starting with a close reading of a Victoria Wood song which offers insights into contemporary sexual politics, and then attempting a similar analysis of the portrayal of Cleon in Aristophanes' *Knights*, which is representative of his assessment of democracy as a whole. Osborne concludes that, while we know less than we think we do about Aristophanes' political alignment, his comedies tell us more than has sometimes been acknowledged about the debates and positions held by his fellow citizens.

The subsequent chapters approach the debate from different angles, some focussed on a particular play or theme, or the application of a particular method or theory, others delivering broader surveys of the corpus and its literary and historical context. One limitation