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Political Comedy in Aristophanes*

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that Aristophanic comedy, although it takes contemporary political life as its point of departure, is not political in the sense of aiming to influence politics outside the theatre. Brief discussions of *Clouds*, *Knights*, *Lysistrata* and *Acharnians* are used to cast initial doubt on interpretations that attribute serious intent to Aristophanes. It is then argued that Aristophanes' treatment of the poet's role as adviser, abuse of the audience and of individuals, the themes of rich and poor and the power of the *dêmos*, support this conclusion. In general, the assumptions of Aristophanes' comedy are too closely attuned to those of the majority of his audience to warrant inferences about Aristophanes' own political attitudes. This conclusion throws light on the democracy's exercise of control over the theatre. An appendix argues that the main unifying element in Aristophanic comedy is not theme, but plot, and that Aristophanes took more care over coherence of plot-structure than is sometimes recognised.

1. Introduction

<7> 'This is a threadbare subject': so in 1938 Gomme introduced his influential paper on Aristophanes and politics, and the subject has been exposed to a good deal of wear and tear since he wrote those words.¹ A sense of tedium could be forgiven; but tempted though we may feel simply to abandon the whole issue and to seek new questions to discuss, the problem of political intent in Aristophanic comedy remains obstinately difficult to evade. Gomme, indeed, although he thought that some relatively easy deductions could be made about Aristophanes' political outlook,² argued at rather greater length that such deductions were of purely biographical interest, contributing nothing to our appreciation of the plays as plays.³ But, quite apart from the perfectly valid

* *Additional note* (December 2007): The original version of this essay presented readers who do not know Greek with unnecessary hindrances; in preparing this revised version, I have modified the text to make it more accessible. I have also brought references to comic fragments into line with the numeration in Kassel-Austin, and made a number of other minor corrections, clarifications and changes of format. Much has been published on this subject in the 20 years since this short book was originally published. In general, I have not attempted to update either the substance of the discussion or the references to secondary literature. However, I have responded to one particularly ill-conceived critique of my argument (in the new Appendix 2), and have supplied references to the published versions of what was at the time related work-in-progress. My subsequent reflections on Aristophanes and politics can be found in Heath (1990a), (1996) and (1997). Some related issues in tragedy are discussed in Heath (2006), as part of an ongoing reassessment of the project very imperfectly executed in Heath (1987a). Heath (2002) outlines and updates the methodological assumptions which lay behind this study (and briefly describes its origins: 102-3). I am glad to have the opportunity to express once again my gratitude for the generous assistance of the Jowett Trust and other benefactors, which made possible the original publication.

¹ Gomme (1938).

² Gomme (1938), 107-8.

³ Gomme (1938), 103-7.

objection that we need also to appreciate the plays as historical evidence, the antithesis on which Gomme rests his case between ‘politician’ and ‘dramatist’ is highly questionable. The notion of the politically motivated dramatist is a coherent one that should not be dismissed *a priori*, while the generalisation that ‘for a dramatist there is no right or wrong side (whatever his private opinions may be)’⁴ seems easily refuted by counterexample. One might still feel (as I do not) that political commitment necessarily impairs artistic or literary value;⁵ but one is not then entitled to conclude that Aristophanes’ work was not in fact thus impaired until one has shown on independent grounds that it was not in fact thus committed.

More recent trends in criticism might encourage the hope that the issue could be sidestepped if we were to treat the plays’ political themes as part of the purely literary structure of each text, a structure that could in principle be grasped in abstraction from the text’s intended bearing on extra-theatrical political practice. This approach would be similar in its effect to Gomme’s, though dressed up in a newer <8> theoretical language. Yet here, too, we must insist that it is, in point of theory, flawed. A text is not simply a structure of words, sentences and themes; it is a teleological system—that is, it is words, sentences and themes organised with a view to some end: specifically, with a view to a communicative end of some kind. That is to say that a text characteristically envisages and invites some particular kind of reception; there is some (imprecisely defined) range of responses and effects which it is designed to elicit. Consequently, the structure of a text cannot be grasped correctly without reference to its communicative end (that is, its meaning). To understand Aristophanes’ plays, therefore, we must ask about the reception with a view to which they were composed; and this will inevitably raise in turn the question of political intent.

But this question, though inescapable, is extremely difficult to answer—and is so for readily intelligible reasons. It is not simply that we lack the intimate knowledge of the contemporary world which Aristophanes presupposed of his audience, so that many allusions pass us by or baffle us. Even where we can detect and explain an allusion, its tone or point may elude us. Irony, fantasy and playful distortion are parts of the comic dramatist’s repertoire, and they may present an almost insuperable interpretative barrier to ‘outsiders’, to those not antecedently familiar with the moods and intentions conventionally appropriate in a given comic genre. It would be an exaggeration to say that what seems to us *prima facie* plausible is probably for that very reason wrong; but it would be perfectly correct to insist that its seeming *prima facie* plausible to uninitiates like ourselves affords exceptionally weak grounds for supposing that it is probably right.

Ideally, therefore, one would wish to find some kind of external control, evidence independent of our reading of the plays that would help us to calibrate our estimation of their tone or mood. Evidence about the poet, for example, might

⁴ Gomme (1938), 99.

⁵ Cf. Gomme’s revealing remark on *Knights*: ‘I prefer to believe that... his dramatic genius got the better of him; and that in fact he does not attack, but gives a picture of contemporary Athenian politics’ (1938, 106 n.1).

usefully restrict the range of intentions which could plausibly be ascribed to him; evidence about his audience might help us to reconstruct the expectations and preferences with which he had to reckon, and so indicate the kinds of response and effect which he might have intended to achieve; evidence about the context in which a play was composed and received, and the consequent constraints on both poet and audience, might also help us to determine their respective intentions and receptive dispositions. That evidence of this kind is, by and large, not forthcoming will be painfully obvious; but we do have some evidence of the kind, and it is with this that we must begin our enquiry.

2. *Clouds*

<9> I propose to begin by discussing *Clouds*. This is not itself a political play, but de Ste Croix refers to it in concluding his account of Aristophanes' political outlook.⁶ Following Dover he finds in the play 'an invitation to violence, or oppressive legislation' against Socrates and other sophists, and in this he perceives an analogy for, and so a defence of, the intent to influence political opinion which he ascribes to the poet.⁷ I shall argue, however, that in this case we do possess external evidence concerning Aristophanes himself which casts serious doubt on the interpretation proposed; and if we allow that evidence its proper weight, *Clouds* in fact supports by analogy a rather different approach to politics in Aristophanes.

The main witness here is Plato, and there are two crucial texts (passages such as *Phaedo* 70b10-c2 add nothing either way). First, *Apology*. In *Apology* 18-19 Socrates distinguishes between his immediate and his more remote (and more formidable) accusers: between Anytus and his associates on the one hand, and on the other those who had for many years been building up a false and hostile public image for Socrates, and thus encouraging prejudice against him. It is suggested that a comic poet was one of the latter group (18d1-2); the description of Socrates' prejudicial public image is clearly modelled on *Clouds* (18b6-c1, 19b4-c1); and Aristophanes is eventually named as its source (19c2-4). Does this suggest hostility towards Socrates on Aristophanes' part, such as Dover and de Ste Croix envisage? It could be argued, on the contrary, that Plato implicitly distinguishes the comic poet of 18d1-2 from those of Socrates' remote accusers whose motives were malicious (18d2-3 ὅσοι δὲ φθόνῳ καὶ διαβολῇ χρώμενοι ὑμᾶς ἀνέπειθον). But one must also ask *why* Plato chose to refer so insistently to comedy at this point. One possibility is that the treatment of Socrates in comedy did, in Plato's judgement, have the effect on public opinion that he describes. Were that so, it would be comprehensible whether or not *Clouds* and similar plays were written with that end in view, so that *Apology* does not, even on this interpretation, count in favour of hostile intent. But it is also possible that, by insinuating that the charges against Socrates at his trial were based on a lot of nonsense out of comedy (19b1-2 ἢ δὴ καὶ πιστεύων Μέλητος με ἐγράψατο τὴν <10> γραφὴν ταύτην), Plato's intention was to discredit the prosecution's

⁶ de Ste Croix (1972), 355-76 (= Appendix 29, 'The political outlook of Aristophanes').

⁷ de Ste Croix (1972), 371, quoting Dover (1968), lvi.

case. Compare the ironical thrust in 19c7: ‘I mean no disrespect for such knowledge, if anyone is really versed in it—I do not want any more lawsuits brought against me by Meletus.’⁸ If that were Plato’s intention, it would mean that he felt able to count on a general acceptance that comic portrayals were untrue and should not influence opinion outside the theatre (I shall argue in this paper that this would in fact have been generally recognised); this in turn would count against the ascription to Aristophanes of hostile intent against his victims.

Apology proves inconclusive, therefore; *Symposium* is more helpful. In this dialogue we find Aristophanes associating on apparently friendly terms with Socrates and other members of the Socratic circle, such as Agathon and Alcibiades—the very people he habitually satirises in his plays as progressive intellectuals.⁹ The mere co-presence of Socrates and Aristophanes at Agathon’s party is indecisive; it could have been a tactless error on Agathon’s part—although we should note that the host was himself not exempt from Aristophanes’ mockery;¹⁰ that his two guests do not appear to be on unfriendly terms (note the amicable banter in 177e1-2); and that Alcibiades is able to quote *Clouds* without apology in an encomium of its victim (221b1-4). Also indecisive is the fact that Aristophanes is engaged in philosophical discussion with Socrates and Agathon at the very end of the dialogue (223c4-d6); not all of Socrates’ partners in discussion were willing and sympathetic. But such evasions seem pointless when we find Alcibiades including Aristophanes by name in his enumeration of those present who have ‘shared in the mania, the bacchic frenzy, for philosophy’ (218a7-b4 πάντες γὰρ κεκοινωνήκατε τῆς φιλοσόφου μανίας τε καὶ βακχείας). Alcibiades is, it is true, drunk; but though this relaxes his inhibitions, it does not seem to impair his reliability as a witness: his encomium of Socrates is meant, after all, to be believed.

Plato goes to some lengths to secure verisimilitude in *Symposium*, and it seems unlikely that he has abandoned this quest for the verisimilar in the single case of Aristophanes. We must assume, therefore, <11> that the inclusion of Aristophanes as an active member of the Socratic circle accords with known facts, although his account of the particular occasion is doubtless fictitious.¹¹ There is some corroborative evidence for this view in contemporary comedy. Cratinus could refer to a hypothetical member of the audience (perhaps in a context similar to *Peace* 43-8) as a ‘clever, hyper-subtle connoisseur of little conceits, a Euripidaristophaniser’ (κομψός τις... θεατής, ὑπολεπτολόγος, γνωμιδιώκτης,

⁸ tr. Tredennick (1954), 21.

