

# Introduction

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The purpose of this edited volume is to make available to students, the learned public, and academics alike a series of chapters that documents and describes the political wisdom of Aristophanes. For those individuals who are unfamiliar with Aristophanes—or who are uneasy with regarding this Athenian comic poet as a political thinker of the highest caliber—these chapters will hopefully make manifest his capacious range of vision, his trenchant insights, and his unique role as a civic educator; and for those who are more familiar with Aristophanes—or who are quite comfortable with regarding him as a towering thinker both in his own right and with respect to his appreciation and criticism of other such political thinkers and figures—then we hope that these chapters will reinforce and even deepen one’s understanding of his philosophical thought, open up new avenues for scholarly investigation, and perhaps challenge in fruitful ways prevailing opinions and assumptions. All the chapters contained herein are original, and they were all written explicitly for this volume. The contributors include a wide assortment of individuals—from junior- to senior-level scholars, political scientists to classicists, and those from inside and outside the academy—and this diversity of background is often reflected in the various interpretive strategies and conclusions employed throughout. Although the editors themselves have assiduously avoided imposing any mandatory or uniform orthodoxy on the authors, all of the contributors are united in their belief that intertwined within Aristophanes’ madcap comedies lies a genuinely philosophical engagement with issues of the utmost seriousness, complexity, and fundamental importance: indeed, it is hard to name a single political

theme of foundational significance that is not in some way discussed in his eleven extant plays. An examination of the “About the Authors” section will reveal that all of the contributors are well versed in ancient political thought, in general, and/or Aristophanes, in particular, and that taken together, they have written dissertations, monographs, translations, and books on these subjects, as well as published peer-reviewed articles in some of the most prestigious academic journals in their fields. Those who enjoy this volume will have no difficulty in following up and furthering this enjoyment by consulting other works by the various contributors.

By his own admission (and this on several occasions in the plays), Aristophanes considered himself one of the—if not *the*—greatest comedians of all time, if not for all time. The historical record has only tended to confirm this (self-)assessment: Who does not fervently hope that someday, in the mustiest section on some neglected shelf of an unappreciated library, the remainder of Aristophanes’ corpus will be discovered (something that one would certainly not wish on every author, past or present!). Obviously, many scholars are interested in Aristophanes for what we might call “antiquarian” or “historical” reasons, namely, that his comedies reveal valuable information about his life and times and about the character of ancient artistic festivals. But however important this information is, Aristophanes continues to remain popular and to scintillate his audience because his comedies are remarkably topical—even contemporary—regardless of the time period in which they are read or performed. It is difficult enough for an artist to get published in any age; it takes nothing short of a rare talent to be in print for some two thousand years. Although the reasons for his success could easily be the subject of one (or several) books, let us posit the following observation: the enjoyment of any particular piece of humor is exceptionally hard to sustain over the long term. Let’s face it: there are many very funny individuals today (and in the past) whose humor and fame will (and did) last but a short time. If a comedian’s material is based primarily upon specific events and individuals in the immediate present, then the appeal of that humor will be limited to the here and now. Of course, someone knowledgeable about the circumstances of this kind of humor can explain why these jokes were considered funny in the past—but we all know what happens to a joke when someone has to explain its humor to us. There is no doubt that Aristophanes’ comedies revolved around his own particular historical situation, and we must admit that although we are knowledgeable about some of these unique circumstances, much of what was humorous to a contemporary Athenian audience is more than likely simply lost to us today. But Aristophanes’ comedies do much more than poke fun at the here

and now; they appeal to universal themes and topics that transcend, that is, are applicable to and comprehensible by, almost any particular political community. In other words, while his comedies may have plots and characters tied to contemporary Athens, the broad themes with which the plays deal are seemingly eternal in character and scope. For example, does a reader need to understand the Greek pantheon in order to recognize the poignant hilarity of Chremylus' Delphic discovery that the god Wealth has been blinded by the apparently more powerful god Zeus, or Poverty's arguments that Wealth's sight should not be restored lest the human economic condition be made even worse? Or, again, is it necessary to read the Platonic and Xenophonic corpus to recognize in Aristophanes' Socrates the typical and very modern "intellectual," someone who is ensconced in an ivory tower or think-tank pondering all sorts of inane and utterly irrelevant matters of interest only to him and his disciples? Or, finally, does one need to know the ins and outs of the Peloponnesian War to understand the sex strike perpetrated by Lysistrata and her cohorts? Substitute almost any destructive conflict in human history and one can easily make sense of trying to bring an end to a male-dominated conflict through the withholding of certain feminine favors (and the equally uproarious difficulty many of the women have in keeping the strike and not crossing the picket line). Examples could be drawn from each and every play, but the idea is clear: Aristophanes' comedies are not time bound because of their universality. Of course, our appreciation of Aristophanes only increases once we know more about the Greek pantheon, the Platonic and Xenophonic corpus, and the Peloponnesian War: indeed, the plays become even more amusing once we are immersed as fully as possible in the particular historical circumstances of ancient Athens and Greece. Nevertheless, because Aristophanes' comedies are of the highest order, lack of knowledge of the latter does not impede enjoyment of the former, and enjoyment of the former is only made richer by knowledge of the latter.

