Wilfred E. Major


$57.95. ISBN 9780814212240.

Two questions about Aristophanes’ politics have long occupied scholars. The first concerns whether we can in fact find any coherent politics in his comedies. We are from time to time reminded that Aristophanes aimed first and foremost to win first prize at the great civic festivals where his plays were presented and that the demands of this competitive context will have shaped his work. The need to please the theatre audience may well have limited what the comic poet could say about political life or even curtailed the offering of serious political commentary altogether. The second question asks after the substance of Aristophanes’ political views. A longstanding answer to this question is distinctly at odds with the idea that the poet was domesticated by the demands of the theatre audience. Instead, many have argued, Aristophanes consistently dared to voice his supposedly anti-democratic views to the Athenians themselves.

Wilfred Major’s *The Court of Comedy* ultimately offers a bold response to both questions. On Major’s reading, Aristophanes’ work is deeply and straightforwardly political, and the poet’s politics are clear enough: Aristophanes is a committed democrat. Major thus departs decisively from earlier work that finds an aristocratic disdain for democratic politics in the comedies. His Aristophanes does critique particular aspects of Athenian political life; but he can safely do so in the Athenian theater only because of his sterling credentials as a friend of the *demos*. Major’s argument is all the more engaging because he develops it subtly, through a consideration of Aristophanes’ engagement with rhetoric as a political phenomenon and as an object of analysis.

Indeed, Major casts his main scholarly contribution not as parsing Aristophanes’ politics but as bringing the evidence of Old Comedy to bear on controversies about the history of Greek rhetoric. Recent work has called into question the traditional narrative of rhetoric’s development. According to that traditional narrative, rhetoric – understood as the more or less systematic study of persuasion – had its origins on Sicily in the mid-5th century BCE. It soon traveled to Athens with the sophists. Later Plato marked the boundary between rhetoric and philosophy, then Aristotle aimed to reclaim the art of rhetoric as a proper object of study. The revisionist history, by contrast, calls into question the idea that rhetoric proper existed before it was defined by Plato and Aristotle. To be sure, the Sophists and others concerned themselves with language, but their approaches were practical and diverse or
‘proto-rhetorical’. For the revisionists, it remained the work of the 4th century to centralize and systematize the study of rhetoric.

On Major’s reading, the evidence of Old Comedy adds weight to this new and revised history of rhetoric. Major exhaustively examines this evidence, much of it fragmentary. He focuses on the period from comedy’s own origins on Sicily, through its flowering in Athens, to its ultimate eclipse at the end of the 5th century. Neither Aristophanes’ extant plays nor the surviving fragments of his and other poets’ work indicate familiarity with ‘rhetoric’ as it come to be understood in the 4th century. The comic poets certainly showed serious and sustained interest in language, speech and persuasion; but this does not amount to evidence of any sort of focused or formal engagement with rhetoric.

Major’s most persuasive arguments on this score focus on other scholars’ tendency to read the analytical categories of later rhetorical study back into the dialogue of 5th century comedies. He convincingly demonstrates, for example, that despite the efforts of more than one interpreter, the speech in Acharnians by which Diceapolis tries to turn away the anger of the chorus cannot be broken down into prologue, narrative, proof and epilogue. Major’s simpler and more compelling take is that Aristophanes knew nothing of these analytical categories and so did not construct the speeches of his comedies with them in mind. Indeed, a great strength of the book is Major’s insistence on not stretching the evidence of comedy beyond what it will bear. His accordingly careful weighing of the evidence makes his core argument about comedy and rhetoric quite persuasive.

Major’s argument, though, is not simply negative; he goes well beyond refuting the often assumed connection between Old Comedy and rhetoric. In particular, his nuanced reading of Aristophanic comedy rests on a broader understanding of the playwright’s relationship to democracy. From this perspective, Aristophanes’ engagement with issues of language and speech begins not from an external body of rhetorical precepts but from the phenomenon of persuasion in democratic politics itself. There is here an interesting deepening of the idea of Aristophanes as an internal critic of Athenian democracy. Deeply committed to the idea of a demos empowered to deliberate and to make collective decisions, Aristophanes’ shows a constant interest in how speech enables or hinders the demos as it does the work of democracy.

Major’s readings of Aristophanes’ earliest surviving plays are particularly strong. Acharnians, Knights, and Wasps engage directly with the Athenian institutions where proper deliberation ought to occur: the Assembly, the Council, and the law courts. Across the three plays, Aristophanes diagnoses the failure of deliberation. In an intriguing argument, Major finds Aristophanes exploring the ‘translocation’ of rhetoric from its normal institutional spaces to new