

## REVIEW ARTICLE — REVOLUTION AND REFORM IN ARISTOTLE'S *POLITICS* BOOKS V-VI

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**Aristotle, *Politics, Books V and VI***, trans. David Keyt, Clarendon Aristotle Series (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. xvii + 265; £45 and \$75 ISBN 0 19 823535 6 (hardcover); £16.99 and \$21.95 ISBN 0 19 823536 4 (pbk).

In the 1950s J.L. Austin conceived and proposed to Oxford University Press a series of small volumes on Aristotle's writings, which would present translations and commentaries adapted to the interests of analytic philosophers. Tragically Austin died before the series got under way, but for nearly four decades, Austin's successor, J.L. Ackrill (now with Lindsay Judson), has edited the Clarendon Aristotle series. Each volume in the scrupulously edited series offers literal translations and concise commentaries emphasizing important philosophical issues and holding Aristotle to the same exacting standards that one should expect of a contemporary philosopher. The volumes have appeared slowly, however, and have generally treated detached books from Aristotle's longer treatises. For example, the very first book in the Clarendon series (in 1962) was Richard Robinson's edition of *Politics* Books III and IV. Although Book III is arguably the philosophical backbone of the *Politics*, it cannot be fully understood in isolation from the rest of the work. Happily, the Clarendon series now covers the *Politics* in toto. Trevor J. Saunders' translation and commentary to Books I and II was published in 1995,<sup>2</sup> and the same year Robinson's edition of Books III and IV was reissued with a supplementary updated essay by David Keyt. Richard Kraut's volume on Books VII and VIII appeared in 1997. The publication of Keyt's edition of Books V and VI has brought the Clarendon edition of Aristotle's *Politics* to completion.

Keyt's book is — and will no doubt remain for a long time — the most authoritative presentation in a single volume of Aristotle's views on revolution and political reform. Although Keyt tries to avoid anachronism and to appreciate Aristotle's historical context, he also views Aristotle as a valuable source of practical wisdom bearing on our own time. This is evident from his opening paragraph:

Equality, democracy, tyranny, revolution, reform — these are some of the topics of Books V and VI. Since they have been major themes in the politics

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<sup>2</sup> See my 'Review Article — The State and the Individual in Aristotle's *Politics* Books I–II', *Polis*, 15 (1998), pp. 151–60.

of the twentieth century, and will no doubt continue to be so in the twenty-first, they lend these books an immediacy that is unusual for Aristotle's writings. The conflict between freedom and equality that Aristotle finds at the root of democracy is still unresolved. Some of the causes of revolution that he discusses were operative in the twentieth century. And his description of tyranny fits the modern, as well as the ancient variety: it was even quoted in one of the leaflets distributed by some of the students at the University of Munich in their heroic (and doomed) resistance to Hitler. (p. xiii)

On Keyt's view Books V–VI of the *Politics* are handbooks or manuals of practical politics of abiding relevance. His commentary makes a number of instructive comparisons between ancient tyrants (e.g. Hiero of Syracuse and Periander of Corinth) and their modern counterparts (e.g. Hitler and Stalin).

Following the format of the Clarendon Aristotle series, Keyt's book has the following features: a short introduction, a translation of Books V and VI with paragraphs identified by the Bekker number of the first line, a commentary keyed to Bekker-numbered paragraphs, a brief bibliography, a glossary, an index locorum, and a general index.

The commentary focuses on Aristotle's arguments, offering both explication and criticism. It carefully explains philosophical ideas which Aristotle develops elsewhere such as justice, change, the four causes, and chance. But this book differs from the typical Clarendon volume in its attention to historical detail. Aristotle makes numerous references to historical events, especially in *Politics* Book V, which are unfamiliar to most modern readers. Keyt has provided as much background information as he could find on each of these events.

This information sheds light on Aristotle's very brief references, and makes them far more interesting. Let me illustrate with just one example. Aristotle says that 'the democracy of the Megarians was destroyed when they were defeated because of disorder and unruliness' (V.3.1302b31). Aristotle does not tell when this occurred or anything else about the event, but Keyt notes that the description meshes with Thucydides' account of a revolution in Megara in 424 BC, and adds the following:

We hear of the disorder and unruliness in Megara from another writer. Plutarch tells a story, whose source may be Aristotle's lost *Constitution of the Megarians* . . . about a sacred embassy passing through the Megarid on its way to Delphi during the time of the 'intemperate democracy' in Megara. When the envoys camped for the night beside a lake in their wagons with their wives and children, a band of drunken Megarians, out of insolence and savagery, pushed the wagons into the lake, and many of the envoys drowned. The citizens of Megara, however, 'because of the disorder of their constitution, took no notice of the wrong'; and it was left to the Amphictyonic Council, an international body charged with the protection of Apollo at Delphi, to proceed against and to punish the wrongdoers . . . (p. 83)