While the above observations might go a small way in helping to explain why Aristophanes has been perennially popular, it does not quite address why he can be considered philosophical, which is the claim of this book. To begin to answer this question, we can assert that Aristophanes' (or comedy's) deep kinship to philosophy is precisely the reason why Socrates banned comedy (and tragedy) from the education of the guardians in the city-in-speech in *Republic* III: in a phrase, Socrates saw that laughter is potentially liberating. To laugh at someone or something is not to take it seriously—to distance oneself from it and even to tower above it: it is to know or say that you would never fall for that old gag. This is why when

a joke is good-naturedly played upon us, we are a bit thankful (if blushing so) to the prankster for the enlightenment: we now see that we are the victim of that which we previously maintained we would never be so foolish as to do, or fall for, or believe in, or admit. In short, laughter calls into question whether we should take something as seriously as we might otherwise, or, more strongly, that once we laugh at something, it is never really possible to take it completely seriously again. It is true that comedy celebrates the low and not the high, and certainly the low is not the best judge of character; nevertheless, the only way you can know if something is fully and genuinely high is if you have seen its undercarriage, and this is something the high and mighty are often not willing to allow. Laughter then is potentially liberating because it calls into question, and thus subjects to critical scrutiny, all that shackles the mind to think or act in a predetermined manner, whether it be convention, shame, public opinion, custom, tradition, or religion. Laughter thus helps reveal to us that what we were once told was true may not be the whole truth. And what does Aristophanes mock and poke fun at if not every subject heretofore considered serious, if not reverential: the gods, the marriage bed, leading politicians, courage in war if not war itself, justice and moderation, the living and the dead, mastery and slavery, the young and the old, and so on. Of course, laughter is no sure sign that one is enlightened, but laughter may have more in common with philosophy than its counterpart. As has been observed before, while Jesus is reported to have wept in the Bible, Socrates is known to have laughed in the *Phaedo*.

This volume is divided into four sections, the first of which offers three chapters on *Clouds*, the undoubted favorite and/or most pertinent comedy for political scientists as a whole: here we have one of the very few direct testimonies as to the character of Socrates and (pre)Socratic philosophy. (The primacy of *Clouds* is starkly revealed by the table of contents of Leo Strauss's *Socrates and Aristophanes*: if one subtracts the "Introduction" and "Conclusion," then the book is rather elegantly divided into a longish chapter on "The *Clouds*" followed by a ten-part section that Strauss simply titles "The Other Plays.") John Lombardini begins this section by suggesting that at the core of Aristophanes' critique of Socrates in *Clouds* is a concern over the antidemocratic implications of the latter's purported scientific and philosophical activities. Lombardini focuses on Socrates' instruction of Strepsiades and the latter's successful attempt to fend off his creditors: just as Socrates mocks Strepsiades for his prescientific understanding of the cosmos, so Strepsiades mocks his creditors for their failure to grasp these same principles. Strepsiades thus uses this newfound knowledge to establish his

superiority over his fellow democratic citizens by contending that he cannot and should not be held accountable by those who lack such knowledge, a belief with troubling implications in a society committed to core democratic values. Khalil M. Habib's chapter examines the character and meaning of Socrates' self-denying asceticism and whether that way of life stands up to critical scrutiny. Far from being a fully self-conscious and wholly self-sufficient being, Aristophanes reveals a deeply religious impulse behind this way of life—an impulse that is explicitly in conflict with Socrates' own self-understanding. Interestingly, Habib suggests that Socrates may have much more in common with Strepsiades than one might originally think: while Strepsiades is certainly more worldly and Socrates more theoretical, both seek an ordered stability and meaning in a world their own principles and actions seem to deny. And finally, Jeremy J. Mhire rounds out the section by maintaining that *Clouds* is intended by Aristophanes to be a defense of political life against the threat posed by Socrates' "pre-Socratic" philosophy. By averring that only the wise have a just claim to rule, Socrates necessarily collapsed the distinction between freedom and despotism and therefore denied the possibility of genuine political life being defined by the ability to rule and be ruled in turn. Aristophanes, by contrast, believes that true wisdom can only be attained in and through political life or, more poignantly, that it is only through a thorough appreciation and understanding of politics that one can adequately address the question as to the existence or character of the gods. At the end of this section, one cannot help but reflect upon a concern raised by all three chapters: Does Aristophanes' own way of life resolve the problems that he identifies with Socrates, Strepsiades, and the other characters of the comedy?