⁹ There is a sensible discussion by Daux (1942); see also Dover (1966).

¹⁰ In addition to *Thesm.*, see fr. 178, 341. (Comic fragments are cited according to the numeration in Kassel-Austin unless otherwise stated.)

¹¹ Dover expresses doubts about the ‘biographical relevance’ of *Symp.*: ‘my own view is that by presenting the story of Agathon’s party as a story told by Apollodorus at second hand many years after the event Plato is warning us to judge it by its quality and utility (as we would judge a myth), not by its relation to fact’ (1968, xx n.3). But (i) Plato has obscured this point by making Apollodorus insist that he has verified the details with Socrates himself (173b1-6); and (ii) we are entitled to ask how presenting Aristophanes as an active member of the Socratic circle (as we have seen, it is not adequate to say simply that Plato ‘represents him as a guest at Agathon’s house’) enhances the ‘quality and utility’ of the dialogue.

εὐριπιδαριστοφανίζων, fr. 342). The association of Euripides and Socrates is a commonplace in comedy,¹² and Cratinus characterises his ‘euripidaristophanist’ in language equally applicable to Socrates himself (cf. *Clouds* 319-21). Thus Cratinus’ fragment is a jibe implying that Aristophanes is himself another of those tiresome over-subtle intellectuals, like Euripides and their common mentor Socrates. At least one contemporary’s perception of him, therefore, was consonant with the implications of *Symposium*.¹³

Interesting consequences follow. If the poet of *Clouds* was indeed on amicable terms with Socrates and sympathetic to the intellectual interests of his circle, then we cannot safely infer, here or elsewhere, from gross distortions in a comic portrayal to the poet’s ignorance of or indifference to the truth about the individual portrayed, nor from extreme abuse and even violence on the comic stage to the poet’s hostility towards or disapproval of the victim outside the theatre. It must be acknowledged that the external evidence on which this conclusion is based is neither as full nor as secure as one would like; but there is *no* worthwhile counterevidence external to the play at all, so that this conclusion can be set aside only by those who place more <12> confidence in their ability to assess the play’s tone without external guidance than seems, on grounds of general principle, to be warranted.

3. *Knights*

We have no evidence external to the plays to tell us about Aristophanes’ political activities and sympathies; the kind of control which we applied to *Clouds* is therefore not available when we turn to the political plays proper. Nevertheless, we do have even here relevant kinds of external data which may help us to make some tentative inferences.

First of all, we can correlate the reception enjoyed by Aristophanes’ plays inside the theatre with the political behaviour of his audiences outside. The most striking datum here is provided by *Knights*. Aristophanes won first prize with this play, devoted to virulent abuse of Cleon, when Cleon was at the height of his political influence; only a few weeks after the play’s triumph he was elected general. This turn of events suggests that, just as Aristophanes was able to abuse and maltreat Socrates in a comedy without feeling any kind of ill-will towards him outside the theatre, so Aristophanes’ audience could tolerate and indeed relish the comic abuse and maltreatment of Cleon without allowing it to influence their political judgement in the Assembly.

This inference can be blocked only if one assumes a significant difference in political outlook, either between the comic audience and the voters in the Assembly, or between the judges of the comic competition and the audience at

¹² Aristophanes fr. 392 (from the first *Clouds*); Telecleides fr. 41, 42; Callias fr. 15; cf. D.L. 2.18.

¹³ This seems not to have been the only attempt to associate Aristophanes with Euripides; in fr. 488 we find him apparently defending himself against such a charge—ironically, by means of a subtle *distinguo*. For other jokes against Aristophanes used more than once by his rivals, see the scholia to *Ap.* 19c. On mutual insults between Aristophanes and his rivals, and their use of a common pool of material, see Heath (1990b)

large. There is nothing to commend the latter supposition. We do not know by what criteria the Council drew up its list of potential judges;¹⁴ but we have no reason to suppose that the procedure was such as would produce results consistently at variance, politically or indeed aesthetically, with the preferences of the audience as a whole, and some reason to doubt whether the *dêmos* would have tolerated it had it done so. And it is with a consistent discrepancy that we would have to reckon, since the success of *Knights* was far from being a freak result; Aristophanes was highly successful <13> in his early career with a whole series of aggressively political comedies.¹⁵ It is worth observing that, although he (naturally enough) often appeals specifically to the judges for a favourable verdict, Aristophanes never tries to drive a wedge between their verdict and that of the audience at large; when he is looking back on the failure of *Clouds*, for example, it is the audience that he blames for the miscarriage of justice (*Wasps* 1016-7, 1043-5, *Clouds* 518-27, cf. *Birds* 445-6). As for the respective composition of audience and Assembly, we know so little about either that comparison is difficult. Admission to the theatre was not free of charge, and this would make it difficult for the very poorest citizens to attend before the institution of the theoric fund in the mid-fourth century.¹⁶ But the theatre was substantially more capacious than the Pnyx, which seems to have seated no more than six thousand in the fifth century; the use of coercive devices such as the dyed rope (cf. *Ach.* 21-2) to encourage attendance implies that the Pnyx was not readily filled in the late fifth century; and the introduction of payment for attendance at the Assembly in the fourth century suggests that in the fifth century its composition, no less than that of the theatre, would have been weighted against the poorest citizens.¹⁷ There seems, therefore, to be no good reason for postulating a significant difference in political outlook between the comic audience and the Assembly. This accords well with the belief of pseudo-Xenophon that the *dêmos* exercised informal control over the political content of comedy (*Ath. Pol.* 2.18, a passage to which we shall return in §11). Consequently, the inference must stand that the audience of comedy relished the abuse of leaders whom they nevertheless continued to support in real political life. Such a conclusion does not strike me as paradoxical.

4. *Lysistrata*

<14> In the case of *Lysistrata* it is possible to apply a third kind of external control, that inferred from the objective circumstances of the play's production. Given Athens' highly unfavourable military situation in 411, no one could have expected Sparta to open negotiations or, if Athens took the initiative, to offer tolerable terms; it is therefore not likely that *Lysistrata* was written to commend

¹⁴ For what is known of the procedure see Pickard-Cambridge (1968), 95-8.

¹⁵ It was presumably because *Wasps* 1030-5 (an abusive description of Cleon) was particularly well received at its original performance that Aristophanes chose to repeat the passage almost verbatim at *Peace* 752-8.

¹⁶ For the dating see Ruschenbusch (1979); Rhodes (1981), 514.

¹⁷ On attendance at the Assembly see M.H. Hansen (1976), and (on payment) M.H. Hansen (1979), 48-9 (= 1983, 1-23, 136-7). Note also that a special Assembly was held in the theatre after the festival to review its conduct: see Pickard-Cambridge (1968), 68-70.

peace as a realisable goal in the real world, or that its audience would have understood it in that sense.¹⁸ The very mechanism of the plot shows that the situational constraints were not lost on Aristophanes. In *Acharnians* Spartan readiness to respond favourably to Dicaeopolis' overtures is simply taken for granted; in *Lysistrata*, by contrast, it is necessary to cripple both belligerents before a reconciliation is possible on mutually acceptable terms. It would have been futile to recommend as a real policy the kind of peace which *Lysistrata* envisages, since its realisation presupposed a Spartan willingness to reciprocate which Athens was certainly in no position to secure. On the other hand, the play conveys no hint of support for the only kind of peace-making policy that was an available option for Athens at this time; there is no suggestion, that is to say, that Athens should open negotiations and allow Sparta to dictate terms. Peace in *Lysistrata*, therefore, is a matter of pure fantasy, and can have no direct bearing on the issues of political debate outside the theatre.¹⁹

What, then, are we to make of the speech in which the play's peace-making 'policy' is expounded at length (1112-87)? De Ste Croix says of this speech that it is 'completely serious in character and <15> without a single jest'.²⁰ That claim is false: it is, after all, Lysistrata herself who sets the ribald tone of the scene by introducing the naked Reconciliation (1114ff.) and by making the indecorous suggestion of 1119;²¹ the main part of her speech opens paratragically (1124-7), and its first section concludes with a tragic line (1135). It may be true thereafter that Lysistrata's speech is 'without a single jest';²² but that, surely, is precisely the

¹⁸ This point is rightly emphasised by Westlake (1980), 38-42; contrast de Ste Croix (1972), 368, 370.

¹⁹ Newiger (1980), 232-4 recognises that the play's treatment of the war is a 'utopian conception', peace on moderate terms being 'certainly impossible' in 411, and argues that 'the meaning of the play is internal unity and the strengthening of Athens as a precondition for peace with external enemies' (236). However, the references to internal politics are hardly the 'central point' of Lysistrata's speech to the *proboulos* (574-86 are introduced almost incidentally, to justify the application of domestic analogies to political issues: 566-73); and internal reconciliation is not otherwise an extensive theme of the play (Newiger points to the reconciliation of the old men and women of the Chorus: but this is a relatively superficial conflict, trivially restored; the fundamental domestic conflict—between wives and men of an age for military service—is a product of the war, and cannot be resolved until peace is made: and Aristophanes significantly does not bother to pursue this theme at the end of the play, but allows it to be displaced by the celebration of external reconciliation).

²⁰ de Ste Croix (1972), 368; contrast Chapman (1978), 63-4.

²¹ On the tone of *σάθῃ* (1119) see Wilson (1982), 160. Since we have remarked on some less dignified aspects of the portrayal of Lysistrata, it might be appropriate to add a brief comment on D.M. Lewis' influential theory of her identity. Lewis (1955) showed (a) that Lysistrata did not share her name with the priestess of Athene Polias, and (b) that Myrrhine did share her name with the priestess of Athene Nike. Since Myrrhine was an extremely common name the latter datum is not very striking (and one is entitled to doubt whether Myrrhine the priestess was in 411 a young wife with an infant child and a suggestively named husband); thus we are left with (a). I do not myself think that Aristophanes' failure to give his heroine the priestess's name (he could have done so, had he wished) legitimates the conclusion that he intended a reference to her.

