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Comedy. Aristophanes and the Intertextual Parabasis*

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Abstract

Few formal elements of Old Comedy have troubled scholars as much as the parabasis. In its typical form, this choral "digression" appears to interrupt the dramatic fiction of the play with commentary on contemporary social or political issues and often brazen trumpeting of the poet's virtues. Its apparent discontinuity with the rest of the play encouraged scholars of an earlier age to consider it the original kernel of Comedy onto which dramatic episodes were eventually grafted.

Comments

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Thomas K. Hubbard, *The Mask of Comedy. Aristophanes and the Intertextual Parabasis*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991. Pp. xii + 284. ISBN 0-8014-2564-6.

Reviewed by Ralph M. Rosen, University of Pennsylvania.

Few formal elements of Old Comedy have troubled scholars as much as the parabasis. In its typical form, this choral "digression" appears to interrupt the dramatic fiction of the play with commentary on contemporary social or political issues and often brazen trumpeting of the poet's virtues. Its apparent discontinuity with the rest of the play encouraged scholars of an earlier age to consider it the original kernel of Comedy onto which dramatic episodes were eventually grafted. Theories multiplied about its original location in the play, as well as about its function and morphology, but there was general consensus that the parabasis was something quite distinct from and fundamentally irrelevant to the rest of the play. More recently, however, some have argued that, whatever its actual origins, Aristophanes and his colleagues employed the parabasis as a literary device well integrated into the larger fabric of the play. Although many examples of this approach can be found here and there scattered in the scholarly literature of the past few decades, Hubbard's book is the first attempt to examine all the Aristophanic parabases synoptically,¹ and to consider in particular how each functions both in its localized context and in the context of the poet's entire corpus.

Hubbard maintains not only that the parabases reflect central concerns of the plays in which they occur, but, more importantly, that when taken together they can be seen to present a developing autobiographical narrative: "Each ... parabasis encapsulates an overview of the poet's entire career and thus relates his intentions in the present play to those of earlier works and of his dramatic *oeuvre* as a whole." (p. 31). Self-presentation of the poet, of course, is a traditional and self-evident feature of the parabasis. But it is Hubbard's focus on the persistent *intertextuality* of all the Aristophanic parabases that makes his approach seem so promising, especially since, more so than in any other genre of the period, the self-referential and self-critical mode was built into Old Comedy. For Hubbard, intertextual allusions "function not merely as cross-references reminding us of a previous text but as significant evocations incorporating and transforming the context and meaning of those prior texts; at the same time they add a dimension of meaning to the alluding text, not present in the words and motifs when taken in isolation" (p. 40). Obviously, distinguishing what is a "significant evocation," or even, for that matter, deciding what are bona fide "cross-references" in poetic works are critical tasks fraught with controversy and uncertainty, and no one working in this area can expect to satisfy all readers. Although Hubbard's zealous attempt to produce a coherent and comprehensive account of parabolic intertextuality does occasionally give rise to tendentious argumentation, just as often his discussions, particularly when focused on individual passages, are subtle, judicious, and persuasive.

The first two chapters, "Comedy and Self-Knowledge" and "The Intertextual Parabasis," discuss the parabasis as a locus of self-referential humor in which the poet can create for himself a comic persona which "undergoes continuous modulation and revision from parabasis to parabasis" (p. 29). Hubbard dismisses, as others have done, the various theories about where the parabasis came from (e.g., from the epirrhematic syzygy? the original choral parodos? from cultic *aischrologia*?) on the grounds that our evidence is simply insufficient or contradictory. But while his aporia on the question of origins is essentially prudent (the search for a *single* provenance of the parabasis is surely quixotic), it is disappointing that he doesn't evaluate in greater detail how reasonably well attested antecedent elements of the parabasis (lyric self-reference, iambographic posturing, the archaic didactic stance, for example) might have influenced its shape by the late fifth century. Hubbard's view that the parabasis was "fundamentally a product of self-conscious literary evolution with distinctly literary purposes" is certainly sound, but it does have the effect of downplaying the delicate interaction of poetic convention, cultural praxis and a poet's conscious hand. Hubbard rejects, for example, the notion that the parabasis was a "cultic remnant," but his categorical repudiation (p. 25) of this view curtails any investigation of the cultic elements that at some level did help shape the parabasis (and other parts of Old Comedy). The observation that "we do not find [cultic aischrology] in every parabasis and the parabasis is far from being the only place in Comedy where we do find it" is hardly grounds for rejecting altogether the influence of the cults on the parabasis. It may be that our evidence for such matters is inconclusive, but no more so than the evidence adduced to argue that the parabasis was a fifth-century literary innovation.

