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**Keith Sidwell, *Aristophanes the Democrat: The Politics of Satirical Comedy During the Peloponnesian War*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xv & 407. £59. ISBN 9780521519984 (Hbk).**

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Sidwell begins his preface with a justification of 'Why (yet) another book on Old Comedy' is needed, claiming to have found 'a new way to resolve' a number of difficulties relating to the genre's context and impact (p.ix). His argument is that the comic poets and their plays were fundamentally political, and that each playwright was associated with a certain political group (and its leader). More pertinently, each used his plays to attack rival poets and the political and intellectual circles with which they were associated; Sidwell remarks that 'the plot was really only a vehicle for attacks on individuals' (p.133). The jokes, characters and 'messages' contained in each play must be understood as part of an ongoing 'poet's war' carried out by means of direct attack, parody and caricature on an intertextual level (intertextuality being defined by Sidwell as '*the intended reuse by an author of an existing text (in the widest sense) known to the audience, as a tool with which the audience may construct the meaning of his own new text*', p.xi). The book's title reflects Sidwell's view that Aristophanes himself was associated with the radical democratic end of the political spectrum, and specifically with Hyperbolus.

Sidwell's argument flows from his interpretation of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, which is of course the playwright's revised version of an original now lost (Sidwell refers to them as *Clouds I* and *Clouds II*). Sidwell sees our version as written and performed for a restricted audience of the poet's 'patrons' rather than for a festival audience (pp.10-11). He reaches this conclusion on the grounds of the parabasis, which he interprets as uniquely personal, and containing detailed information on his 'political and poetic targets' (pp.6-7). The crucial lines are 521-5, which for Sidwell suggest that there were two performances of the original *Clouds*, with πρώτους at line 523 referring to a

patrons' preview and εἶτ' at line 524 to the festival performance (p.9). Aristophanes is once again addressing the audience of the first performance, who have seen previews of his previous plays 'in this place' (ἐνθάδ', line 528).

This is an ingenious and attractive hypothesis, if also a speculative one – and so crucial is it to Sidwell's argument that those who reject it will presumably reject all of what follows.<sup>1</sup> I also suspect that most of those who do find it plausible will not find the conclusions which Sidwell reaches on its basis to be persuasive. In effect, he argues that the 'special bond between this audience and Aristophanes' (p.27) and the context of an appeal to their patronage and political and intellectual tastes means that the parabasis can be taken as an expression of what Aristophanes really meant his comedy to achieve, and as an accurate description of how his comedy worked. This is perhaps put most plainly when Sidwell discusses Aristophanes' claim, at line 550, not to have attacked Cleon when he was 'lying down' (κειμένω). He explains this as a reference to not having 'brought Cleon on stage as a character' after *Knights*, as opposed to merely attacking him verbally. He explains that 'If we are to absolve Aristophanes of self-contradiction – *as we must before his audience of long-established patrons* – we should accept that this distinction... is one to which the poet subscribes' (p.23, my emphasis).

In other words, a claim which Aristophanes makes in the *Clouds II* parabasis must be taken literally, and an explanation found that allows it to fit with what he writes elsewhere in his work. An important example of this is the treatment of Hyperbolus – because Aristophanes supports him in the parabasis, the attacks on him by name in other plays must really be aimed at the character who speaks them, 'a device to characterise and sometimes, no doubt, ironically to devalue the on-stage individual who is under attack' (p.26; the examples are examined individually at pp.92-101).

This seems to me a fundamentally flawed approach, since it rules out entirely the possibility of irony and parody in the parabasis, while demanding it as a

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jeremy B. Lefkowitz's review in the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2010.10.62.

feature of all his other work. According to Sidwell's hypothesis there is, for example, no other way to explain Aristophanes' use of the vulgar comedy which he decries in the *Clouds* // parabasis than as a parody of the work of his rival poets (pp.17-19; cf. pp.202-203 on the similar problem of *Peace* 739-53). Similarly, given the poet's apparently radically democratic politics, the famous exhortation in the parabasis of *Frogs* must be ironic, and intended 'to *ridicule* the idea that the re-enfranchisement of the oligarchs was the answer to the city's current dilemma' (p.285, cf. p.41). If the festival audience was so used to irony of this kind, however, it is very difficult to see why a select and sophisticated audience of patrons would be denied it in the *Clouds* // parabasis; and if the possibility of irony and self-deprecation in the parabasis is accepted, Sidwell's subsequent arguments are unsupported.

These subsequent arguments amount to an ingenious and intricately reconstructed web of connections between poets and their plays, in which the levels of parodic and ironic representation reach sometimes dizzying levels of complexity. A key feature is the consistent representation of rival poets as characters, especially Aristophanes' great rivals Cratinus and Eupolis. Thus in *Acharnians* Dicaeopolis is said to represent Eupolis, and the character's addresses to the audience in the guise of the play's writer show how this parody of Eupolis would present his own parody of Cratinus. In Sidwell's words, Aristophanes is 'presenting a Cratinus on stage in *Acharnians* who was being *acted* by Eupolis' (p.79-80). Fortunately, these complex interpretations are effectively summarised in Sidwell's Appendix 3.

As this last example shows, some delightful interpretations are suggested, and there is much to admire in Sidwell's thorough integration of fragmentary and chronological evidence with the plays which we possess in full. It must also be noted that the interaction between comic poets through their plays is all too easily marginalised or ignored in many treatments of the genre. But I cannot escape the feeling that in this case Sidwell's whole edifice is built on sand. I also find Sidwell's interpretation of Old Comedy to be too narrow, and not to allow sufficiently for innovation or experiment. He rejects, for example, the interpretation (derived from the scholia) of Cratinus' *Pytine* as a self-

deprecating satire on the author himself on the grounds that 'It would seem much more logical to attack in this manner either his young rival Aristophanes or the other equally young comic poet he accuses him of copying, Eupolis'. Sidwell's deterministic insistence on the 'poet's war' and the use of caricature of opponents has, I feel, led him to dismiss such a possibility too hastily. Similarly, many will reject the idea that Aristophanes' great creations such as Dicaeopolis and Philocleon are mere parodies of his opponents, rather than attempts to show the audience something of themselves, and their own national character as the poet saw it.