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### Review Of "Aristophanes The Democrat: The Politics Of Satirical Comedy During The Peloponnesian War" By K. Sidwell

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#### Recommended Citation

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# Aristophanes the Democrat: the Politics of Satirical Comedy during the Peloponnesian War

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Jeremy B. Lefkowitz

The idea that some of the fictional characters in Aristophanic comedy are in fact caricatures of real Athenians has been around since antiquity. In the opening of *Knights*, for example, one of two unnamed slaves appears to out himself as the general Demosthenes when he complains that Cleon has stolen credit for “my own” ( ἐμοῦ, 54) victory at Pylos (*Knights* 54-57). Ancient commentators speculated on the identity of the other slave as well: “They say that while one of the slaves is Demosthenes, the other is Nikias, to make both of them politicians ( *demegoroi*)” (Hypothesis A3).<sup>1</sup> But does this type of masquerade only make sense in the context of the allegorical plot of *Knights*? And is it just a one-off joke or is it the case that “Slave A = Demosthenes” and “Slave B = Nikias” in some more meaningful way? Scholars such as Süvern (1827/1835) and Katz (1976) wrestled with similar questions in their attempts to identify real individuals underneath the veil of fiction in *Birds*;<sup>2</sup> but the first extended attempt to justify and describe a pattern of disguise and identity in Aristophanic comedy was Michael Vickers’ *Pericles on Stage: Political Comedy in Aristophanes’ Early Plays* (1997). Vickers focused his attention on characters who (he claimed) represent Pericles and Alcibiades; the book was criticized in BMCR [97.9.15](#) for treating Old Comedy (and its audience) as excessively subtle and sophisticated. In an article on “The Limits of Allegory and Allusion in Aristophanes,” Kenneth Dover was more disparaging, describing Vickers’ speculative method of detecting similarities and resonances as “beyond the reach of parody” (242).<sup>3</sup> Readers of Aristophanes understandably have trouble believing that veils or ventriloquial games were a part of his repertoire—when one thinks of Aristophanic comedy’s excoriating, name-naming satirical attacks, its graphic sexual language, its celebrations of *hubris* and heroic *poneria*, and its dangling *phalloi*, one does not exactly think of a poet who was concerned with hiding things.

But, for Keith Sidwell, whose own review of *Pericles on Stage* in *The Classical Review* (1997, 47: 2, 254-255) concludes by applauding Vickers as a “pioneer,” the main problem with Vickers’ approach is that it did not go far enough. Several years before Vickers’ book, Sidwell had begun to lay out his own view of the intersection of politics and satire in Old Comedy, which he based on two tendentious claims: (1) the primary mode of satirical attack was subtle caricature, not *onomasti komodein* (as is commonly thought); (2) comic poets appropriated and parodied each other’s plays by a kind of ventriloquism: “...the new play pretended to be by the rival”.<sup>4</sup> These two concepts—now called “disguised caricature” and “metacomedy”—are central to the project of *Aristophanes the Democrat*, which presents an

entire network of “identifications” in Old Comedy and outlines an elaborate system for discovering the nature of the relationship between politics and comedy in 5th-century Athens.

The key insight of this book is that Aristophanes’ politics are to be discerned not from a straight reading of the plays themselves nor from the statements of the putative authorial voice of the parabases, but from a web of intertextual relationships (grounded in “disguised caricature” and “metacomedy”) interwoven through the plays of Aristophanes, Eupolis, and Cratinus, spanning a period of more than 20 years (during the height of the Peloponnesian War). This insight is articulated most concisely on p. 208: “...metacomedy is the vehicle for the expression of the political content of comedy.”