Hubbard's principal concern, of course, is the Aristophanic parabasis, and he proceeds to take up each play in chronological order up to the *Frogs*, the last play to feature one. He rehearses a good deal of familiar material here, no doubt with a non-specialist audience in mind; still a little less descriptive "plot summary" would have profitably tightened his argument. In these chapters Hubbard does not offer any especially novel interpretations of individual parabases. His contribution lies rather in viewing them synoptically and arguing that their interplay with one another and with other comic texts (i.e. their intertextuality) allows us to trace an evolving autobiography of the poet.

The early parabases, he argues, show a poet obsessed with his alleged dealings with Cleon, and more generally with justifying his art to a sometimes unappreciative audience. This much is hardly new in itself, though in each case Hubbard succeeds nicely in showing how Aristophanes sets up a "parallelism between the poet's glorified persona and major characters involved in the dramatic action of each play" (p. 220). In *Acharnians*, for example, the "poet's" self-defense against Cleon in the parabasis is mirrored by Dicaeopolis' later attempt to make his own case heard by putting his head on the chopping block. The fact that Dicaeopolis "becomes" Aristophanes earlier in the play, and appropriates on behalf of the poet a quarrel that doesn't really concern him (377-84), is played out later when Dicaeopolis feels compelled to plead his own case in the guise of the Euripidean Telephus. Like this disguised Dicaeopolis, Aristophanes too has evidently disguised his real identity by having Callistratus produce the play. Hubbard's discussion of the constantly shifting masks of Dicaeopolis and their importance for creating a self-portrait of the poet is elegant, and his notion that the parabasis of *Acharnians* in effect serves as a focal point where the layers of irony and masquerade in the plot are deconstructed, is persuasively set forth.

In a similar fashion the parabasis of *Knights*, which situates Aristophanes in the poetic rivalries of the day, finds its dramatic counterpart, according to Hubbard, in the political rivalry between the Sausage seller and the Paphlagonian (Cleon). Just as the Sausage seller gradually warms up to the fight against Cleon during the course of the play, so the parabasis reflects the poet's own growing self-confidence in confronting Cleon on his own, without the protection of a producer.

Hubbard's discussion of *Clouds* in Chapter 5 highlights well the anxieties Aristophanes seems to have felt as he tried to compose an "intellectual" comedy that satirized current intellectual trends. Hubbard sees the failure of the first version of the play as a pivotal trauma in the poet's career, which largely informed the parabasis of the second version that we now possess. In this parabasis, the poet quite transparently identified himself with his own portrayal of Socrates: "Socrates and Aristophanes are both educators of the Athenian public, although each exercises his didactic leadership in different ways. And both are misunderstood by the general public" (p. 95). The parallelism between Socrates and Aristophanes in the play is easy to endorse, but Hubbard also finds an important contrast between the two: "Aristophanes differs from Socrates in that there is a moral dimension to his SOFI/A; his comedy is not only SOFO/S, but also SW/FRWN (vv. 529, 537)... On the other hand Socratic education, at least as presented in this play, seems to be a godless mechanism completely devoid of moral considerations or concerns with traditional values" (pp. 95-96). But Hubbard risks here, it seems, undermining the very parallelism that he is at pains to emphasize. For if Socrates is, like Aristophanes, a misunderstood intellectual, then we might easily argue (as I think we should) that his alleged godlessness and lack of social responsibility arise also from a misunderstanding by the public at large. Seen in this light, the Socrates of the *Clouds* is the Socrates of Strepsiades' imagination, i.e., the Socrates that existed in the minds of many unreflective and untutored Athenians. Martha Nussbaum has argued (*YCS* 1980) along these lines that the play dramatizes the dangers of Socrates' uncontrolled and indiscriminate elenchus. But where Nussbaum saw the play as a serious critique of Socratic methodology, Hubbard sees it as a critique of the very moral foundation of Socratic philosophy itself.