Section Two might be titled "Themes and Plays," with three chapters on the former and four on the latter. The effort here is to address topics that have a broad appeal and relevance and therefore would be applicable both inside and outside an academic environment or classroom. John Zumbrunnen starts off by asking a question central to Aristophanes' enterprise as a whole: How does one understand comic rhetoric or the rhetoric of comedy? While being wary of developmental arguments, this chapter draws on the earliest and latest of his comedies to consider continuity and change in the playwright's portrayal of persuasion in democratic politics. Produced in the 420s BCE, *Wasps*, *Acharnians*, and *Knights* consider the foibles of Athenian democratic politics in the context of the Peloponnesian War and the demagoguery of Cleon. *Assemblywomen* and *Wealth*, by contrast, appeared in the late 390s and early 380s as Athens slowly recovered from the long war and after the city had endured the temporary disruption of democracy.

In general, where the early plays focus on issues of war and peace and engage Cleon personally, the later plays explore the nature of persuasion in the context of radical social and economic change. Arlene W. Saxonhouse examines how Aristophanes' plays view the articulation of the different ways in which political membership can be constituted. In the *Acharnians*, a single individual attempts to act independently of any political body; in *Lysistrata*, it is the desire for sex and peace that brings the women together as political actors, not the physical or political boundaries that separate their cities; and in the *Ecclesiazusae*, old boundaries are broken down in order to open up political authority to new actors. In each play, the comic poet illustrates the challenges and tension-laden decisions underlying efforts to define the "who" of political action. Stephanie Nelson argues that Aristophanes is not primarily interested in contemporary political issues, but instead uses these issues as a way to examine Athens itself, or, in other words, the self-conscious understanding Athens has of itself as a city and the extent to which that understanding is consistent and wholly objective. Pursuing a range of plays, from *Knights* to *Frogs*, *Acharnians*, and *Birds*, Nelson suggests that Aristophanes in essence holds a mirror up to Athens and its citizens and asks whether their self-conceived image of themselves is more self-constructed than its purported natural and/or divine origins and character. Through his comedy, Aristophanes thus calls into question the very rationality of the polis. Thereafter follow four chapters, each of which introduces a single play and what the authors see as its most significant implications. In *Peace*, Wayne Ambler analyzes Aristophanes' account of the political and philosophical events that eventually resulted in the Peace of Nicias during the Peloponnesian War. In Ambler's view, Aristophanes' play provides invaluable insight into how this Peace was (or any peace is) constituted, the obstacles to its achievement, whether the Greeks even ultimately wanted peace, and, finally, if not especially, to what extent the gods endorsed or aided in helping to bring about what turned out to be but a temporary reprieve to this murderous and destructive conflict. In *Birds*, Kenneth DeLuca explores how Athenian imperialism is reflected in Peisthetairos' own enterprise. This chapter (which in many ways is as much philological as it is philosophical) considers a wide array of themes—from the character of Tereus to the people of Thrace—many of them linked to or informed by (as his title suggests) Herodotus' *History*. Christopher Baldwin maintains that the *Frogs* presents us with some of Aristophanes' most mature reflections on the nature of poetry, the relationship between comedy and tragedy, and the role of the poet in political society. Situated at a time of political and cultural decline, with Athens about to lose the Peloponnesian War, Aristo-

phanes displays what Baldwin calls his Dionysian wisdom to demonstrate how great artists (both tragic and comic) can instruct the city in such times and positively shape public opinion. And finally, Paul W. Ludwig points out that *Wealth* is the Aristophanic play that most closely engages with some of the founding principles of modern liberalism (e.g., that the accumulation of property yields happiness, that poverty causes crime, and that God is a loving and therefore charitable Being). But, as so often happens, the comedy also questions these very principles: Would the alleviation of poverty necessarily lead to an unmitigated increase in human happiness, and would such a situation cause us to lose the fear, reverence, and awe needed to maintain belief in the gods? After reading the totality of the chapters in this section, one can only marvel at Aristophanes' formidable philosophic acumen and the staggering breadth of his political instructiveness.