²² The Greek orators display such a talent for tendentious distortion of historical exempla (see, for example, Dover (1974), 11-13) that I hesitate to endorse Wilson's suggestion (1982, 161) that the distortions of history in 1138-44, 1150-6 are meant to be perceived as such and found comic; but that is a possibility.

joke: Lysistrata adopts an elevated tone which is hilariously deflated by the background action (two men with chronic erections are inspecting a naked woman's anatomy as Lysistrata speaks and, not unnaturally, they show greater interest in the girl than in what is being said: 1148, 1157-8), by the ribald interjections which punctuate the speech, and by the culminating transformation of territorial negotiations into a web of obscene *doubles entendres*.²³ It is hardly satisfactory, therefore, to treat Lysistrata's speech as if it were (in de Ste Croix's image) serious meat that could be extracted from a purely external comic sandwich; and while it is true that serious points can be conveyed in comic guise, it needs to be shown, not assumed, in each case that something of the kind is happening.²⁴ I do not see how that can be shown in the case of *Lys.* 1112-87; the passage makes excellent comic sense without it, as we have seen. Since we have already found independent reason to doubt that the peace-making in *Lysistrata* is anything other than fantasy, we <16> need not feel reluctant to conclude that the comedy of the scene in which it is commended was not meant to be a vehicle of serious intent.

5. *Acharnians*

The control which we applied to *Lysistrata* is not available for *Acharnians*; in this case we must depend more exclusively on internal evidence. In his discussion of this play, de Ste Croix lays a good deal of weight on two points about its hero: on his identification with the poet (377-82, 497-505), and on the implications of the name Dicaeopolis.²⁵ The latter point need not detain us. 'Just City,' as de Ste Croix says, 'does what the city ought to have done': but that we know in any case, for the wisdom of Dicaeopolis' words and actions is a premise of the plot, to which his name therefore adds nothing. The identification of Dicaeopolis with the poet is more interesting, but it is far from obvious that we should read it as a guarantee of serious intent. The lines in which the identification is made suspend the founding pretence of drama ('break the dramatic illusion', as we are forced to say for want of an apt term). This is a very frequent device in Aristophanes, and it is commonly a *humorous* device; why should we suppose otherwise here?

One reason why we might suppose otherwise is that the identification of Dicaeopolis with Aristophanes is closely bound up with the elaborate defensive preparations which Dicaeopolis makes for his speech. In the first passage he remarks warily on the fierce temper of his (Dicaeopolis') auditors (370-6) and recalls the attack which Cleon made on him (Aristophanes) after *Babylonians* was performed the previous year (377-82);²⁶ he decides that he must apply to Euripides for some tear-jerking devices by which to win a sympathetic hearing (283-4, 393-4). Thus this first identification turns out to be an excuse for a long burlesque of Euripides—an outcome which should, perhaps, give pause to those

²³ See Henderson (1980), 213 n.110 (where the cross-reference should read: 'AJP 95 (1974), 344ff.').

²⁴ de Ste Croix (1972), 357, 360.

²⁵ de Ste Croix (1972), 363-5, 369-70.

²⁶ It is, I think, Aristophanes rather than Callistratus; see Halliwell (1980), and (for an opposing view) MacDowell (1982).

who see in the identification a signal of underlying seriousness. Dicaeopolis, at least, does not take his forthcoming speech altogether seriously; he admits quite freely in 440-5 that his plan is to make fools of the dim-witted Chorus with his clever <17> Euripidean rhetoric (ῥηματαίσις 445, 447; cf. *Clouds* 943). Suitably attired after his visit to Euripides, Dicaeopolis begins his speech; the identification is renewed (499-500), and Cleon reappears: ‘this is the Lenaea, so he can’t say that I’m slandering the city before foreigners; and anyway, it’s not the city that I’m criticising, but a few good-for-nothing individuals’ (502-8, 515-8). This might seem more serious. But we must not forget that Dicaeopolis’ ‘suitable attire’ constitutes a grotesque visual joke; that his account of the war’s origins, so elaborately prepared for, turns out to be utterly preposterous;²⁷ and that the speech as a whole is riddled with parody of *Telephus*—its opening words set the tone.²⁸ Furnishing this farrago of jokes with such an elaborate build-up is itself a joke (a form of bathos); but is even the build-up as serious as it seems at first sight, or is it not perhaps itself tongue-in-cheek? The obvious possibility that Dicaeopolis’ mock-seriousness is in reality part of a joke against Cleon does not seem to have been considered as carefully as it deserves. We do not know much about Cleon’s prosecution of the poet. Since it was heard before the Council (379) it was probably an *eisangelia*;²⁹ but the procedure adopted is of less significance than the outcome: the prosecution *failed* (381-2). By alluding to the affair here, therefore, Aristophanes is rubbing his antagonist’s nose in the ineffectualness of his attack.³⁰ The jibe would have been even more pointed if Aristophanes <18> could count on the audience’s agreeing that the attack was an inappropriate reaction to a comedy, and I shall argue in due course that the audience would indeed have inclined to that view. It is also worth asking why Aristophanes nowhere else thinks it necessary to construct even remotely similar defences. The obvious answer is that such a defence was topical only here, in the first play he produced after the clash with Cleon; but topicality is more usually seen as a virtue of jokes than of defences seriously intended. I am inclined to believe, therefore,

²⁷ de Ste Croix wickedly remarks that Dicaeopolis’ argument ‘nicely represents the consensus of modern scholarly opinion on the outbreak of the war’ (1972, 366); but in saying this he abstracts from the awkward detail of Dicaeopolis’ case: most modern scholars would have doubts about the prostitutes, for example (most but, astonishingly, not all; MacDowell is quite willing to accept them, though even he concedes that ‘Aspasia’s loss of her two girls may not have been the only reason why Perikles proposed the Megarian decree’: see (1983), 151-5). For a less tongue-in-cheek evaluation of the speech see de Ste Croix’s comment on p.242: ‘what we are being given is a whole series of comic exaggerations, with scarcely an atom of truth in them.’ On the deceptiveness of Dicaeopolis (and many other Aristophanic characters) see Heath (1990a).

²⁸ Rightly emphasised by Forrest (1963), 8-9 (contrast MacDowell 1983, 149-51); but Herodotus is not parodied: Fornara (1971). I have discussed *Telephus* in Heath (1987b).

²⁹ See Rhodes (1972), 162-71.

³⁰ I am reminded of the way in which Aristophanes thumbs his nose at Cleon in *Wasps* 1284-91, where I agree with MacDowell and Sommerstein (*ad loc.*) that 1291 cannot refer to *Knights*: that would be stale; rather the poet is gloating over the trick he has played on Cleon *in this play*. (In 62-3 Aristophanes claims that he is going to leave Cleon alone; but that is a bluff, as the audience will realise as soon as they hear the old man’s name at 133-4; the trial scene will not disappoint them. On 133-4, MacDowell is right to note the pause for laughter at this point, but misses the point of the joke: ‘men are not usually named after the politicians they support’; rather, men are not named ‘pro-Cleon’ in, of all people, Aristophanes without some good jokes being in prospect.)

that Aristophanes' defensive posturing in *Acharnians* is to be understood as a joke at Cleon's expense; that is at any rate a possible reading, and the case for taking Dicaeopolis' speech seriously is therefore deprived of its most substantial support.

It is, of course, again a possibility that a serious point is being conveyed by means of a comic vehicle; but, as always, we must ask what positive reason there is for supposing that to be so in the given case. We have found no reason to make that supposition here (or none that stands up to scrutiny); and the analogy of *Lysistrata* would encourage us to assume that this is because the supposition is in point of fact false.

6. The poet as adviser

In our discussion of *Acharnians* we have not yet considered its parabasis. This might seem a tendentious omission, since Aristophanes lays claim in it to the role of political adviser—a claim which, if taken seriously, would give us some reason for expecting to find serious intent in Aristophanic comedy, and therefore for regarding more sympathetically individual alleged instances.³¹ But Aristophanes does not encourage us to take the claim seriously. His attempt to show that he has benefited the Athenians is in part, at least, a piece of amiable banter with the audience; to say 'I have stopped you being *χαυνοπολίται*' is to say, 'in your natural state, citizens of a slack-jawed city is precisely what you are' (as we shall see, this kind of light-hearted abuse of the audience is a <19> common technique in Aristophanes). It then develops into an amusing fantasy: 'look,' he says, 'the allies are flocking to pay their tribute now, and all because they want to see the Man Who Dared To Tell The Truth In Athens; even the king of Persia has heard of that astonishing feat of daring, and *he* says that I'm a military asset at least as important as the navy; that's why Sparta wants Aegina back—it's not the island they're worried about: they want to get hold of *me*' (643-54). At this point Aristophanes does give one piece of direct advice: do not surrender Aegina to the Spartans (655). Since the autonomy of Aegina was one of Sparta's main demands, this is equivalent to advising Athens not to accept Spartan terms. That is part of an elaborate joke, of course, but it is surely not the kind of joke that Aristophanes would have made at this point had he really intended the play to promote a peace-making policy;³² and it is in any case significant that Aristophanes absorbs the role of adviser so promptly into the realm of the purely comic.

This disarming of the adviser's role is characteristic of Aristophanes' parabases, in which typically he does not offer seriously meant advice to the audience, but plumes himself on his own unique excellence as a comic dramatist (sometimes, as in *Clouds* 537-44, telling bare-faced lies in the process) and invites his Chorus to make bizarre suggestions appropriate to its own fictive persona: the elderly Chorus of *Acharnians*, for example, suggests that old men should be allowed a segregated legal system (713-8); the militant jurors of *Wasps* argue that

³¹ de Ste Croix does not lay any stress on the parabasis (wisely, I think); contrast MacDowell (1983), 155-6.

³² As Forrest observes (1963), 4. (His use of the term 'pacifist' here was injudicious, as de Ste Croix insists; but that is a point of little consequence.)

jury-pay should be reserved for those who have been on active service (1117-21); the Chorus of *Birds* urges upon us the advantages of worshipping the birds instead of the gods (723-6), invites the audience to throw over all civilised restraints and live like the birds (752-68), and points out how useful we would find it if we could grow wings (785-800).³³

There is one exception to this general tendency. Aristophanes begins the parabasis of *Frogs* by reasserting the role of adviser (686-7); this is his most direct claim to the role, and he goes on to urge an amnesty for those disfranchised for their part in the oligarchic coup of 411 (688-705). This was a practicable policy in 405; an amnesty was <20> in fact granted later in the same year.³⁴ Moreover, the passage does seem, by the criterion of jokelessness, to be a good candidate for the ascription of serious intent. (The antepirrhema, 718-37, does not meet that criterion so well, consisting as it does of a wittily extended metaphorical development of what was, as we shall see, a stock joke in contemporary comedy.) The passage is certainly striking; but it is striking not least for being unique in extant Aristophanes, and it would therefore be an unreliable basis for generalisation about the adviser's role in his work. Furthermore, it does not seem possible to pursue its apparent seriousness beyond the context of the parabasis, where it is explicitly marked; that is, the action of *Frogs* as a whole does not seem to have been designed to convey a comparably serious point. It is true that, when all other tests have proved inconclusive (1411-3),³⁵ Dionysus tries to break the deadlock by asking the two tragedians to submit samples of the advice they would give to the city (1418-21): what should be done about Alcibiades? How can the city be saved? But it is Euripides whose advice echoes that of the parabasis (1446-50, cf. 718-37); Aeschylus' advice (1463-5) is a blatant anachronism, wholly irrelevant to the actual situation of Athens in 405. If Aeschylus is adjudged the winner, this is not because Aristophanes has made him the better political adviser;³⁶ it is because he belongs to the 'good old <21> days', which are bound

³³ For an analysis of the contents of the parabasis (with some rather over-confident references to fragments) see Sifakis (1971), 37-44.