The perennial question resurfaces: did Aristophanes have any real understanding of what Socrates was up to? Hubbard's argument, which has Aristophanes identify the historical Socrates with the immoral practices endorsed by the Lesser Logos, would seem to answer no. But his own compelling discussion of Socrates and Aristophanes as kindred spirits leads me now to regard their kinship as a guiding theme of the entire play, including the disquieting final scene in which Strepsiades burns the phrontisterion. Of this scene Hubbard states (p. 112): "The vigorous affirmation of life which we expect in a comedy is here submerged in the ironic gloom of intellectual despair, whether of the disappointed poet or his negative alter ego, the ill-tempered philosopher." If, however, the play really is a critique of the "ill-tempered" philosopher, the "gloom of intellectual despair" becomes rather (as others have claimed) a ray of hope, as "traditional" good unambiguously triumphs over "contemporary" evil. But I think Hubbard is absolutely right: there *is* an enormous sense of gloom at the end of *Clouds*, and the play *does* question "the position of the intellectual in society" (p. 112). Only it stems precisely from the fact that Socrates too has been misunderstood (just as Aristophanes complains in the parabasis that he himself has been misunderstood), and the conflagration at the end of the play dramatizes the dangers faced by both the philosopher and the intellectual comic poet when they confront an unpredictable public. Ironically, this is a reading that I owe largely to Hubbard's discussion the play, but which he evidently would not endorse.

In the parabasis of *Wasps*, Aristophanes is still smarting from the defeat of *Clouds*, and so, according to Hubbard, he proceeds to reevaluate "his developing aims and methods as a comic poet" (p. 113). Indeed, Hubbard sees the whole play as a recapitulation of the poet's entire dramatic career to date (p. 126). In the first half of the play "we see the young reformer Bdelycleon succeed in his explicitly political program, like Aristophanes, his alter ego, who won dramatic victories with his political plays." The second half of the play after the parabasis "is devoted not so much to the political reform of Philocleon as to his social and cultural education" which, he argues, evoke the "social and intellectual critique in Aristophanes' most subtle play, the *Clouds*. And like the *Clouds*, Bdelycleon's attempt to reeducate his father is a total failure." The parabasis, then, functions as a "hermeneutic key to the structure of the *Wasps*, which is itself a recapitulation of the poet's past career" (p. 126).

In many ways the chapter on *Wasps* is emblematic of both the virtues and the pitfalls of Hubbard's entire approach to Aristophanes. His discussion of how the parabasis in this play serves as a kind of pivot between the two plots is elegant and persuasive, as is his general argument that the poet intended the entire play (i.e. not only the parabasis, with its well-recognized traditional programmatic concerns) to be considered with his previous work in mind. Some of the details of Hubbard's argument, however, beg questions about the mechanism of what he considers "intertextuality." Consider the following representative quotations: "The idea that political leaders like Cleon keep the public impoverished in order to manipulate it better ... *is clearly derived from the Sausage Seller's critique of Paphlagon in the Knights*" (p. 129), or "the idea for Labes' theft of cheese from the kitchen and for Cleon's characterization as a dog *comes from the rival dog oracles presented in the Knights*" (pp. 130-31, italics added in both quotations). Hubbard never really makes it clear just how exactly he envisions these forms of intertextuality coming into being. It seems at any rate as if he would consider these cases as old-fashioned intentional "allusions," with the poet fully conscious at every stage of the intertextual process. The problem is, however, that in very few of these cases can we say with any certainty that the intertextuality must be fully intentional. Often Hubbard does persuade us that Aristophanes probably was in full control of his allusions in any given passage, but his relentlessly biographical approach, which seeks at every turn to discover an overarching, conscious poetic program throughout the plays, leaves out of discussion a whole host of other factors that must have influenced their final contour. There is little sustained attention, for example, to conventional material in Comedy, to the constraints and dictates of genre, or to how we should even formulate the very concept of allusion in a culture hovering between orality and literacy.

