Jeremy J. Mhire and Bryan-Paul Frost, eds.


A book on Aristophanes’ political theory is timely and long overdue. Aristophanes ‘neglect by political theorists is regrettable but not surprising. Despite the fact that Aristophanes’ comedies dealt with inherently political themes such as war, economic inequalities and egalitarianism the prejudice associated with his genre, comedy, was hard to overcome. One of the first political philosophers to examine Aristophanes’ plays was Leo Strauss in Socrates and Aristophanes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). The debt to Strauss is evident in the majority of contributions – a fact noted by the editors, Jeremy J. Mhire and Bryan-Paul Frost (8). For the sake of clarity what follows is, alas, an oversimplified summary of the 15 chapters.

Chapter 1: ‘Seeing Democracy in the Clouds’ by John Lombardini. This author suggests that at the ‘core of Aristophanes’ critique of Socrates is a democratic anxiety concerning the antidemocratic authority of Socratic intellectualism’ (p. 14). In support, and as a preamble of his argument, Lombardini highlights the following: (a) while the Athenians were willing to accept advise from someone holding a corresponding technê, in matters of democratic deliberation they recognized no such expertise and/or authority; (b) while the principle of iségoria (equal right to speak) was available to all Athenian male citizens, in reality the authority to speak in the Assembly was exercised by a small number of wealthy rhêtores whose rhetoric however was translated into benefits for the demos; (c) in the judicial sphere, while theoretically anyone could prosecute in practice, authority tended to rest with those who were perceived as ‘legitimate’ on account of a personal connection. The above pave the way for Lombardini to identify (correctly in my opinion) three different types of authority: the authority of gods (resting on traditional authority), epistemic authority (the type possessed by the philosopher-kings in Plato’s Republic), and the authority of the orator (contingent on good-will towards the demos) (p. 17). Lombardini delivers an insightful analysis of Aristophanes’ Clouds arguing that Strepsiades does learn something from Socrates’ phrontistērion; epistemic knowledge which he uses to fend off creditors. Lombardini’s argument that Strepsiades’ attempt to discredit lending activities – via analogies about the natural environment – is an example of Socratic intellectualism that is inherently antidemocratic. By ‘antidemocratic’ Lombardini means (mostly) Strepsiades’ attempt ‘to deny the existence of interest – a social practice governed by Athenian laws and customs – on the basis of the movements of the seas’ (p. 23).
Chapter 2: ‘The Meaning of Socrates’ Asceticism in Aristophanes’ Clouds’ by Khalil M. Habib. A subtle and nuanced reading of the Clouds in which the author interjects his own artful interpretation. Influenced by the interpretations of Leo Strauss, Mark Kremer, Alan Bloom, and Mary Nichols, this author brings into question Socrates’ study of natural philosophy (read: science). For Habib, Socrates’ asceticism betrays religious undertones which run in contradiction to the natural world which has no such purpose. In regards to Strepsiades, he is seen as a figure motivated by fear of loss – be it fear for his polis, his financial well-being, or his son. Taken together, Habib suggests (again, correctly in my opinion) that Aristophanes portrayal of Socrates and Strepsiades alike is ‘a study of the human condition, of man’s need for meaning in human existence and hope in the face of oblivion’ (pp. 42-3).

Chapter 3: ‘Rethinking the Quarrel Anew: Politics and Boasting in Aristophanes’ Clouds’ by Jeremy J. Mhire. Here the reader is presented with a sympathetic reading of Aristophanes as a poet who approached many political questions prior to political philosophers (p. 64). One of his arguments is that Aristophanes wrote the Clouds as a ‘defense of political life’ (p. 61). His reading of the Clouds sees Socrates in the possession of a philosophical hybris that is a threat to the polis because it denies the importance of politics. At the risk of misinterpretation, Mhire also argues that the Clouds should not been seen as a defense of democracy but rather a defense of the view that there are ‘many claims to rule’ (p. 62).

Chapter 4: ‘Persuasion in Comedy and Comic Persuasion: Aristophanes and the Mysteries of Rhetoric’ by John Zumbrunnen. The focus of this essay is on every possible shade of persuasion in Aristophanic comedy. Zumbrunnen provides a sophisticated discussion of rhetoric in the Aristophanic corpus which covers the centrality of rhetoric in Aristophanic comedy (p. 69), its various uses in all of its multifaceted forms, and Aristophanes’ contemplation and concern of the same form (p. 71). This includes insights into how rhetoric plays into the preexisting prejudices of the audience (pp. 74-5), the use of deception in rhetoric and, in the case of Assemblywomen, the ability of rhetoric to not only alter or overturn some of those prejudices (p. 78), but to also alter deep-rooted practices (p. 79).

Chapter 5: ‘Boundaries: The Comic Poet Confronts the “Who” of Political Action’ by Arlene W. Saxonhouse. The central theme in this article is that of boundaries. Taking as a starting point Manville’s The Origin of Citizenship in Ancient Athens which articulated, within the framework of citizenship, the creation of spatial, legal and even psychological boundaries, Saxonhouse turns her gaze to Aristophanes to examine the flexibility of some of those boundaries as they contract (Acharnians), expand (Lysistrata) or dissolve (Ecclesiazusae).