³⁴ This measure, proposed by Patrocleides, was adopted in the face of the terminal crisis which followed the defeat at Aegospotami (Andocides 1.73-80). Since the Athenians were not willing to implement the policy which Aristophanes commends before then, we might tentatively infer (a) that in commending it Aristophanes was going against the trend of Athenian opinion, and (b) that, if Dicaearchus was right in thinking (i) that *Frogs* was voted a second performance and (ii) that this was because of its parabasis (neither point can be regarded as certain) then this was probably not until the democratic restoration of 403. This is argued by Allen (1930/3); but his arguments are not uniformly strong.

³⁵ One of the tests is that of didactic effect. Both poets accept that the poet has an educative function (1009-10, 1030-6, 1054-6); Euripides claims to have made the Athenians more alert and intellectually sharper (910, 954-79), while Aeschylus replies that in so doing his rival has undermined the moral and martial excellences that his own plays had instilled (1010-88). This traditional view of the poet's function (Heath 1987a, 38-44) is obviously related to the pose of adviser which Aristophanes sometimes adopts; but that does not tell us whether he takes (or wants his audience to take) the pose seriously on any given occasion (and the function is treated in a burlesque spirit in this scene).

³⁶ Sommerstein denies that Aeschylus' advice is anachronistic (1974, 24-7); I am unpersuaded. But even if his point is allowed, Aeschylus' advice is banal (with the Spartan army in occupation of Decelea and a Spartan fleet operating in the Aegean, Athens could hardly follow any other strategy

to win out in the end in comedy (for reasons to be discussed shortly), and because it leads to a splendid comic climax in which Euripides' increasingly desperate protests are countered by the citation of increasingly outrageous paradoxes from his own plays (1471, 1475, 1477-8). Thus the action of *Frogs* is a comic fantasy that Aristophanes has not tried to coordinate with the apparently serious advice of its parabasis, just as the apparently comic advice in the parabasis of *Acharnians* has not been coordinated with the peace-making fantasy of that play's action.³⁷

7. Corporate abuse

In the parabasis of *Acharnians* the poet's adviserly role is brought into close connection with his abusive function. At first he says only: 'they say that I insult the city and *dêmos*, but in fact you should be grateful for all the good I've done you' (630-3, 641); but it becomes obvious quite quickly that it is *by* insulting the *dêmos* that he has (or claims to have) done them good: 'the king of Persia says that whichever side I insult will be greatly improved thereby, and is sure to win the war' (646-51). To be an adviser (ξύμβουλος) therefore, is (in part, at least) to be abusive (εἰπεῖν κακὰ πολλά).³⁸ The theory behind this is explained in *Eccl.* 677-80: if children sing the praises of brave men and lampoon cowards at the communal meals of post-revolutionary Athens, the cowards will be ashamed to show their faces, and socially undesirable behaviour will be discouraged.³⁹ That passage refers to abuse of individuals, to which we shall return; for the present I wish to concentrate on corporate abuse of the kind mentioned in the parabasis of *Acharnians*. (In what <22> follows 'the audience' must be taken to refer to the adult male citizens present.)⁴⁰

In parabases 'blame' (μέμφεσθαι) is a recurrent word: the old men blame the city (*Ach.* 676); the poet blames the audience (*Wasps* 1016, cf. *Clouds* 518-26); the *Clouds* blame the audience, too, and also pass on a complaint from the Moon (*Clouds* 576, 607-11); the women blame the men (*Thesm.* 851). But one also finds direct abuse of the audience outside the parabasis, combined with humorous violations of 'dramatic illusion': 'look at the audience', one character will say to

than the one which Aeschylus, on this view, commends), while Euripides' advice is radical and—if the parabasis is serious—in agreement with Aristophanes' own advice to Athens; so it is hard to see how Aeschylus' advice could be thought, in extradramatic terms, superior.

³⁷ Compare, for example, the uncoordinated attitudes to father-beating in the parabasis of *Birds* (755-9) and the main action (1337-71); the opportunist use of Socrates' novel theology in *Clouds* (a joke in the early scenes and a source of 'outrage' at the end); the inconsistency between the lyric at *Knights* 1111-50 and the action of the play (cf. 1335-57; see Dover 1972, 98-9). See further the Appendix,

³⁸ See Dover (1974), 23-30.

³⁹ Ussher *ad loc.* thinks that epic recitation is in question; but I find κεί τις δειλὸς γεγένηται difficult on that view.

⁴⁰ Metics and (at the Dionysia) non-residents were present (*Ach.* 503-9), as well as minors and (perhaps) some women (see Pickard-Cambridge 1968, 263-5; Wilson 1982, 158-9 presents the case against women). But the adult citizens formed the *effective* audience: others may have been present, but they were the ones addressed. Thus in *Ach.* 507ff. 'we' are contrasted with the metic 'they', and in the parabasis 'the theatre' (τὸ θέατρον) is treated as equivalent to the Athenian *dêmos*.

another, ‘they are all perverts (*Clouds* 1096-1104), parricides and perjurers (*Frogs* 274-6), or rascals, thieves and sycophants (*Eccl.* 433-40)’; or else the audience will be addressed directly: ‘you are mad (*Peace* 55), much nastier at close quarters than you looked from the air—and you looked pretty nasty then (*Peace* 821-3); and you are exceedingly stupid (*Clouds* 1201-3).’ This is all in a light-hearted vein, of course; the poet evidently enjoys a jocular and amiably disrespectful relationship with his audience (and doubtless the audience enjoyed it as well). But it is important to realise that such jokes are continuous with the kind of indirect abuse implicit in the unflattering representation of groups with whom the audience is effectively identified. For example, since it is the adult male citizens among those present in the theatre who make up the ‘real’ audience, the audience is effectively equivalent to the *dêmos*, and so to the Assembly. Thus when the Assembly is portrayed as a flock of sheep (*Wasps* 31-6; cf. *Knights* 749-55), this amounts not to ‘they are stupid’ (as might a comparable joke about Parliament), but to ‘you are stupid’.

That is an almost parenthetical joke; but often enough an equally derogatory view of the *dêmos* is a crucial premise of the main action of a play. *Knights* is a particularly lurid example, but *Acharnians* also illustrates the point well; in the Assembly-scene we see precisely Sosias’s sheep-like gathering, herded in with the dyed rope to sit unprotesting while profiteers fleece and impostors make fools of them, and while the one man among them with any sense is suppressed and ignored. It is presumably to a similar scene that Aristophanes alludes in the parabasis when he claims that his abuse has <23> stopped the Athenians being slack-jawed *χαυνοπολῖται* and made them wise to the insidious deceits of toadying allied ambassadors (633-40). Observe that Aristophanes is here claiming credit on the grounds that his abuse has stopped the audience doing essentially the very thing that he has just abusively portrayed them as still doing; this inconsistency (another instance of parabasis and action being uncoordinated)⁴¹ should give pause to those who think that his unflattering portrait of the state of Athenian political life has a serious critical edge. In fact, we are dealing with a comic stereotype for which only the most tenuous attachment to reality can safely be assumed. After all, Aristophanes again and again devised plots which assume that Athens is in the most desperate of straits: in *Acharnians* and *Wasps* public life is so insane that sensible individuals must withdraw into a purely private world; in *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae* things are so bad that only (of all improbable things) a *coup d’état* by the women can introduce some sense; in *Knights*, *Frogs* and *Wealth* even more far-fetched devices are required to put things right. If Aristophanes really felt so desperate throughout his career, it is astonishing that he could write such funny plays. But of course he did not; he chose to portray Athens in this unflattering light because his audience, *knowing it to be untrue* (for they certainly were not in the throes of despair throughout his career), laughed when he did so. They seem to have laughed when his rivals did so, as well; Eupolis brought Solon, Miltiades, Aristides and Pericles back from the dead in the *Demes* of 412.

⁴¹ Thus I cannot accept the approach to the parabasis of *Ach.* urged by Bowie (1982); a similar attempt to integrate incidental lyrics in Moulton (1981), 18-47, strikes me as equally unsuccessful (contrast n.37 above; and see further the Appendix).

The comic opportunism apparent in the discrepancies between parabasis and action will also be in evidence if we consider Aristophanes' treatment of the position from which his abuse of the audience is launched. Given the retrospective cast of Greek culture, from Homer's depreciation of 'men such as they are now' to the fifth-century reformers and revolutionaries who adopted the 'ancestral constitution' as their slogan,⁴² to abuse the present-day world was to adopt a conservative standpoint; even the highly novel constitutional innovation envisaged in *Ecclesiazusae* is justified by reference to the conservatism of women (*Eccl.* 214-28). So *Knights* ends triumphantly with the transformation of the degenerate Demos into his old self, the 'violet-crowned' Athens of old, city of Aristides and Miltiades, of the <24> trophy at Marathon (*Knights* 1323, 1325, 1333-4); in *Lysistrata* the fantasy of peace envisages a return (scarcely possible in 411, whatever was felt in the euphoric days of 421: cf. *Peace* 1080-2) to the Cimonian dual hegemony (*Lys.* 1128-56); in *Frogs* it is Aeschylus, the poet of old Athens, who is brought back to life, just as in Eupolis' *Demes* it is the politicians of old Athens who return to put things right.

