

Introduction

On Reading Aristophanes Today

O democracy! Are these things to be tolerated?

—ACHARNIANS 618

This volume contains new translations of the two earliest extant plays of Aristophanes, the *Acharnians* and *Knights*, together with explanatory notes and interpretive essays meant to aid readers coming to the plays for the first time.

It is reasonable to wonder at the outset why this author and these two plays deserve our attention here and now. As for Aristophanes (d. circa 386–380 B.C.E.), we can begin from the contention that he is not only the greatest Athenian comic playwright but also among the world's greatest comic writers simply. For although only eleven of the roughly forty plays he wrote have come down to us, they are so filled with wild comic invention, zany plots, and unforgettable characters, both lovable and loathable, that they have easily earned him a place alongside Rabelais, Molière, and Shakespeare. In brief, Aristophanes is an unsurpassed master of comedy and its devices—mockery, blasphemy, parody, and the scatological among them. As a result, anyone interested in the peaks of world literature, and in enjoying them, would do well to turn at some point to Aristophanes.

Still, this contention runs the risk of making of Aristophanes an impressive antique or a giant of the past and only of the past. Hence it may not quite do justice to the fact that Aristophanes' plays can

still speak forcefully to contemporary audiences, as I hope the *Acharnians* and *Knights* will confirm: there remains something remarkably fresh about them. This is ultimately traceable to the fact that Aristophanes the comedian was also and above all a thinker of a very high order. In fact Aristophanes sought nothing less than what he himself calls wisdom (*sophia*), a wisdom that, however much it may be rooted in a specific time and place, also transcends time and place in the direction of the permanent human condition and hence the permanent human problems. Aristophanes boasts not only of his unrivaled “novel conceits” (*Wasps* 1044), of the madcap inventions and comic twists that enliven his plays, but also of the “subtle things” (*Acharnians* 445) that fill them. In the revised version of his *Clouds*, Aristophanes famously complains that the audience watching its first performance failed to grasp that it—the play on which he had expended the most labor—was also his “wisest” one: Aristophanes prides himself above all on his wisdom (*Clouds* 522–26). Or, as the Chorus in the *Assembly of Women* puts it, speaking for the poet, “The wise, on the one hand, should judge me by remembering the wise things [in the play], but the laughers, on the other hand, should judge me with pleasure on account of the laughter” (*Assembly of Women* 1155–56). Everyone can see that the plays of Aristophanes are filled with jokes of all kinds, but it is good to remind ourselves that there is also material in them intended for “the wise,” actual or potential.

This much, then, in support of the possibility that Aristophanes, the supreme jokester of antiquity, deserves to be taken seriously by us—and more seriously, perhaps, than we may be inclined to take comedians of any age. But to pursue this possibility, we must see what the *Acharnians* and *Knights* in particular help make plain, that the thoughts of concern to Aristophanes, while ranging far and

wide indeed, were, for all that, remarkably political: Aristophanes deserves to be known not only as a great thinker but also as a great *political* thinker. It is said that Dionysius I, tyrant of Syracuse, once wrote Plato asking the philosopher for instruction concerning the democratic polity of Athens. Plato responded by sending Dionysius the works of Aristophanes.¹ The tyrant's reaction upon receiving Plato's mailing has not, unfortunately, been recorded. But if Dionysius did read those works, he might well have come to see the good sense behind Plato's gift.

Aristophanes' claim to political wisdom or to political judgments of unusual sobriety rests in part on his understanding of justice. In the *Acharnians*, the lead character, Dicaeopolis, turns out to be none other than Aristophanes in disguise, and at one point he turns to address the audience. He asks them not to take it amiss if he will "speak about the city, while writing a comedy. / For when it comes to what's just, comedy too knows it. / And I'll say things terribly clever, but just" (*Acharnians* 499–501). Similarly, the Chorus of the *Knights* praises Aristophanes on the grounds that the poet "dares to say the just things" (*Knights* 510)—even if doing so comes at some cost to the poet himself. In the *Acharnians* the Chorus describes Aristophanes and his political wisdom this way: "But now don't *you* ever let him go, since he'll make a comedy of the just things! / And he affirms that he'll teach you many good things, so you'll be happy, / Not flattering, or setting out the prospect of pay, or fooling you through and through, / Nor acting nastily nor sprinkling with praise, but teaching the things that are best" (*Acharnians* 655–58). The knowledge of what is just and what is best or most