The thrust of *Aristophanes the Democrat* lies in its title: this network of allusions and appropriations will reveal that Aristophanes was a supporter of radical democracy and not the nostalgic conservative he is often thought to have been. The basis for this view of Aristophanes’ politics is developed in the first chapter (3-30), which presents a detailed, line-by-line reading of the parabasis of *Clouds* (lines 518-562)—a passage that is invoked in just about every chapter of *Aristophanes the Democrat* (e.g., at 34, 91, 120, 166, 219, 299, et al.). Sidwell’s avowedly hypothetical reconstruction of the performance context of the revised *Clouds* (“*Clouds II*” passim) and his new interpretation of its parabasis provide both the basis and model for his approach to the rest of the corpus. After discussing the likelihood that *Clouds II* was never performed at a festival (5-7) and suggesting that the specificity of its references exceeds anything else in Aristophanes (6)—both of which suggest that the poet may not have had a broad audience in mind for the revision—Sidwell raises the stakes with the claim that the *Clouds II* parabasis provides evidence of an elaborate (and previously unrecognized) political agenda designed to promote the interests of a small circle of Aristophanes’ supporters. In this first chapter, Sidwell maps out the core beliefs of this (hypothetical) group, which emerges as a loyal, tightly-knit group of fundraisers that has stood by Aristophanes from the start of his career (a conjecture based on references to *Banqueters* and *Knights* in the parabasis); they are anti-Socrates and anti-Cleon, but (more surprisingly) they are devoted supporters of the radical democrat Hyperbolus, whom Aristophanes appears to defend at *Clouds II* 551-559. Because Sidwell sees *Clouds II* as a uniquely private communication between Aristophanes and his friends, he treats it as “quasi external” (7) evidence of what Aristophanes must *really* have thought and felt; thus, the “positive authorial evaluation” (28) of Hyperbolus at *Clouds II* 551-559 overrides the many negative attacks on him found throughout the corpus. Moreover, as Sidwell will argue in the next chapter, named attacks in Aristophanes are not as simple as we thought, since they may “disguise private intent” (29) and are “wrapped in the cocoon of caricature and cross-reference to other comedies” (29).

Sidwell applies his analyses of the performance context and subtext of *Clouds II* to the entire corpus of Old Comedy, arguing that each comic poet would have had an analogous inner circle of supporters, with Aristophanes (radical democrat) and Eupolis

(conservative/oligarchic) on opposing ends of the Athenian political spectrum, and with Cratinus (accommodationist/Cleon-supporter) floating somewhere between them. In Chapter 2, “Metacomedy and Politics,” Sidwell pursues the idea that references to other comic poetry in Aristophanes—particularly to items on the list of trite comic motifs at *Clouds* // 537-550—signal Aristophanes’ intent to wage a “politically motivated comedic campaign” (45) aimed above all at his primary rival, Eupolis. Because these motifs are found throughout the corpus, a picture begins to emerge of Aristophanes’ entire career as one long attack on Eupolis—an attack that occasionally appears to be grounded in aesthetic rivalry but in fact will turn out always to be political in nature. In Chapter 3, “Metacomedy and Caricature,” Sidwell begins by arguing that there is no reason why Aristophanes could not have alluded to comedic plays with the same level of detail with which he alluded to tragedy; though his term “metacomedy” is not sufficiently (or even explicitly) defined, it is clear that he wants the reader to think about its mechanics as essentially the same as paratragedy. A key difference, of course, is that metacomedy in Aristophanes will always be “ideologically motivated parody” (53). According to Sidwell, Aristophanes, Eupolis, and Cratinus attacked each other for their respective political allegiances: since the weapon of choice for all three was disguised caricature—both of each other and of other prominent Athenians—the nature and intent of their attacks (and thus their politics) will only come to light when all the identifications have been discovered.