But even in Praxagora's speech in *Ecclesiazusae* the conservative standpoint is not treated with complete respect; the examples she cites of women continuing to act 'in accordance with traditional practice' (κατὰ τὸν ἀρχαῖον νόμον) are all trivial, and most play on the comic cliché that women are hopelessly addicted to drink and sex. Notoriously Aristophanes pokes fun at the old at the very same time that he uses it to satirise the new: Aeschylus is treated as iconoclastically as Euripides in *Frogs*, and the conservative 'right argument' in *Clouds* is mercilessly handled; as for the 'brave old men of Marathon', they are, as Gomme observed, 'invariably on the wrong side, or *are* the wrong side'.⁴³ Thus the exaltation of the 'good old days' is a conventional and inevitable stance for the comic poet who wishes to abuse his contemporary audience, but it does not provide Aristophanes with a stable programmatic platform; instead he uses it opportunistically, launching his shafts against the present day from it when he sees fit, but as readily turning his weapons against it if that will raise a laugh. Here too, therefore, we find reason to doubt a 'serious' thrust either in the direct abuse or in the indirectly abusive portrayal of audience and *dêmos*; here too the poet's adviserly role has been absorbed into a realm of fantasy and pure comedy.

8. Individual abuse

Aristophanes does not abuse only his audience and its equivalents *en masse*, but also singles out individual members of the community for mockery; to what end? Mockery can serve a number of different functions.⁴⁴ On one level it is a communally applied sanction; the fear of mockery, and of the consequent loss of standing in the community, discourages deviant behaviour (this is the principle underlying <25> *Eccl.* 677-80, cited §7 above; cf. *Knights* 1274-5). It is also a

⁴² See Finley (1975), 34-59.

⁴³ Gomme (1938), 94.

⁴⁴ For this, as for many other aspects of fifth-century Athenian society, du Boulay (1974) provides an illuminating model; see esp. pp.181-7.

weapon that individuals can use in the competition for superior standing in the community, and above all in political competition; this function is very evident in the Greek orators.⁴⁵ A scrupulous respect for the truth is not to be expected in such a case; Demosthenes and Aeschines did not necessarily believe the slurs they cast on each other's ancestry, private life and public integrity, or expect their audience to believe them. Rather, by distorting the known facts in an unfavourable way, or even by inventing 'facts', so long as the inventions have some recognisably apt point of attachment to the victim, a speaker can raise a laugh at his opponent's expense, inflicting on him a loss of face and so subverting the audience's capacity to give his case their serious attention (in accordance with Gorgias' precept about using laughter to negate the seriousness of one's opponents: τὴν μὲν σπουδὴν διαφθείρειν τῶν ἐναντίων γέλῳτι, *Ar. Rhet.* 3.18, 1419b4-5); and to win an exchange of insults by superior skill is to establish one level of argumentative superiority over him, and so to detract from the overall effect of the presentation of his case.

But abuse can also be transformed into entertainment, or even into a form of art; and in such a case mockery can be detached, not only from any commitment to veracity, but also from any hostile intent towards the victim (although this is not necessarily absent). As West comments on the 'marvellous rudeness' of Theognis 453-6, 'it is the perfection of its form, rather than the justice of its sentiment, that invites applause':⁴⁶

ὦνθρωπ', εἰ γνώμης ἔλαχες μέρος ὥσπερ ἀνοίης
καὶ σῶφρων οὕτως ὥσπερ ἄφρων ἐγένου,
πολλοῖσ' ἂν ζηλωτὸς ἐφαίνεο τῶνδε πολιτῶν
οὕτως ὥσπερ νῦν οὐδενὸς ἄξιος εἶ.

If you, sir, had been allotted as much judgement as you have stupidity, and if you had been as sensible as you are foolish, you would seem to many of these citizens to be as deserving of admiration as in fact you are worthless.

West plausibly suggests as a context for these lines 'that abusive banter which was exchanged in song by young men at feasts', citing *hHerm.* 55f. and other evidence for symposiastic improvisation, which (as West says) 'in such convivial circumstances is naturally liable to veer in the direction of badinage'.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See Dover (1974), 30-3. In *Knights* the exchanges between the Paphlagonian and the sausage-seller serve, with admirable economy, both to generate abuse of Cleon and to parody this aspect of political competition. On Aristophanes' parodic and ironic exploitation of contemporary political discourse see Heath (1997).

⁴⁶ West (1974), 16. (The translation is modified from Gerber 1999.)

⁴⁷ The abusive comparisons which Philocleon and Lysistratus exchange in *Wasps* 1308-13 show a certain structural similarity to the 'sounds' discussed by Labov in 'Rules for ritual insults' (1977, 297-353). Most of the company enjoy the game (ἀνεκρότησαν 1314), but it imports a vulgar tone into the proceedings, and Theophrastus maintains a disdainful *hauteur*; this irritates Philocleon, who deviates from the 'ritualised' frame to make what are, in consequence, highly offensive remarks about each of his fellow guests in turn (1316-21; cf. Xen. *Symp.* 6.8-10). In 'sounds' an insult too near to the truth loses its ritualised character and becomes insulting; conversely, for the victim to protest at or deny a 'sound' (to treat it *as* insulting) is implicitly to concede its nearness to the truth. A similar convention perhaps underlies *Wasps* 1224-30: Cleon's angry reaction is in

<26> The symposiastic context of these last instances calls to mind an anecdote concerning Socrates recorded by Plutarch. Asked whether he was not annoyed by his maltreatment in comedy, Socrates is said to have replied: ‘No, by god, not me: it’s like a big drinking-party when I’m mocked in the theatre’ (μὰ Δί’ οὐκ ἔγωγ’... ὡς γὰρ ἐν συμποσίῳ μεγάλῳ τῷ θεάτρῳ σκώπτομαι, Plut. *de lib. educ.* 10cd). Socrates is not here explaining the conventions of Old Comedy to an ‘outsider’; his remark (if authentic, which there is no reason to suppose) is worth quoting only if it is regarded as in some way an extraordinary reaction to comic abuse, if Socrates shows in it a degree of tolerance unusual in the victims of comedy. That would be comprehensible. The experience of witty badinage in a small circle of intimates is rather painless; before a mass audience, especially in a society that placed so high a value on status and honour (τιμή), mockery would potentially be much more wounding, and would be so whether or not it was inspired by any specifically hostile intent. For the victim to react, as the Socrates of Plutarch’s anecdote reacts, with amused equanimity, could be seen as an ideally appropriate reaction to such non-hostile abuse in the theatre, but one which perhaps was infrequently achieved in fifth-century Athens.

But its infrequency should not be exaggerated. We deduced from *Symposium* that Aristophanes’ circle of friends included people he had or in due course would make fun of on the stage; and it might in any case seem improbable that comic poets would indulge so freely in abuse if that would have earned them the bitter enmity of large numbers of their social peers, of the men potentially most dangerous as personal enemies. In Athens (as in most places at most times) inability to take a joke tolerantly was socially unacceptable behaviour: ‘those who do not make jokes themselves, and are offended by those who do, are thought to be boorish and austere’ (οἱ δὲ μήτ’ αὐτοὶ ἂν εἰπόντες μηδὲν γελοῖον τοῖς τε λέγουσι δυσχεραίνοντες ἄγροικοὶ καὶ σκληροὶ δοκοῦσιν εἶναι, Ar. *NE* 4.8, 1128a7-8). In *Frogs* 367-8 Aristophanes alleges that a politician⁴⁸ who had proposed a reduction <27> in the honorarium paid to comic poets was motivated by resentment, because he had been targeted in comedy (κωμωδηθείς). The allegation was doubtless a scurrilous lie; but the fact that Aristophanes could use it mockingly implies that resentment of and indirect retaliation against comic poets was seen as absurd and improper. I argued earlier that references to Cleon’s prosecution of the poet in *Acharnians* should similarly be read as mocking in tone. Certainly the comic poets seem to have thrown out with impunity claims that in everyday life would have laid them open to prosecution for slander; attempts to impose legal restraints on comedy, for which we have tantalisingly shadowy evidence,⁴⁹ were at best short-lived and ineffective. Thus the comic poets seem to have enjoyed, in practice at least, a special license to abuse. This freedom may

effect an admission that he is ‘a scoundrel and a thief’ since, if he were not, he would have been able to accept the charge as mere banter.

⁴⁸ Unnamed; Archinus and/or Agyrrhius according to a scholion *ad loc.* (= Plato *Com.* fr. 141; Sannyrrio fr. 9).

⁴⁹ In the scholia to *Ach.* 67 (which appears to be using a trustworthy source) and *Birds* 1297 (which does not); see Körte (1921), 1233-6; Halliwell (1984a), 86-7 (this article, and the same author’s 1984b, are valuable contributions to our understanding of personal abuse in Aristophanes).

have been protected by the religious context of the dramatic competition. Aristotle recommends a complete exclusion of obscene or offensive speech (αἰσχρολογία) and similar indecency from the city, but has to accept religiously sanctioned mockery (εἰ μὴ παρὰ τισι θεοῖς τοιούτοις οἷς καὶ τὸν τωθασμὸν ἀποδίδωσιν ὁ νόμος, *Pol.* 7.17, 1336b3-23, cf. *NE* 4.8, 1128a30-1; he suggests that young people should be excluded from comedy, the presence of adult males satisfying the religious obligation on behalf of women and children). It is presumably for this reason that Aristophanes, in mocking the politician of *Frogs* 367-8, specifies that he had been targeted in comedy in the ancestral rites of Dionysus (κωμωδηθεὶς ἐν ταῖς πατρίοις τελεταῖς ταῖς τοῦ Διονύσου); by emphasising the traditional and religiously sanctioned grounds of his own license to slander, Aristophanes emphasises the impropriety of the politician's (alleged) retaliation.

I would suggest, therefore (and if this is correct, it again illustrates how the poet's potentially critical role as adviser had largely been absorbed into pure comedy in the late fifth century), that the abuse of individuals in Aristophanes can best be seen as a form of entertainment, not indeed unduly concerned to avoid wounding the victim (cf. *Ar. NE* 4.8, 1228a6-7), but compatible with the absence of offense and not (in general) inspired by any specifically hostile intent, to be evaluated more for its wit and ingenuity than for veracity or even verisimilitude. This last point is not easy to illustrate, since we are so often dependent on Aristophanes (or, worse, on scholia themselves tacitly dependent on Aristophanes) for our knowledge of his victims. We shall consider his treatment of Cleon in this light shortly; for the present <28> Cleonymus and his shield may afford one, necessarily conjectural, illustration.