1. "Life of Aristophanes" sec. 40, in *Poetae Comici Graeci*, ed. Rudolph Kassel and Colin Austin (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1983), 3.2: 3.

beneficial, then, characterizes the political wisdom of Aristophanes, and so it is that he can “make a comedy” of the city, and even of justice, while also benefiting Athens.

The Athens of concern to Aristophanes was of course a democracy, a direct democracy. His plays feature scenes in or about the democratic Assembly, where all citizens were entitled to gather, to speak, and to vote (*Acharnians*, *Assembly of Women*); the smaller Council or *boulē* made up of five hundred citizens charged with (among other things) setting the legislative agenda for the Assembly (*Knights*); and the courts, the frequent haunts of the famously litigious Athenians (*Wasps*). Aristophanes is concerned with political affairs domestic and foreign, not least the ruinous and seemingly endless Peloponnesian War, which broke out in 431 B.C.E. and lasted until Athens’ surrender to Sparta in 404 (*Acharnians*, *Peace*, *Lysistrata*). It is said that Athens bestowed on Aristophanes a special honor in recognition of the sound political advice he conveyed to the city in his *Frogs*, where he urged a reconciliation between democratic and oligarchic factions in the wake of the democracy’s restoration in 410 subsequent to a short-lived oligarchic coup (“the 400”).² Instructive here are the remarks of G. W. F. Hegel, among the most discerning readers of Aristophanes in modern times. According to Hegel, Aristophanes was “no ordinary joker and shallow wag”; “everything has to him a much deeper basis, and in all his jokes there lies a depth of seriousness.” Accordingly, “when Aristophanes makes merry over the Democracy, there is a deep

2. See, e.g., *The Comedies of Aristophanes: Frogs*, ed. Alan H. Sommerstein (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1996), 21–22 and 216. According to the prose “hypothesis” that accompanies the Greek manuscript of the *Frogs*, “The play was so admired on account of its parabasis that it was even produced again, as Dicaearchus asserts.”

political earnestness at heart, and from all his works it appears what a noble, excellent, and true Athenian citizen he was.”³

What then of the two plays of concern to us? That they belong together is easy to demonstrate, for they are linked by their proximity in time—the *Acharnians* was staged in 425 B.C.E., the *Knights* in 424—and by their favorable reception: they were back-to-back hits, each winning first prize in their respective festivals. More important are their kindred themes, for both are strikingly political. And it is this concern for politics, for the conduct of democratic politics in particular, that makes the plays so accessible today. The *Acharnians* is a comedic plea to end the Peloponnesian War. The play’s lead character is an old Athenian farmer named Dicaeopolis (= Aristophanes), and when Athens proves uninterested in peace, he resorts to striking a private treaty with Sparta, the enemy. This is the comic conceit at the heart of the play, that a “private” peace is possible, and it sets in motion the rest of the play’s action.

Now the most vocal and persuasive advocate of war in Athens at the time—and hence Aristophanes’ greatest foe—was the demagogue Cleon (d. 422 B.C.E.).⁴ We learn in the *Acharnians* that Aristophanes had previously tangled with Cleon as a result of the poet’s comedic takedown of him in the play produced the year before, the *Babylonians* (now lost).⁵ This recent conflict in no way prompted Aristophanes to soften his attack or, still less, to retreat.

3. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E.S. Haldane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 1:427–28.

4. As part of the background to the *Knights* and its portrait of Paphlagon, i.e., Cleon, the appendix in this volume reproduces a speech Cleon gave to the Athenian assembly, the only such speech recorded by Thucydides in his *War of the Peloponnesians and Athenians*.