Section Three juxtaposes Aristophanes with several other of his Greek contemporaries in the hope that such in-depth comparisons will fruitfully illuminate all the thinkers involved. Timothy W. Burns opens the section with a figure central to Aristophanes, Thucydides, and the Peloponnesian War: the demagogue Cleon. Burns focuses on Cleon's angry (or waspish) desire for justice as well as on the role such anger plays in politics more generally. While both Thucydides and Aristophanes were inclined to peace throughout the war, and while both authors try to make their readers more gentle and less "Cleon-like" in and through their writings, it may be that Aristophanes sees some measure of anger as a necessary bulwark for the city's defense. Burns demonstrates that while Cleon was a central figure historically, an understanding of his soul philosophically is necessary to comprehend most fully political life and human nature more generally. The next two chapters by Peter Nichols and Matthew Meyer compare a work that is widely acknowledged to be influenced by, or even a refutation of, Aristophanes: Plato's *Republic*. Nichols looks at the resonances and dissonances between Socrates' three waves in Book V and Praxagora's revolutionary designs in *Assemblywomen*. Although both Plato and Aristophanes understand the ultimate impossibility of ever achieving perfect justice, what separate them most fundamentally are their differing understandings of the role and portrayal of philosophy in the best regime. Meyer contends that the difference between the erotic philosopher and the erotic tyrant in Book IX of the *Republic* might reveal a deeper quarrel between poetry and philosophy as to the highest way of life. Drawing upon the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, Meyer argues that while the eros of the philosopher is directed toward the contemplation of the Idea of the Good, the eros exhibited by Peisthetairos in *Birds* aims at a quest for power and the satisfaction of his sensual passions.

Amy L. Bonnette enlarges the comparison with the *Republic* to consider Socratic political science more broadly (i.e., to include both the Platonic and Xenophonic corpus) as it relates to Aristophanes' feminine comedies, or those with female choruses: *Lysistrata*, *Ecclesiazusae*, *Thesmophoriazusae*, and *Clouds*. Beginning with the Socratic thesis that politics and economics belong to the same art or science, Bonnette divides the plays into two groups: in the former two plays, the Socratic thesis tends to be confirmed, as *Lysistrata* and *Praxagora* are portrayed as rather competent rulers; in the latter two plays, there is a marked coolness and even hostility to Socrates and his like. Irrespective of what Aristophanes' final teaching is on the relationship between women and Socrates, any comprehensive understanding of his political science would do well to consider these four plays as a whole. And finally, Section Four contains but a single chapter on a book by one of the twentieth century's preeminent scholars, Leo Strauss's *Socrates and Aristophanes*. The centrality of this work for political scientists is readily indicated by the number of contributors who acknowledge their debt to Strauss in their notes and elsewhere. By Devin Stauffer's own admission, it is as impossible to do justice to Strauss's work in a single chapter as it is to do justice to Aristophanes in a single volume. Stauffer therefore aims to introduce us to some of the major puzzles and questions of the book, foremost among them being precisely what was Aristophanes' critique of Socrates, his way of life, and, perhaps most importantly, his understanding of the gods. Taken together, Sections Three and Four suggest a vast horizon of interpretive approaches and strategies both in respect to Aristophanes' influence on other thinkers and the vast scholarly literature surveying his thought. In sum, political theorists must sooner or later engage with Aristophanes.

As mentioned at the outset of this Introduction, the editors intend this volume for use by those who are already familiar, or wish to become so, with Aristophanes' overall philosophic thought; in this spirit, we hope that the volume finds its way into university classrooms in order to assist in inculcating a new generation of Aristophanes aficionados by those who have already been converted. It should be emphasized that no such book appears to be in print today. While there are certainly books on a specific theme(s) or play(s), and while there are volumes detailing his artistry, language, cultural influence, and so on, no edited edition exists that takes as its explicit focus his political philosophy as a whole. We therefore believe that this volume will fit in nicely with many traditional political philosophy courses (whether survey courses or those dedicated to a particular author or theme) as well as with the growing popularity of "Politics and Literature" both as a subfield in political science and as a focus of teaching on college

campuses. Indeed, and ideally, we hope that this volume might persuade teachers to offer entire courses dedicated to an examination of Aristophanes' corpus: such courses could not only highlight Aristophanes' relationship to other key thinkers, from Thucydides to Plato, but also focus and discuss pivotal events in Western history, from the Peloponnesian War to the death of Socrates. While no single volume on Aristophanes can be complete, we have endeavored to survey in as comprehensive a fashion as possible what might be loosely termed his most political plays, themes, and influences, and all of his plays figure prominently in at least one chapter, while several plays make their appearance on multiple occasions. At the very least, the interpretations presented herein should allow students to receive a rich sense of all that Aristophanes has to offer, and especially how much work remains to be done.

Clearly, much more could be said in introducing and therefore justifying a book dedicated to Aristophanes—but perhaps an overly longish Introduction would be a proof against reading the book in the first place. After all, could it not be argued that if you feel the need to justify a book about Aristophanes, then you obviously have no genuine appreciation for the artist himself? Who needs to justify laughter or a book that seeks to highlight laughter's wisdom? At any event, whether the book accomplishes this task will be decided by each and every reader. What the editors can confirm, however, is that each and every contributor involved in this project had an enjoyable time writing their chapter—and certainly learned and transmitted important insights about politics from that ever clever, bawdy, and utterly preposterous philosophic poet.