

Michael Vickers

Aristophanes and Alcibiades: Echoes of Contemporary History in Athenian Comedy.

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Michael Vickers' latest book completes something of a trilogy, complementing two earlier volumes, *Pericles on Stage: Political Comedy in Aristophanes' Early Plays* (Austin, 1997) and *Sophocles and Alcibiades: Echoes of Contemporary History in Athenian Drama* (Ithaca, 2008). Anyone who has read either of the previous books or any of Vickers' numerous articles will find the content and approach here quite familiar. Vickers champions the idea that Pericles, his partner Aspasia, and the notorious Alcibiades were cultural celebrities in Classical Athens to the point that much of live theater referenced them constantly during their lifetime and across the decades after their deaths. The volume under review focuses on the later years of this phenomenon, the late 410's to the 380's BCE, roughly the last decade of Alcibiades' life and when Pericles had been dead for decades (when Aspasia died is unknown). Chapters cover Aristophanes' last five extant comedies (*Lysistrata*, *Thesmophoriazusa*, *Frogs*, *Ecclesiazusae* and *Plutus*), along with analyses of Euripides' tragedies *Ion*, *Helen* and *Andromeda*. While Vickers retains his tenacious (and tendentious) method, he is no more persuasive than before, which is to say ultimately unconvincing.

Since in the entire extant corpus of Classical Athenian drama there are only scattered explicit references to Pericles, Aspasia or Alcibiades (all in comedy; none more than a few lines long), Vickers must build his case indirectly. He describes his methodology as the 'wigwam' approach, meaning that he assembles a number of individual references or allusions to one or more of his three main celebrities and, while conceding that any discreet example does not stand as substantial evidence, taken together they build a 'wigwam' structure that demonstrates the validity of his larger thesis. I will return to this metaphor, but it is worth giving some idea of the hundreds of small, discreet claims that Vickers makes to assemble his theoretical structures. Most of these are brief sonic allusions that Vickers asserts would have been so common at the time that audiences would have been attuned to them. To pick some representative examples from his analysis of *Frogs*, a play that does at least explicitly mention Alcibiades, Vickers uses a joke about the wine god Dionysus being 'son of Wine-jar' (*huios Stamniou*) to suggest a reference Alcibiades because Alcibiades was 'son of Kleinias' (*huios Kleiniou*) the last two syllables of which sound like Stamniou. Thus Dionysus can briefly be Alcibiades. Vickers feels no constraint that any character on stage be consistently linked with a particular celebrity, invoking the idea of 'polymorphic' characterization, where

a character on stage can invoke one or more of his celebrities and allusions to any of his celebrities can be sprinkled across multiple stage characters. There seems to be no limit to this process. Thus in *Frogs* the stage character of the playwright Euripides can be Alcibiades even though the Euripides character disavows the historical Alcibiades (p. 157), which Vickers claims is 'amusingly unexpected'. Well, unexpected to be sure. Elsewhere in the play general references to being a noble gentleman, wrestling, music, dignified restraint and justice all 'carry Alcibiadean resonance' precisely because Alcibiades failed to acquire the virtues associated with these cultural practices (p. 156). Some verbal references depend on characters delivering lines with a lisp like Alcibiades reportedly had, so that the name of the playwright Aeschylus in *Frogs* (who represents Pericles, according to Vickers) sounds something like the word for 'shameful' (pronouncing Greek as *aischron* as *Aischyleion*), and invoking Alcibiades simply by virtue of this lisp. Almost any similarity of syllables suffices for Vickers. The Greek words for 'force' (*bia*) and 'life' (*bios*) can sound like the name Alcibiades (e.g., pp. 50, 65-66, 100). Along the same lines, almost any reference to Sparta refers to Alcibiades' time among the Spartans, references to the Persians to Alcibiades' time with the Persian governor Tissaphernes, and on and on. Vickers also assumes, with no better evidence, that performers wore masks, costumes, and engaged in physical activity that reminded spectators of Alcibiades. Such are the poles Vickers collects to support his 'wigwam'.

Many of the 'poles' in this wigwam are rickety in themselves, but more damaging to Vickers' thesis is his failure to assemble his parts into a coherent structure. Vickers' own metaphor of the wigwam highlights the problem. Even if Vickers has identified a sufficient number of poles to support a wigwam, and it is doubtful whether he has, he never takes the trouble to build a complete structure. Rather, Vickers seems to reckon it as self-evident that where there might be sufficient wooden poles, a wigwam can and must exist. This is of course far from true. A wigwam requires more than a large number of poles; the poles need to be assembled into a standing structure and additional material provides cover so that the wigwam stands and serves its manifold purposes. Vickers never engages in this sort of construction. Only a few sentences in the entire book even say what the larger conclusions are (Alcibiades is all-important; Aristophanes was a conservative who opposed him; Greek theater was constantly polyvalently engaged with political celebrities). Over the years Vickers has proven largely impervious to substantive criticism of his methods and responds here with vigorous assertions of the truth of his thesis but without filling in the logical steps one can legitimately expect of an intelligent argument. Sustained antagonism such as Vickers has endured from past critics brings out brittle responses in the best of us, of course, and the book is