5. Consider *Acharnians* 6, 377–82, 502–5, and 659.

Far from it. For in the *Knights* Aristophanes even more directly attacks Cleon, who was then at the peak of his power, this time going so far as to portray Cleon as a central character named Paphlagon (roughly “Blusterer”). This Paphlagon is a wheedling and cynical manipulator of the Athenian democratic multitude, always concerned above all with his own power—and pocketbook. The comic defeat, not to say humiliation, that Cleon is made to suffer onstage was intended simultaneously to deflate this wily demagogue and to educate the audience even while delighting it. Aristophanes thus availed himself of the talents that were peculiarly and spectacularly his own to damage Cleon, if not in the popular Assembly then in the venue that was most Aristophanes’ own, the comic theater. And, as today’s satirists may be able to attest, to bring others to laugh at a public figure is to begin to have them take that figure much less seriously. Laughter can be an acid that corrodes the pretensions, and the prerogatives, of the powerful.

As it happens, the earliest instance of the Greek term for “demagoguery” (*dēmagōgia*) appears here (*Knights* 191). This term could be used, and indeed was used, in a neutral or even positive way, for it means simply “leading the demos,”⁶ the demos being the largest political class that is by definition the poorest and hence also the least educated. Yet “demagoguery” also soon came to have, as it has in Aristophanes, much the same negative connotation that it has for us: a “demagogue” can also be an unscrupulous master of often bombastic rhetoric who manipulates the crowd for his own ends, the needs of the common good be damned. As a character in the *Knights* puts it, “Demagoguery no longer belongs to a man

6. Consider, e.g., Isocrates, *To Nicocles* 16: “And you will nobly lead the demos [*dēmagōgēsēis*].”

acquainted with the things of the Muses or to one whose ways are upright / But to one who is unlearned and loathsome” (191–92).

The problem with demagoguery as Aristophanes presents it here is twofold. First, of course, is the demagogue himself, who in the *Knights* is shown to be endlessly flattering of the demos, even as he thinks himself far above them: he despises the demos he nonetheless feels compelled to fawn over. He tells the Athenian demos—represented here as a single character named Demos—whatever he thinks they want to hear, and in particular he promises Demos endless material benefits and comforts, something not unknown to us: the promise of inexpensive healthcare for all, say, “free” college tuition, a nice bump in the old age pension, all of it with a lower tax bill to boot—or rather no bill at all. The successful demagogue, then, must constantly curry favor with the masses, even as he will enrich himself through bribe-taking and other shakedown operations. But he will also fiercely attack any and all who challenge his dominance by seeking high public office themselves. Here the tools of the trade include slander, lawsuits or the threat of them, and any trumped-up charges that are useful in damaging the good reputation of a fellow citizen. So it is that Cleon-Paphlagon is a master of calumny and the like, even as he shamelessly takes credit for the good deeds, including the military exploits, of others.

The second feature of demagoguery as Aristophanes presents it may hit a little too close to home, for the poet makes plain that the demagogue, the “leader of the demos,” needs a demos ready and even eager to be led—or rather misled. There’s one born every minute. Accordingly, Aristophanes does not spare the Athenian people, the very citizens making up the great bulk of his audience in the theater and laughing at the very jokes that sometimes also sting: he charges them with being amazingly gullible, “half-deaf,”

irascible, ignorant of what is being done in their name at home and abroad. In the *Knights*, Aristophanes hammers away at the thought that the Athenian people are particularly susceptible to being hoodwinked by those who claim to speak in the name of a god or gods, through oracular pronouncements of various sorts.⁷ There is, to say it again, one born every minute.

It is Aristophanes' focus on the conduct of democratic politics, in matters foreign and domestic, that most obviously renders the *Acharnians* and *Knights* deserving of our attention today. Our own experience of demagoguery is in some ways different, to be sure, for we are less concerned (at present) with the conduct of a war than we are with such divisive questions as immigration and race relations, questions without a direct parallel in the Athenian case. But it is nonetheless true that democratic politics, then and now, remains open to the manipulations of demagogic actors. The *Acharnians* and *Knights* present raucous portraits of just such a demagogue in action, together with the pleasing spectacle of his just comeuppance.