Hubbard does acknowledge that some of his arguments for intertextuality are necessarily imprecise. His argument for the chronological priority of *Lysistrata* over *Thesmophoriazusae* depends largely on a particular sense of how the later text alludes to the earlier, and he does recognize that "to some extent the judgment of priority is subjective," since one can always argue that what he identifies as a "cross-reference" to an earlier text, is in fact an anticipation of the later one (p. 199). Indeed the whole discussion of *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae* points up an interesting methodological tension that pervades much of the book. The discussion centers on a traditional problem of relative dating, and in answering this sort of positivistic question, Hubbard appears to use "intertextuality" as a dressed up term for "allusion" in the traditional sense: "passage y alludes to passage x, therefore passage x was written before passage y." Curiously, I found it easy to object to many of Hubbard's arguments when he wanted to invoke them

as evidence for chronological priority, but when I ignored the larger project of relative dating, I found his discussion of the intertextuality of the plays of 411 to be quite subtle and compelling. When fettered by a concern for empirical facts about a text, it is difficult to appreciate fully what distinguishes "intertextuality" (as a kind of reciprocal interplay among texts) from its more limited subspecies "allusion."

For similar reasons, Hubbard's overall approach in the book presents something of a dilemma. Fundamentally, he is constructing a very detailed biography of Aristophanes. Every play, at least up to *Frogs*, is related intimately to the previous one, and represents another discernible point in the poet's developing career. The last chapter of the book (Chap. 9) summarizes how Hubbard extrapolates this career from the plays he has discussed, but he is never quite clear (nor is he in the rest of the book) about the precise nature of this autobiography. At times, he speaks of a comic "persona," which leads one to suspect that after all he is less concerned with Aristophanes "the man" than with Aristophanes "the fiction of the plays." But most of the time Hubbard's rhetoric suggests that his project is to uncover a real flesh-and-blood personality. A case in point that reveals Hubbard's own ambivalence about the issue is his attitude towards Aristophanes' relationship with Cleon. Hubbard says of the *Acharnians*, for example, that "the interpenetration between dramatic fantasy and political reality is so well developed that we cannot at any moment assert with certainty which of the two realms is referred to" (p. 46), but in a footnote to this sentence he insists that there was a historical conflict between Cleon and Aristophanes, reasoning simply that the alleged conflict appears so insistently in the *Acharnians* that it "must have had some basis in reality" (p. 46 n.18). At the end of the chapter, he hedges again: "Cleon's 'lawsuit' (or whatever it was) against the comic poet was a historical, civic event, but is here transformed into a dramatic event through its appropriation by the character Dicaeopolis who speaks of it as a lawsuit against himself" (p. 59). In another context, Hubbard accurately notes that "the various poses and masks of Aristophanes' persona are to a large degree conventional" (p. 32), and in speaking of another of Aristophanes' autobiographical claims, the claim to poetic originality, Hubbard can say that "there was nothing less original than the claim of comic originality. The parabasis is in its very essence grounded in an atmosphere of developed agonistic competition and intense literary allusion, wherein the poets sought and created for themselves visible public identities" (p. 33). But clearly one can equally say that there is nothing less unusual in Old Comedy than a poet claiming to have bêtes-noires. Just when Hubbard seems to be moving in the direction of explaining Aristophanes' relationship with Cleon in terms of a fictional self-presentation, he reverts to an apparently historical model of explanation. The last sentence of the book highlights the confusion on this issue: "Behind the mask of Aristophanes one finds many masks, but this is not to say that there is not at the same time also a real man there with real views and with all the complex contradictions which thoughtful and generally funny human beings possess" (p. 225). This would be a fine conclusion to the book if Hubbard had been able to distinguish more clearly throughout how he differentiates the masks from reality (as indeed we had been promised in the Preface, p. ix, where he states the need for a "refined synthesis of the social and biographical approaches that treats the work as a confrontation or nexus between the author and society ... and articulat[es] the dynamic tension between social demands and authorial intentionality.")

The dangers of Hubbard's attempt to construct a systematic biography of Aristophanes from the plays is well illustrated by his discussion of the end of the *Frogs* (pp. 214-19). Here, the yearning for a clear-cut, dogmatic explanation of extremely ambiguous material