The artistry of abuse could scarcely be seen to better advantage than in the string of ingenious variations which Aristophanes devises on this theme:

- *Clouds* 353-4: why do the Clouds look like deer? They've seen Cleonymus the shield-dropper (ῥιψασπίς).
- *Wasps* 15-27: a bird snatches up a snake (ἄσπίς) and then turns into Cleonymus, who of course drops his shield (ἄσπίς). This initiates a series of jokes (*Wasps* 818-23), concluding with an obscene pun: how does Cleonymus resemble Lycus? He's a hero without any 'equipment' (ὄπλα).
- *Peace* 670-8: Cleonymus is a brave man, but of uncertain paternity: when he's in the army he becomes inclined to throw away his equipment (ἀποβολιμαῖος τῶν ὄπλων, punning on ὑποβολιμαῖος, a supposititious or illegitimate child).
- *Peace* 1295-1304: the child who persists in singing warlike songs turns out to be Lamachus' son; so Trygaeus sends instead for Cleonymus' son, who sings Archilochus: ἄσπιδι μὲν Σαῖων τις ἀγάλλεται... ('my shield is now some Thracian's glory...').
- *Birds* 288-90: 'what's that bird called?' 'A gobbler.' 'You mean it's Cleonymus?' 'Can't be; it hasn't thrown away its crest.'

- *Birds* 1470-81: the Cleonymus-tree—in autumn it sheds its shields.⁵⁰

But what was the truth behind all this? As early as *Knights* 1372 there seems to be something funny about Cleonymus and his shield; but that passage is curiously unspecific by comparison with later developments, and it suggests a context of evasion of service rather than of desertion in the field. Conjecture may be futile; but one should think rather of an embarrassing mishap than of a criminal act of cowardice as the origin of the joke: perhaps he was excused from some duty for which he had been called up because a fault was found in his equipment at the last moment (his shield-strap, for which *πόρπαξ* is a pompously elevated word, becoming detached, let us say). That would mean that something in essence as innocuous as Pantacles' parade-ground ineptness (*Frogs* 1036-8) lay behind the subsequent series of jokes, something which was subjected to comic distortion, and which was funny in part *because* it was a distortion of a harmless absurdity; if Cleonymus had really thrown his shield away, a crime punishable by disfranchisement (Andocides 1.74, and MacDowell *ad loc.*), it might not have been seen as a laughing matter.⁵¹

9. Rich and poor

<29> We have already commented on de Ste Croix's account of Aristophanes' attitude to the war; in this section I shall consider his remarks on Aristophanes' use of social and political terminology, on his treatment of the rich as a class, and on his leniency towards certain public figures—stimulating remarks that are, nevertheless, almost completely misleading.⁵²

De Ste Croix conveys the impression that evaluative words like *chrêstos* ('good, useful') and *ponêros* ('bad, worthless'), and above all the term *kalos kagathos* ('noble and good'), typically carry social, and indeed somewhat restrictive social, implications in Aristophanes: 'Aristophanes' *kaloi kagathoi* have an unmistakably social and political character almost every time they are mentioned.'⁵³ It is true that Aristophanes sometimes uses the words demonstrably in this sense. In other passages the context does not dictate our interpretation of the words; in these passages, although the social connotation is in principle available, it would be arbitrary to assume that it is intended, for there are also

⁵⁰ See also *Wasps* 592, *Peace* 44-6, Eupolis fr. 352, and the scholion to *Clouds* 353. (The joke in *Birds* 288-90 alludes to the other joke against Cleonymus, his gluttony; see MacDowell on *Wasps* 19 for further references.)

⁵¹ Sommerstein offers a similar conjecture about *Knights* 1372 (*ad loc.*), but does not connect it with the subsequent series of shield-jokes, which he thinks may have been derived from the retreat after Delium (on *Wasps* 19); but it is uneconomical to assume that Cleonymus' shield became funny twice, and easy to suspect that some one trivial incident has been comically inflated.

⁵² de Ste Croix (1972), 358-62, 371-6.

⁵³ de Ste Croix (1972), 374, cf. 359. Sommerstein concurs: 'In his fifth-century plays... as has been shown (in my view conclusively) by de Ste Croix, Aristophanes reveals himself as one who instinctively speaks the language and thinks the thoughts of the well-to-do' (1984, 314); since I disagree with this conclusion, I do not share the puzzlement which Sommerstein feels over the politics of Aristophanes' fourth-century plays.

passages for which this interpretation can be ruled out.⁵⁴ In *Clouds* 101, for example, Strepsiades maintains that the occupants of the ‘thinkery’ are merimnophrontists (‘subtle thinkers’) and *kaloι te kagathoi*. Obviously he does not mean that Socrates and his friends are aristocrats (not true of Socrates, and in any case irrelevant), but that they are good *qua* subtle thinkers, good of their kind; they are the best merimnophrontists that money can buy. When *khrestos* or *kalos kagathos* qualify ‘citizen’ (πολίτης), the meaning is similarly ‘good *qua* citizen’; and the criteria of excellence for a citizen in Aristophanes do not as a rule include wealth and aristocratic breeding. Dicaeopolis is a *khrestos* citizen because of his responsible behaviour as an ordinary citizen (*Ach.* 595-7; cf. *Peace* 910), just as in *Thesm.* 830-43 the *khrestos* man is the man who serves the city well (‘taxiarch or general’ 833, cf. 839 ‘brave’), while the *poneros* man is the man who discharges his <30> duty badly (who may be a rich man: ‘trierarch’ 857, cf. *Frogs* 1065-6). A case less easy to decide is *Knights* 225-8: ‘there are a thousand knights, good men (ἄνδρες ἀγαθοί) who hate Cleon, and they will help you, and the *kaloι te kagathoi* among the citizens, and anyone who is intelligent (δεξιός) among the spectators.’ Protesting against Gomme’s claim that in 227 *kalos kagathos* is used in a moral sense, de Ste Croix argues:

In fact all the people who are being referred to in lines 225-8 are by definition those who are political opponents of Cleon, and of course Aristophanes feels able to take it for granted that all *kaloι kagathoi* are anti-Cleon! The real force of the expression here is therefore social and political, and any moral implications are purely consequential upon that.⁵⁵

The real point, however, is not whether all *kaloι kagathoi* are anti-Cleon, but whether all those who are anti-Cleon are *kaloι kagathoi* in the restricted social sense. ‘Demosthenes’ is trying to encourage the sausage-seller by pointing to the *breadth* of support for him, and will hardly wish therefore to *restrict* the application of *kalos kagathos* to a small subsection of Athenian society. Rather he is saying: the Chorus will support you, and all decent ordinary people (like Dicaeopolis: *Ach.* 595-7), and the clever spectators (and who in the audience will not want to be clever?).⁵⁶ Thus *kalos kagathos* here is (in terms of de Ste Croix’s classification) a ‘Group C’ usage, in which ‘the connotation of *kalos kagathos* is... predominantly moral: uprightness of character, or the quality of being a patriotic and good citizen’.⁵⁷ In *Wealth*, *khrestos* has this moral sense almost without exception; it is associated with a whole string of positive moral terms and applied to poor men like Chremylus, while the rich are condemned as *poneroi* and endowed with all manner of vices.⁵⁸ There is only one passage in *Wealth* in which

⁵⁴ Demonstrably social: e.g. *Knights* 185-6, 735, 738-40; indeterminate: e.g. *Lys.* 1059-60; moral rather than social: e.g. *Knights* 1274-5 (shown by 1276-89, contrasting Arignotus with his *poneros* brother), *Lys.* 350-1; further references in text (note also Phrynichus fr. 62; Eupolis fr. 129).

⁵⁵ de Ste Croix (1972), 374, citing Gomme (1953), 66-7.

⁵⁶ de Ste Croix’s comment on this last line (228) is nothing short of perverse: ‘cf., for δεξιός Ps.-Xen., *Ath. Pol.* 1.6, 9’; cf., rather, *Knights* 233, and frequently in Aristophanes.

⁵⁷ de Ste Croix (1972), 375. It is not only *kalos kagathos* that acquires this wide extension: ‘well-born’ (εὐγενής) is applied in *Thesm.* 330-1 to all free Athenian women.

⁵⁸ The poor man is *khrestos* (92-3, 386, 490, 497, 502, 826-31, 899), just (δίκαιος 28, 89, 94, 97, 219, 475, 751), god-fearing (θεοσεβής 28, cf. 497), oath-abiding (εὐορκος 61), wise and well-

khrestos has a restricted social sense, and that is <31> ironical, a barbed reference to the mercenary sexual depravity (μοχθηρία) of young gentlemen (153-9).⁵⁹

It is clear from the references collected in n.58 that *Wealth* takes an unfavourable view of the rich. De Ste Croix says that the ‘unflattering references to the rich’ in this play are few, which is untrue (as we have seen), and that they are demanded by the plot, which is true but unhelpful since the same could be said of the sympathetic treatment of the rich in *Knights*, on which in the same context de Ste Croix lays considerable emphasis.⁶⁰ In fact de Ste Croix there seriously misrepresents the range of attitudes displayed towards the rich in Aristophanes’ plays. Consider first the passages that he alleges as ‘sympathetic’. *Knights* 1137-40: the rich (παχεῖς) here are the thieving politicians Demos fattens for slaughter, the last people in the world with whom Aristophanes will sympathise; *Knights* 223-4: this is simply a polar expression (‘the rich fear him and the poor are terrified of him’ = ‘everyone is afraid of him’) and evinces no special sympathy for any one class; *Knights* 264-5: this is sympathetic, but the sympathy is evoked by the victim’s helpless naiveté (ἀμνοκῶν... καὶ μὴ πονηρὸς καὶ τρέμων τὰ πράγματα: note that *ponēros* here is moral) more than by his wealth; *Eccl.* 197-8: unsympathetic, for the wealthy (πλούσιοι) and the farmers in opposing the construction of warships are subordinating national security to their private financial advantage, just as the *dēmos* as a whole prefers public pay to ship-building (*Knights* 1351-6); cf. *Eccl.* 205-8).⁶¹ This leaves very little: *Peace* 639-40, and two passages in *Wasps* (288-9, 626-7) which will bear closer scrutiny.

