

## BOOK REVIEW

*Comic Democracies from Ancient Athens to the American Republic.* By ANGUS FLETCHER. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 209. Hardcover, \$49.95. ISBN 978-1-4214-1934-3.

This brief and jaunty volume proposes that comedy, beginning in democratic Athens, has much to offer to what ails democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Neither the ideas nor the analysis, and especially not the understanding of historical context, are especially rigorous, but for those inclined to Fletcher's politics, the book can be a charming and diverting read.

Fletcher lays out his core claims in his introduction ("Modern Democracies and Ancient *Demokratia*") that "Modern Democracy...is more principled, while ancient *demokratia* was more pragmatic" (3). He sketches out the claim that the dominant model of democracy today (the "liberal-electoral model") would benefit from some reorientation, favoring pluralism over universalism, pragmatism over utopianism, and cautious empiricism over philosophical idealism. Ancient Comedy, Fletcher says, provides useful precedents and examples for success along these lines.

The first chapter ("The Ancient History of Comedy and *Demokratia*") has the most material of direct interest to Classicists. Fletcher briefly reviews Plato's critique of *demokratia* (primarily in *Republic* 8) as an unphilosophical mass of bodily appetites but counters that Aristophanes dramatizes these same characteristics as examples of how democracy can be pragmatically successful. Fletcher then turns to various comedies to tease out dynamics that benefit democracy then and now. Thus *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusa*e trumpet pluralism, *Frogs* is realistic about the needs of the times, and Aristophanic comedy generally is fully aware of the role of bodily desires in democratic decision-making. Moving on to Menander and New Comedy, Fletcher finds *Dyskolos* an example of partnerships across class divides and teases out a populist bent in New Comedy generally.

In the next chapter ("Fortune Favors the Impetuous"), Fletcher surges ahead to the Renaissance, where he has Machiavelli, inspired by Roman comedy, promoting comic democratic impetuosity in the *Mandragola* and then *The Prince*. Fletcher traces this praise of populist impetuosity to colonial America,

notably in Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Chapter 3 ("The *Virtù* of Imitation") argues that Shakespeare's Henry V crucially learned through the pedagogy of imitation from the comic Falstaff a number of tenets valuable to modern democracy: pluralism, emphasis on effects, and treating mistakes as opportunities.

Again, Fletcher follows this dynamic to colonial America. Chapter 4 ("The Pursuit of Indolence") finds democratic value in the Epicurean pursuit of indolence, which surfaces in the comedy of Menander. Indolence likewise became a populist goal and virtue in English and American playwrights of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Chapter 5 ("Quixotic Governance"), the idiosyncratic narrator of part 2 of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* gives rise to the comic wit of William Petty's *Political Arithmetic*, Thomas Fielding's *Tom Jones* and eventually to the sardonic commentary in Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, in turn imbibed by the founding fathers. Humor among great Americans persists in Chapter 6 ("Amending Ourselves") where Frederick Douglass used the tradition of inclusive laughter to promote systemic constitutional change. The final chapter ("*Demokratia* at Denshawai") makes some general recommendations about promoting successful democracy and contrasts two twentieth-century comic plays that were critical of the liberal British Empire after the disastrous events at Denshawai, Egypt in 1906: Ahmad Fahim il-Far's *Ibn il-Balad* and George Bernard Shaw's *John Bull*. A brief conclusion summarizes the volume.

That the seven chapters summarized above comprise a mere 140 pages should act as a warning to specialists not to expect depth about their favorite topic(s). Indeed, the chapters for many will recall the sophistication of a well-meaning but amateur undergraduate theses. The book as a whole would be more successful as an essay on democratic politics inspired by ancient comedy and a variety of classic authors than as a treatise that seems to make serious historical claims. In terms of audience, those who do not already consider liberal democracy the desirable end of political discourse will not find anything to persuade them otherwise here.

Even those already sympathetic to Fletcher's political allegiances can be reasonably taken aback at the simplicity of thought here. As just one overarching example, Fletcher never seems to consider that the virtues he trumpets could be associated with any political system but enlightened democracy. Such a connection is far from clear, however, and often unlikely. The pragmatism, impetuosity and indolence that Fletcher parades, for example, could very easily be aligned with the campaign of Donald Trump, but Fletcher hardly envisions Trump as a political savior. To be fair, the goals that Fletcher promotes are harm-

less, even beneficial (he supports greater support for education, after all) and he has an infectious, even buoyant style. So, while the hard work of improving the world will inevitably come, those seeking a light-hearted and optimistic view of a humorous, democratic and prosperous future stemming from the Classical past can find repose with this book.

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