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The translations of the *Acharnians* and *Knights* offered here aim at giving readers more or less direct access to the texts of Aristophanes, based on the best available Greek editions,⁸ and, to that end, they

7. Consider *Knights* 61, 109 and following, 997 and following.

8. I have used the Greek text of the *Acharnians* and *Knights* in *Aristophane*, ed. Victor Coulon and Hilaire van Daele, Budé ed. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1995), vol. 1, although I have also consulted the Oxford Classical Text edition: Aristophanes, *Fabulae*, vol. 1, *Acharnenses Equites Nubes Vespae Pax Aves*, ed. N. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). In the case of the *Acharnians* I have

attempt to be as literal as sound English usage permits. This means that I have tried to render consistently all key terms—*justice, wisdom, courage, god, man, human being*—by what seemed to me their closest English equivalents, resorting to explanatory footnotes where such consistency proved impossible. Readers may therefore be confident that when *nature* appears in the translations, for example, it is reflecting the presence of the same word or family of words (*physis, phyō*) in the original. The translations also strive to reproduce the most striking details of Aristophanes' text—its wide variety of oaths, for example, and terms of address that are too often suppressed or altered by modern scholars. In one respect, however, the versions offered here depart from the letter, if not I hope the spirit, of Aristophanes. For the plays were recited or sung in poetic meter, whereas the present translations are in prose. For this translator, at least, even the attempt to render Aristophanes into English verse would not only fail to convey the dazzling brilliance of the original poetry but also likely sacrifice the clear meaning of the words or a sense of the playwright's intention.⁹ I have chosen, then, to try to convey that intention in the medium of prose alone. Readers dissatisfied (or for that matter satisfied) with this

benefited from the masterful commentary of S. Douglas Olson: *Aristophanes, Acharnians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Very helpful too are the editions of both plays prepared by Alan H. Sommerstein: *The Comedies of Aristophanes*, vols. 1–2 (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1980–81). Material in square brackets does not appear in the Greek and is therefore the responsibility of the translator. Line numbers attempt to reflect as closely as possible those in the Greek text.

9. For a classic rendering of the plays into English verse, see the Loeb Classical Library edition of the plays of Aristophanes by B.B. Rogers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924).

choice are of course encouraged to learn to read Aristophanes' marvelous poetry in the original language.

The texts are accompanied by explanatory notes intended to aid a first reading of the plays, with their many political and literary allusions, and by interpretive essays meant to foster further reflection.¹⁰ The essays for the most part follow the plays as they unfold. They draw readers' attention to the most important plot points, explain the significance of various characters, foreign and homegrown, and shed light on the meaning of Aristophanes' often mad-cap, rapid-fire episodes. Above all, the essays strive to disentangle Aristophanes' serious teaching about democratic politics from his many jokes and pratfalls: he puts on display in both the *Acharnians* and the *Knights* the frailties peculiar to democracy. In general, then, the essays attempt to vindicate Aristophanes' claim to "teach the just things" while "making a comedy of the city."

It is my hope that this volume will foster the study of Aristophanes understood not only as a comic genius but also as an important political thinker, not least in times of democratic turmoil. In the medium of comedy, Aristophanes proves to be a tough critic of democracy as well as a prudent advisor to it. He sets forth with great power the dangers to which democracies, then and now, are prone: the threats posed by external warfare and by internal division. Above all, Aristophanes has a keen eye for the seductive allure of demagogues and the damage they can do to a more or less healthy democracy. He is particularly skilled at portraying the toxic mix of a ruthlessly ambitious man with a people at once ill-informed about the doings of their own democracy and too ready

10. An earlier version of the essay on the *Acharnians* first appeared in *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 45:3 (2019): 365–82.

to believe empty promises or idle flattery. The demagogue Cleon is Aristophanes' greatest opponent in both the *Acharnians* and the *Knights*, and his comedic skewering of the man still resonates. If not all jokes travel well, Aristophanes' singular blend of wisecracking wisdom certainly does.