Kidd, Stephen F.


This book begins with an old and interesting problem, which is that Athenian comedy seems to be simultaneously serious and funny, and that both aspects appear crucial to the genre’s effect, but how they can be pried apart is unclear. Kidd approaches the question from a novel direction, asking not what is serious about the plays, but what is left over after one sifts out their sensible elements. This ‘nonsense’ and the pleasure the audience gets from encountering it, he argues, is pervasive in comedy and fundamental to its effect. The thesis has a clear, basic appeal: whatever ‘serious’ assertions Aristophanes’ Peace may be making about Athenian politics in the late 420s BCE, for example, it is also deeply nonsensical—and thus somehow wildly ‘funny’—to keep a giant beetle that must be fed freshly kneaded dung-cakes in the courtyard of one’s house. It nonetheless gradually emerges that nonsense is not an easy topic around which to organize a book, in part because it is hard to define the subject in a useful manner, but also because the ‘non-serious’ aspects of the texts are at least as difficult to identify and understand as the serious ones.

Kidd begins in Chapter 1 with a discussion of words such as λῆρος and φλυαρία, which he connects with medical references to ‘babbling’ in a feverish state and thus with mental illness. Why this model—appealed to again and again at crucial points in the argument—has been awarded decisive significance in Kidd’s interpretation of his topic is unclear. But much of the nominally philological argument that follows leaps wildly about (from Plato, to Aelius Aristides, to Seneca, to an early Hellenistic epigram from Egypt), creating a sense that the choice of material is driven by the argument rather than the other way around. In what follows, Kidd treats (Chapter 2) riddles, allegories and metaphors, arguing that problems with interpreting them fully are fundamental to their wit, i.e. to the joy an audience takes in them; (Chapter 3) personal invective, which its targets and other spectators should, on this reading, have reacted to as ‘play’; (Chapter 4) word-play, puns, extravagant coinages and the like; and (Chapter 5) instances in which characters within the plays identify someone else’s talk as nonsense, freeing the audience from the need to carry out this—patently necessary—police function and allowing them to enjoy the babbling.

The best parts of Nonsense and Meaning recall recent work by Michael Silk and James Robson on how comic references slip in and out of relationship to dramatic realities, and on how individual lines or sets of lines are constructed to produce that magical thing—whatever it is—called ‘humor’. Chapter 5, for
example, with its careful handling of the question of how characters respond to disruptive remarks of the type usually termed ‘bomolochic’, may not break new ground, but it does frame its issues effectively on both the abstract and the concrete levels. It is nonetheless difficult to identify a clear guiding thesis in this book, which reads more like a series of highly wrought meditations on a somewhat amorphous central topic. The more substantial difficulty is that, despite Kidd’s readiness and ability to argue on an elegant abstract level about how comedy functions, where nonsense resides within it and what dramatic work that nonsense accomplishes, he touches only occasionally on the original texts themselves, which do not always support what he has to say about them and thus the larger conclusions he wishes to draw.

In the story of the stolen cheese consumed by the dog Labes (~ public funds supposedly misappropriated by the Athenian general Laches during a campaign in Sicily) in Aristophanes’ Wasps, for example, Kidd (pp. 72–74) takes the mortar Labes/Laches is said to have sailed around (924) and the corner in which he allegedly did his treacherous eating/thieving (911) to be external to both the surface and the allegorical levels of the story, and asks who or what the cheese-grater that testifies at the trial (963-965) might stand for. All of this, Kidd asserts, is ‘nonsense’—meaningless babble that works to make the action of the play not just serious but ‘funny’ as well. But cheese was pounded in a mortar with other ingredients to make μυττωτός (Ar. Pax 242-259, esp. 251-252; cf. V. 837, which locates the theft in the kitchen area of the house); Labes patently “ran off into the corner” to eat the cheese because that is where one proverbially goes after stealing something one does not want to share; and the cheese-grater is specifically identified as standing in for Laches’ paymaster (964 σὺ γὰρ ταμιεύουσ’ ἔτυχες), all of which is to say that none of this is obviously ‘nonsense’ of the sort Kidd needs to support his argument. So too in regard to the personified cities who made up the chorus of Eupolis’ Poleis, and who are clearly at least leered at by some of the male characters (frr. 245-247, cf. frr. 243-244), Kidd comes at the end of a long, complex discussion (pp. 78-81) to the conclusion that “To have sex with a city is the point at which thought yields at the literal level, it is nonsense” (p. 81). But—as Kidd himself has repeatedly emphasized in the preceding pages—the point of all the onstage action here is that the cities are represented by (doubtless nominally lovely) women, so that no one in the audience or onstage is actually confronted with the strange intellectual question of how a man could sleep with an abstract entity. So too in the case of the idea that Diallage at the end of Lysistrata has a lovely ass and other functional sexual parts (1148, 1158-1159), which Kidd (p. 82) treats as an example of “thrusting a third element between signifier and signified, muddling the verba-res relationship”: how is this ‘nonsense’, if individual members