First it should be stressed that the theme of rich and poor is not particularly prominent in the ‘juridical’ portion of this play (see 241, 287, 464, 575, 627). It is true that the pleasure Philocleon takes in convicting or humiliating any defendant is enhanced when the defendant is wealthy (575, 626-7); but equally he enjoys exercising power over the physically imposing (553) and the politically influential (592-3, 596-600)—in short, it is the deference of anyone to whom he might normally have to defer that he relishes. Further, are the <32> references to rich victims really sympathetic? Two factors qualify or cancel any such sympathy. First, although the audience knows abstractly that Philocleon is in the wrong and wants Bdelycleon to win the argument, they are likely to find him a sympathetic

behaved (σοφός, κόσμιος 89), intelligent and sensible (δεξιός, σῶφρων 387), good (ἀγαθός 495). The rich are *ponēroi* (31, 96, 491, 496, 502, 781, 862, 869, 939, 957), unjust (ἄδικοι 37, cf. 755), godless (ἄθεοι 491, 496), depraved (μοχθηροί 109), unscrupulous (πανοῦργοι 37), temple-robbers (ἱερόσυλοι), politicians and malicious informers (ρήτορες, συκοφάνται 30-1, cf. 850ff.), and burglars (τοιχωρῶχοι 869, 909, 939). The sycophant claims to be loyal to the city (φιλόπολις) and *khrestos* (900, a significant combination), but his claim is naturally rejected on the grounds that he does nothing useful (901, 909-10; cf. 939 ‘a *ponēros* man and a burglar’).

⁵⁹ de Ste Croix (1972), 375 claims that *kalos kagathos* is never used by Aristophanes in a hostile context, marked by sarcasm or irony; this may be true of *kalos kagathos*, but it is not true of *khrestos* (we shall see further instances below), nor of the cognate abstract noun *kalokagathia* (fr. 205.8)—which may prompt doubts about the adjective in, e.g., *Wasps* 1256.

⁶⁰ de Ste Croix (1972), 360-1.

⁶¹ Note that receiving pay for public service (*misthophoria*) is not a passion only of the lower classes: *Ach.* 65-7, 595-619, etc.

and engaging character,⁶² thus the audience is invited into a kind of complicity with him and *enjoys* his triumph over the rich, the strong and the powerful. Secondly, it is a standing assumption in Aristophanes that politicians are on the make; hence it can safely be taken for granted that the rich victims of Philocleon and his colleagues are guilty. This point is vividly illustrated by the case of Laches, the first rich victim mentioned in the play (240-1), who is subsequently metamorphosed into Labes, the defendant dog in the household trial. De Ste Croix believes that ‘Labes-Laches is sympathetically treated by Aristophanes (see esp. *Wasps* 952-72) and acquitted (994)’.⁶³ In fact he is sympathetically treated by *Bdelycleon*—not surprisingly, since Bdelycleon is counsel for the defence—and is acquitted only because Bdelycleon is determined to break Philocleon’s obsession by trickery; that Philocleon for his part would have convicted the defendant solely out of prejudice and professional pride is true, but does not alter the fact that the dog is patently guilty (not even Bdelycleon denies that, and if you doubt it just look at his name; cf. 836-8). Laches is turned into a dog, mocked and condescended to, written off as beyond dispute guilty of malfeasance: ‘sympathetically treated’!

We have already seen how the assumption that the rich are invariably corrupt underlies the plot of *Wealth*; in that same play one finds also an expression of the ideology of the poor. It must be emphasised here that πένης means ‘poor’, not in the sense ‘very poor’ or ‘destitute’, but as ‘not rich’; Poverty (πενία) is sharply distinguished from her ‘sister’ Penury (πτωχεία). The poor man, in this sense, has no significant surplus, but nor does he go short (548-54); his existence, frugal and hard-working (551), is the mother both of invention, of all crafts and skills (527-34), and of the moral virtues: wealth debauches and degrades (558-61, 563-4). So it is that politicians do right by the city and *dêmos* when they are poor, but once they have enriched themselves at public expense they lose their integrity and turn against the *dêmos* (567-70).⁶⁴ It is true that Poverty, who makes these claims, is <33> driven off the stage ignominiously; but Chremylus does not try to *refute* her arguments, or even listen to them seriously (as she complains in 557).⁶⁵ The rebuff of Poverty means only that, as so often in Aristophanes, mere facts have not been allowed to interfere with wishful fantasy; facts they nevertheless are, as Chremylus himself and his fellows, just, pious and decent (n.58), thrifty without stinginess (245-9), and hard workers to a man (223-4, 254), will suffice to prove. Poverty’s doctrine is more in keeping with the premises of the plot than is its scornful rejection by Chremylus.

Chremylus and his fellows are of the middle rank of society, neither rich nor destitute. *Wealth* therefore provides the analogy to Euripides’ exaltation of ‘those

⁶² Cf. Dover (1972), 125-7.

⁶³ de Ste Croix (1972), 367.

⁶⁴ The approval of poor politicians in this passage sits uncomfortably with the view that Aristophanes takes a consistently hostile attitude to the political influence of the ‘lower orders’.

⁶⁵ Note the opposition of mockery and comedy (σκώπτειν καὶ κωμῳδεῖν) to seriousness (σπουδάξειν). Chremylus’ essentially frivolous attitude is shown in 555-6, 561, 565, where he continues simply to ignore the distinction between poverty and penury, the vices of 565 properly attaching to the latter (as well as to wealth: n.58 above).

in the middle' (οἱ ἐν μέσῳ, E. *Su.* 238-45) which de Ste Croix misses in Aristophanes.⁶⁶ It should not surprise us to find the ideology of this class expressed in comedy. As has often been pointed out, Aristophanes' heroes are typically men of precisely that rank. Dicaeopolis, Strepsiades (before his son ran up huge debts, and with admitted qualifications on the moral side) and Trygaeus are, like Chremylus, farmers working their own land, neither destitute nor positively wealthy; they are *khrestoi* citizens. The very rich in fact appear rather rarely in the plays, and Strepsiades' autobiographical reflections indicate the gulf which separates him from the very wealthy strata of society in which his wife originated. In consequence the rich are often mentioned in comedy in terms suggesting a 'they' whose mannerisms are regarded with a certain disapproval. This is true of Strepsiades' wife, the niece of Megacles son of Megacles, 'snobbish, spoilt and thoroughly Coesyrised' (σεμνήν, τρυφῶσαν, ἐγκεκοισυρωμένην, *Clouds* 48; cf. 51-5, 61, 67-70); Coesyra (Megacles' mother), who for Strepsiades epitomises aristocratic luxuriousness (*Clouds* 48, 800), appears also in *Ach.* 614, significantly in a context in which Dicaeopolis is trying to excite resentment against the elite who draw public pay for easy jobs while the ordinary folk of the Chorus endure hardship (*Ach.* 599-619). Elsewhere, when young men are satirised for their fashionable vices and affectations it is of course rich young men who are in mind.⁶⁷

<34> The ultimate fall-back of the comic dramatist wishing to satirise rich aristocrats is the cliché neatly summed up in *Frogs* 739-40: 'of course my master is a gentleman (γεννάδας),' says Xanthias, 'he hasn't a clue about anything but boozing and bonking' (ὅστις γε πίνειν οἶδε καὶ βινεῖν μόνον).⁶⁸ One fragment of Eupolis (fr. 221) fits Cimon into this cliché, and gives it a neat twist: 'he wasn't a *bad* man, but over-fond of the drink, and rather neglectful; sometimes he used to sleep in Sparta, leaving Elpinice here all alone'; this is a barbed reference to Cimon's alleged incest with his sister.⁶⁹ A person unnamed is satirised for extravagance in both fields and for inventiveness in the former in Eupolis fr. 385; the passage is obscure, but Meineke's conjecture that Alcibiades is meant may well be right.⁷⁰ Alcibiades appears surprisingly infrequently in Aristophanes and the fragments of other dramatists. De Ste Croix believes that this may be politically significant;⁷¹ it may be (though we have so far found little trace of

⁶⁶ de Ste Croix (1972), 340.

⁶⁷ *Ach.* 676-718 (n.b. 716); *Knights* 1373-81; *Wasps* 686-90; cf. the agon of *Clouds*.

⁶⁸ 'Boozing and bonking' for the aristocrat's interest in drink (*pinein*) and sex (*binein*) is borrowed from Sommerstein's translation (1996); David Barrett felicitously renders the assonance as 'soaking and poking' (1964, 84). For 'soaking' see also *Wasps* 79-80 (MacDowell's note *ad loc.* is misconceived: that the terms can be applied to slaves does not mean that they can have no social connotation here, and the joke is enfeebled if they do not; for the ironical use of *khrestos* see also *Wealth* 155-6, cited above).

⁶⁹ This should deter us from reading Eupolis' political views out of fr. 117, 205, with their praise of the 'godlike' leaders of old; Aristophanes was evidently not the only comic poet to use the 'good old days' motif opportunistically.

⁷⁰ He cites Pliny *NH* 14.143-5 for 385.3; and the identification gives point to the (admittedly lacunose) first couplet. (Meineke's conjecture is to be found in the *Supplementa addendorum*, vol. 5 p.lxxxvi.)

⁷¹ de Ste Croix (1972), 361-2.

political *Tendenz* in Aristophanes' choice of comic target), but equally it may be due to the loss of relevant evidence. We know, for example, from testimonia that Alcibiades was the butt of Eupolis' *Baptae*, but one would not have guessed it from the surviving fragments of the play. The guess that Aristophanes' *Triphales* gave Alcibiades the title role is not supported by any real evidence;⁷² but it has its attractions (Alcibiades' reputation would make him uniquely suited to the part), and the impossibility of knowing anything certain about this play, as about so many others, should remind us of the need for caution in interpreting apparent silences.⁷³

<35> It might be objected that these satirical thrusts at the rich and at individual rich victims are not directed against the rich 'as such'.⁷⁴ It is true that Aristophanes does not laugh at people simply because they have money; he laughs at them because they have money and vices, or money and affectations. Since the affectations are restricted to the rich, and the vices are sometimes alleged to be universal among the rich, this might be thought a distinction without a great deal of difference. Nevertheless it should be stressed that we should not expect Aristophanes to satirise the rich *as such*, any more than he does the handsome, the brave or the talented *as such*. In Aristophanes above all, the laughable is what is odd, grotesque or deformed.⁷⁵ There is nothing odd, grotesque or deformed, and therefore nothing laughable, about having wealth and so forth *as such*: they are qualities one admires and envies in those who possess them. Hence the inevitable recourse in satirising such people (and one will want to satirise them, since one

⁷² Only fr. 554 Kock connects the play with Alcibiades, and that is reassigned to *Banqueters* by Kassel-Austin (fr. 244).