that the biographical approach fosters is especially evident. In interpreting the final scene of the play in which Dionysus decides to bring back Aeschylus rather than Euripides from Hades, Hubbard essentially identifies Dionysus with Aristophanes: "Dionysus ultimately expresses the poet's view in saying that Aeschylus again has spoken 'wisely' ..., Euripides 'clearly'" (p. 215). From this identification, Hubbard is able to view the entire play as a sort of poetic manifesto which has Aristophanes embracing the best elements of each tragedian (Aeschylus' "fantastic imagination and moral purpose ... Euripides' everyday realism without the moral indifference," p. 218), but ultimately repudiating Euripidean poetry because "it has lost all sense of poetic presence, that is, the notion of the poet having a special relationship with his audience" (p. 217), and is thus morally bankrupt. Hubbard's whole discussion here, however, resolves too neatly the very palpable tensions, equivocations, and ambiguities that make the play so provocative and slippery. Hubbard's conclusion, for instance, that Aeschylus' and Euripides' respective advice about Alcibiades and the current governance of the polis reveals Aristophanes' fundamental conservative, aristocratic leanings seems too simplistic. He argues (p. 215) that because Aeschylus asks specifically about the moral quality of contemporary leaders while Euripides' "interest seems rather to be in continually using new men for the sake of using new men," the former's advice is intellectually sound (if impractical) while the latter's is morally deficient. But the term Hubbard stresses for Aeschylus' notion of morally "good" (v. 1455; and cf. v. 735, in the parabasis), namely XRHSTO/S, is hardly unambiguous, connoting just as readily and perhaps even primarily, "useful." Hubbard states of Euripides' advice (p. 216) that "it is not sound or intelligent advice to tell the city that it should simply do 'the opposite' (v. 1450) of what it is doing, if it is currently having problems." But this assumes unfairly that Euripides will have given no thought to *why* the city should do the opposite, and presumes that Aeschylus' advice amounts to something more than the unreflective conservatism that it can easily be seen to be. Hubbard is aware that Euripides professes, like Aeschylus, to be concerned for the "betterment of the citizens" (p. 216), but charges him with being "unconcerned with the effects of his plays on the audience." One could just as easily, however, interpret the play as blaming the audience for failing to appreciate exactly what Euripides' moral program was, and for preferring Aeschylus' familiar appeals to a nostalgic form of patriotism to Euripides' intellectual discourse.

Hubbard also makes the Havelockian argument that Euripides' notorious bookishness, especially prominent in the *Frogs*, reflected a disturbing trend away from living performance toward a growing text-based culture, and that this resulted in a diminution of a play's didactic force; hence the preference for Aeschylus in the end. This is indeed half the picture -- Aeschylus, for example, does ridicule Euripides and his coterie of scribes -- but it suppresses the fact that Euripides too presents himself as a didactic poet. As texts are disseminated, read, and reread, it is true that "the poet is removed one step further from his audience" (p. 217), but it was a hallmark of Euripides' general intellectual orientation to prefer discourse and debate to the self-righteous pontificating of the Aristophanic Aeschylus. The end of the *Frogs* may imply that the Athenian audience was not quite ready for the philosophical ambiguities and uncertainties of Euripidean drama, or for the desacralization of the poet that accompanied the rise of literacy, but we need not conclude, as Hubbard does, that Aristophanes himself advocated categorically one side of the argument or the other. Hubbard does not sufficiently consider the significance of the fact that the ultimate choice of Aeschylus at the end is set up as something of a *paraprosdokian*, that Dionysus, who makes the choice, is an amalgamation of conflicting character-types, and that neither Aeschylus nor Euripides is portrayed univocally in the

agon. Hubbard's tendency here, and throughout the book, is to isolate the salient issues of an Aristophanic play, and then attempt to align the poet himself with a particular viewpoint. This procedure, it seems to me (and glaringly so in the case of the *Frogs*), often robs the work of subtleties, ambiguities and contradictions that a less rigidly conceived reading might encourage.

New books about Aristophanes appear far less frequently than books about most other canonical classical authors, so any contribution as serious and as ambitious as this one not only is likely to receive especially close scrutiny but deserves a warm welcome as well. The paucity of such books reflects not so much scholarly indifference as the extreme difficulty of saying anything cogent about such a particularly elusive subject as comedy. Despite my disagreements with Hubbard on a number of issues, *The Mask of Comedy* is always intelligent, provocative, and engaging, and will certainly become an important focal point for future studies of Aristophanes and the comic parabasis.

NOTES

- [1] G. M. Sifakis' *Parabasis and Animal Choruses* (London 1971) still remains the best descriptive account of the parabasis in Old Comedy, although his view that the parabasis (like all the scenes of Old Comedy) was essentially a self-contained and disconnected dramatic unit, runs counter to Hubbard's approach.