

BOOK REVIEW

The Court of Comedy: Aristophanes, Rhetoric, and Democracy in Fifth-Century Athens.
By WILFRED E. MAJOR. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013. Pp.
viii + 232. Hardcover, \$57.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1224-0.

Major examines how rhetorical language and public speakers appear in Aristophanes' comedies, and since *rhetor* also means "politician" (42), his discussion leads naturally onto the well-trodden path of Aristophanes' political views. He comes to three important conclusions. First he agrees with recent critics that no formal theory of rhetoric existed before Plato and Aristotle and thus comedians were making fun, not of a recognised technical vocabulary, but of unusual language, the speakers who employed it, and its effects on the institutions of Athenian public life. Here he persuasively rejects traditional attempts to detect later established elements of rhetoric in the speeches of Aristophanic characters. Second, Aristophanes is no enemy of democracy, but one "whose plays reflect an abiding faith in deliberation presided over by a sovereign Demos" (113). Finally the same rhetorical language that Aristophanes finds hostile to democracy in his earlier comedies would ironically become "the very language of democratic institutions after the democracy is renewed in 403 B.C.E." (22).

The five plays of the 420s form the core of Major's discussion (51-114), although with *Clouds* we should remember that what we possess is a partial revision ca. 419 and thus not the finished product like the other comedies. We know that major changes were made in the scene with the Logoi (889-1114), and thus the transition that Major detects from the prologue through the agon and into the final confrontation between father and son may not be as neat and as intentional as he describes. In many of his discussions he calls out attention to dislocation of scenes as in *Acharnians* where the debate on peace which should have occurred in the Assembly is transferred to a theatrical tragedy; in *Wasps* the courtroom moves to Phillikoleon's house; and in *Thesmophoriazusae* an Assembly is held at the women's festival. Things are out of joint at Athens, for which flamboyant and misleading public speaking bears much of the blame. Thus in *Acharnians* Dicaeopolis argues his case "translocated outside a dysfunctional assembly"

and consequently enjoys great personal success. Aristophanes expands this in *Knights* to include the whole Demos, “before prominent individuals like Pericles or Cleon used their vigorous speech making to abuse the Demos” (113). But is there evidence for Pericles’ abuse of the Demos? And would it not be better said of Cleon that he used public institutions to abuse his rivals?

I found Major’s discussion of *Wasps* quite appealing, as he argues persuasively that whereas in the first two plays the problem is getting Demos to assert “its proper judgment in the processes in these venues ... he does not assert comparable faith in the courts” (100). The passage that he quotes in support (409–414), however, is spoken by a chorus hostile to Bdelycleon and need not represent the personal feelings of Aristophanes. That said, the whole force of the comedy is that the ideal Athenian would not miss the law-courts if they vanished. Most who regard Aristophanes as hostile to the law-courts proceed to view him as an oligarch-in-waiting, but Major wisely avoids such a conclusion, arguing that the courts “only provide occasions for destructive self-serving individuals to enslave the Demos against its own interest” (102).

I am less convinced by his discussion of *Frogs* in chapter 6. He rightly confronts the difference between the earlier comic Euripides (“distinctive and bizarre ... but ultimately innocuous,” 171) and the “villain” of *Frogs*, and explains this by attributing the rise and fall in Euripides’ popularity with the Demos to attitudes to democracy expressed in plays produced between 410 and 406. In particular he cites *Orestes* 696–701, where the Demos is described as prone to manipulation by demagogues, and the production of *Archelaos* and Euripides’ move to the court in Macedon as evidence of anti-democratic sentiments. But the evidence is fragmentary at best and his conclusions open to challenge at every step. Does a second-place finish and a comment about “the frigid *Palamedes*” at *Thesm.* 848 amount to a “poor reception” of the plays of 415? Is writing a play about a mythical Macedonian king evidence of tyrannical sympathies?

Major explains also the shift in *Frogs* from Dionysus’ initial desire to bring back Euripides to the eventual victory of Aeschylus and the virulent dismissal of Euripides at 1491–1499 as “a straightforward emotional trajectory, from carefree pleasure to confused disappointment to rejection” (163). This assumes, however, that *Frogs* was a logically planned and consistent entity from start to finish, and do we really seek unity in an Aristophanic comedy? His attempt to apply his political analysis of *Frogs* (164–170) to the treatment of Euripides is forced, since parabases do not necessarily possess a logical connection to the rest of a comedy. Major tends throughout to assume an overly serious interpretation of jokes, such

as that at *Frogs* 964-70 where certain contemporary Athenians are described as 'disciples' of both Euripides and Aeschylus. But how does having Cleitophon and Theramenes as 'disciples' shred "Euripides' democratic credentials"(175)? That Dionysus cannot make up his mind at 1411-1413 tells against Major's contention that the second part of the comedy shows a distinct deterioration of Euripides' position.

There is also a useful study of Pericles the public speaker as he appears in comedy before 425 (44-50), complemented by a similar examination of Eupolis' *Demes* (118-123), wondering (122) if "the positive portrayal of Pericles was novel and influential". The appendix (185-206) provides a valuable collection of "proto-rhetorical terms" in fifth-century comedy, along with a useful prosopography of political speakers and a summary of the three major public institutions (Council, Assembly, law-courts). On the whole Major raises the right questions, although I may not agree with some of his answers.

IAN C. STOREY

Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, istorey@trentu.ca