The second part of *Aristophanes the Democrat* (Chapters 4-6) maps out all the “true targets” (105) of Aristophanes’ plays. Although Sidwell does raise some questions about the nature and purpose of Old Comedy writ large, these chapters are dominated by the type of inside baseball that suggests that Sidwell’s intended audience is itself a small circle of cognoscenti:<sup>5</sup> most of Sidwell’s arguments turn on painstaking and conjectural readings of thorny passages and tireless examination of previous scholarship on the fragments (e.g., there are more than 125 references to Ian Storey’s work on Eupolis). For example, on Vickers’ reading of *Knights*, Sidwell writes: “Vickers has in fact ventured to identify the Sausage-Seller as a caricature of Alcibiades. Of his thirty-seven arguments, however, none is compelling, and, since I shall argue that he is, nonetheless, correct, this is a good demonstration of how difficult it is to pry from the text what it was not meant to reveal *per se*” (158). Instead of attempting a summary of these chapters, I will offer a quick survey of what I take to be the four principal lines of argument in Chapters 4-6, followed immediately by a short list of the identifications to which Sidwell seems to be most strongly committed: (1) the antagonism between poets was based on the real political agenda of each participant; (2) poets were themselves the on-stage targets of one another; (3) their plays were attempts to satirize each other’s political postures and circles; (4) the satiric weapons were “antagonistic misappropriations” of each other’s work. *Babylonians* : Dionysus = Cratinus; *Acharnians* : Dicaeopolis = Eupolis pretending to be Cratinus (sic); Eupolis’ *Noumeniai* : Paphlagon = Cleon; Demos = Cratinus; Lamp-seller = Hyperbolus; *Knights* : Paphlagon = Cleon; Demos = Cratinus; Sausage Seller = Alcibiades; Cratinus’ *Pytine* : Poet figure = Aristophanes; *Wasps* : Philocleon = Cratinus; Bdelycleon = Eupolis; Eupolis’

*Marikas* : Marikas = Hyperbolus; *Peace* : Trygaeus = Eupolis; *Clouds II* : Strepsiades = Alcibiades; Pheidippides = Phaeax; Unjust Logos = Eupolis; Just Logos = Cratinus; *Birds* : Peisetairos = Critias; *Thesmophoriazusae* : Euripides' kinsman = Eupolis; Eupolis' *Demes* : Pyronides = Aristophanes; *Frogs* : Dionysus = Eupolis.

Tackling the famously elusive problem of Aristophanes' politics with conjectural interpretations of the fragments of Eupolis and Cratinus will strike most readers as a clear case of *obscurum per obscurius*. Moreover, there are some theoretical blind spots that one wishes Sidwell had taken more time to address, including approaches to intertextuality (which Sidwell takes to be always intentional, xi) and the sociological function of humor (it is not always clear what the audience got from disguised caricatures). These oversights are in part a product of a tendency in *Aristophanes the Democrat* to emphasize small questions at the expense of big ones, which results in a comfortingly totalizing neatness (if this = this = this, then this = this = this) that leaves little room for dissent—for example, if one does not buy into the highly speculative reconstruction of the performance context of *Clouds II*, it is difficult to know what to make of the subsequent chapters. But it must be said that Sidwell is everywhere open about the hypothetical nature of his project—even those who think he goes too far will benefit from his insistent reminders that Aristophanes' politics *must* (in some way) be wrapped up in his rivalries with other comic poets.

## Notes

1. See discussion in K. J. Dover, "The limits of allegory and allusion in Aristophanes," in D. L. Cairns and R. A. Knox, eds., *Law, Rhetoric and Comedy in Classical Athens: Essays in Honour of Douglas M. MacDowell* (Swansea, 2004) 239-249.
2. J. W. Süvern, *Über Aristophanes Vögel* (Berlin, 1827); J. W. Süvern, *Essay on the "Birds" of Aristophanes* (translated by W. R. Hamilton, London, 1835); B. R. Katz, "The *Birds* of Aristophanes and politics," *Athenaeum* 54, 353-81.
3. See above, note 1.
4. K. Sidwell, Review of Dunbar and MacDowell in *Hermathena* 161, Winter 1996, p. 79.
5. One sub-section of Chapter 4 begins as follows: "MacDowell is also correct, then..." (111); and another: "I now turn to the problem that exercised Parker in her response to Bowie's identification of Eupolis as the poet behind Dicaeopolis..." (117).