⁷³ References to Alcibiades (apart from *Frogs* 1422-34) are to his affectations (*Ach.* 716, *Wasps* 44-6, fr. 201, cf. Archippus fr. 48), and to his homo- and heterosexual excesses: fr. 244 (see previous note; it is relevant, whatever its source), fr. 907; Pherecrates fr. 164 (cf. D.L. 4.49); Eupolis fr. 171; fr. adesp. 123. (One should not forget in this connection that Alcibiades' private life was a public and political issue: Thuc. 6.15.3-4, 28.2; Plut. *Alc.* 16.) De Ste Croix also claims (p.362) that the comic poets' gentle treatment of Nicias is politically significant; the same cautions are necessary, and note also that he understates the satirical thrust of the references: in them Nicias appears as timid (Phrynichus fr. 62, contrasting him with a *khrêstos* citizen) and dilatory (*Birds* 640), while Aristophanes fr. 102 is fairly clearly a jibe at his ceding the Pylos command to Cleon (in spite of de Ste Croix's enigmatic doubts); these were politically damaging charges outside the theatre: Thuc. 6.18.6-7 (cf. Gomme 1951, 79), Plut. *Nic.* 8. Telecleides fr. 44 implies that Nicias has some (unspecified) guilty secret; in Eupolis fr. 193 he is described by Plutarch as a target of comedy (κωμωδοῦμενος): de Ste Croix says that the fragment is 'warmly appreciative', but without access to the context we are in no position to reject Plutarch's assessment. (Nicias' appearance in Eupolis' *Demes*, fr. 105, is due to an implausible conjecture in the text of Galen, and should be discounted; see Plepelits 1970, 28.)

⁷⁴ Cf. de Ste Croix (1972), 360: 'Aristophanes scarcely says a disrespectful word about the rich as such... the rich are never once attacked as such'; Sommerstein, in his commentary on *Ach.*, adds that 'the poor quite often are satirised as such' (p.25 n.28). Dover (1974), 45 n.24 is rightly sceptical of the significance of this.

⁷⁵ One should not underestimate the element of malicious pleasure (ἐπιχαίρεκακία) in Aristophanes: the Megarian in *Ach.* is a good instance (MacDowell 1983, 156-8 finds sympathy here, but I am unable to detect it); see also fr. 71 ('a joke in rather bad taste, at the expense of... the Samians', Forrest 1963, 19-20) and *Birds* 186 ('Melian hunger'); at *Peace* 478-80, despite the eirenic context, Aristophanes cannot resist a jibe at the Spartan prisoners from Pylos (nor against the Megarians: 481-3, 500-2).

admires *and envies*) is to point to or invent concomitant attributes and attack these; this is what Aristophanes does.

We found in *Wealth* that the poor disapproved of the rich, and that they wanted to become rich themselves. There is no real contradiction here; everyone is inclined to believe that he or she would behave <36> much better if enriched than those who are now rich do (this is precisely what Chremylus claims of himself in 245-8, doubtless with better reason than most of us). But we have now added admiration to the mix of attitudes, and this does give rise to a certain inconsistency; for one may desire wealth *per se*, but to *admire* wealth implies that one believes it to consort with other and admirable traits. I do not think, however, that this inconsistency reflects a flaw in the analysis; rather, the ambivalent attitude to the rich is one which may plausibly be attributed to Athenian poor (πένητες), in whose culture wealth and aristocratic breeding retained (and would continue to retain) significant prestige and influence, although ultimate political power had long been vested with the *dêmos*. Hence when Aristophanes incorporates an admiring attitude towards the wealthy and well-born into his mockery of contemporary politics this is not to be understood as the expression of a distinctively upper-class and ‘paternalist’ bias;⁷⁶ rather he is for satirical purposes pushing to its extreme one of the tendencies in the complex social attitude of the Athenian *dêmos*, just as he elsewhere pushes the opposite tendency to its extreme, again for satirical purposes.

We may use as an illustrative case Aristophanes’ treatment of Cleon. We can confidently assert that Cleon was a very wealthy man: leisure, and therefore wealth, were preconditions of political activity at the highest levels; there is evidence that Cleon’s father performed an expensive liturgy in 460/59; and one may recall that Aristophanes could envisage Cleon and his circle at a high-class dinner party (*Wasps* 1220-1).⁷⁷ The ‘handle’ of the joke against Cleon is that he did not belong to one of the established leading families, and that his wealth (though inherited) was ultimately derived from industrial slave-owning rather than the traditionally respectable landed sources. By a familiar process of comic distortion these, perhaps distant, disreputable connections are wildly exaggerated and projected onto Cleon’s person; the result is the vulgar tanner familiar from *Knights* and elsewhere. Two points must be made. First we must qualify an observation made in §8. We remarked there that abuse of individuals <37> was not committed to veracity in oratory or in comedy; but whereas the orator may be indifferent to falsehood so long as he can make his opponent lose face, the comedian is likely to have a positive interest in falsehood, since a perceived discrepancy between caricature and reality is a rich source of amusement. Aristophanes’ portrayal of Cleon is funny partly because it is, and is meant to be

⁷⁶ de Ste Croix (1972), 357-62, 374-6; contrast Dover (1974), 34-45, with whose cautiously expressed conclusion I agree. (Relevant passages are *Knights* 128-45, 177-94, 738-40, *Frogs* 718-37; cf. also Eupolis fr. 219, 384, with n.68 above.)

⁷⁷ See MacDowell *ad loc.*; for the first two points see de Ste Croix (1972), 235 n.7, and Davies (1981).

recognised as, fantasy.⁷⁸ Thus most of Aristophanes' audience would not outside the theatre have granted the antecedent of the inference, crucial to Aristophanes' joke against Cleon, 'Cleon is a vulgar tanner, therefore he is unfit to exercise political leadership'; but (and this is the second point) having granted the antecedent in the fantasising context of a comedy they would probably not have resisted or resented the inference to the consequent. The reaction of Aristophanes' sausage-seller may be cited here. Although he enters into the fray enthusiastically once he has been convinced that his social disadvantages ideally qualify him for a political career, his initial reaction is one of incredulity (*Knights* 178-9): he is only a sausage-seller, low-born and uneducated; how can he become a *man* (ἀνὴρ), an important and influential person?⁷⁹ We must allow for humour in this passage, but the humour comes from the counter-argument that these qualities are in fact essential to the politically ambitious, and the sausage-seller's initially sceptical reaction is (allowing that the situation as a whole is grotesquely unlikely) verisimilar. We must distinguish between the exercise of political leadership and the right of access to political debate and participation in political decision-making. The latter right was jealously guarded by the ordinary Athenian, and it is in this sense that ultimate political control was vested with the *dêmos*; as a matter of practical necessity political leadership remained with the wealthier classes, and this practical necessity was reinforced by, and in turn reinforced, the prestige of wealth and (to a lesser extent) of aristocratic descent.

<38> If we accept this line of argument it will enable us to avoid a paradoxical consequence of de Ste Croix's reading of Aristophanes. The paradox is particularly evident in a passage such as this:

It would only be among the snobs like Aristophanes that one would then 'lose face' because one's fortune (or, more likely, that of one's father or grandfather...) originally came from industry or trade. Not a few of those among Aristophanes' audience who laughed at his nasty little jokes about the 'demagogues' he so detested must have been tradesmen of one sort or another and are not likely to have felt demeaned by their calling.⁸⁰

But if the 'tradesmen' among Aristophanes' audience found his 'nasty little jokes' funny, as de Ste Croix admits that they did ('who *laughed* at his... jokes'), then the social outlook which those jokes presuppose is one which they shared with him; if so, then we cannot infer from the jokes that their author was a 'snob', or indeed that he 'detested' the demagogues (any more than did his audience, who laughed

⁷⁸ A curious illustration of the failure to grasp the fantasising nature of Aristophanes' comedy can be found in MacDowell (1983), 147, on the ambassadors in *Ach*. He recognises two questions: (a) would Aristophanes have approved of ambassadors acting in the way these ambassadors act, and (b) did Athenian ambassadors 'as a matter of historical fact' act in this way? But one must also ask (c) did Aristophanes think, or expect his audience to think, that Athenian ambassadors acted in this way in reality? If the answer to (c) is negative (as seems plausible), then one cannot without further argument infer from a positive answer to (a) to an intent to excite disapproval of the real ambassadors.

⁷⁹ The implication, perhaps unintended, in Dover (1974), 44 that the sausage-seller 'proclaims' his poor birth 'with pride' is incorrect; it is his instructor who values poor birth, while the sausage-seller still sees it as a reason for shame and as a disqualification from politics.

⁸⁰ de Ste Croix (1981), 125.

at the jokes and voted for their victims). De Ste Croix observes elsewhere that the orators' use of social terminology 'might... be dictated by considerations of prudence', since 'an orator's audience in the Assembly or the courts would naturally contain a good number of poor men';⁸¹ but precisely the same is true of the comic dramatist's audience,⁸² and one would not have expected a comic dramatist to have achieved before such an audience the acclaim that Aristophanes achieved if he were articulating views distinctive of a very restricted section of Athenian society, as de Ste Croix's analysis would imply. That difficult conclusion is, I have argued, unnecessary.

10. The power of the *dêmos*

The paradox we have detected in de Ste Croix's treatment of Aristophanic attitudes to class and social structure arises elsewhere in his analysis. Commenting on Aristophanes' caricature of the Athenian <39> courts, and in particular on his frequent and disrespectful references to jury-pay, de Ste Croix remarks that this was 'in itself not in the least funny, except of course to a member of the upper classes, who disapproved of it to the extent of thinking it a fit subject for satire'; again: 'very little of this is at all funny, except to someone who sees the whole system as a form of popular tyranny, and is out to discredit by ridicule.'⁸³ But de Ste Croix himself lays it down as an axiom that the comedian 'must always be *funny*';⁸⁴ and this must mean funny to his audience. Either Aristophanes violated this axiom (but why, then, did he persist when he found that his jokes were being received in stony silence?); or else (and his success as a comic poet points to this alternative) his audience did find these jokes funny. But then the joke was more widely available than de Ste Croix allows, and we can no longer use it as evidence for Aristophanes' distinctively upper-class outlook. The conclusion that satire of the jury system was widely popular in Athens is not an easy one to resist, since we have no independent evidence of who did or did not find it funny; de Ste Croix's view is speculative, and is very unconvincing, resting as it seems to do on the premise that one can only see as 'a fit subject for satire' that of which one disapproves.

Residual doubts may be laid to rest if we now remark de Ste Croix's misrepresentation of Aristophanes' satire on the courts. We are told that the poet 'clearly resented the power the *dêmos* was beginning to exercise, more particularly in the law courts, as a result of dicastic pay', and that his caricature of the courts is 'a very clever attack upon the system which enabled many humble men, gulled (as Aristophanes would have us believe) by "the demagogues", to sit

⁸¹ de Ste Croix (1972), 376; but Dover (1974), 30-7 remarks on the *similarities* between social attitudes in oratory and comedy.

⁸² On the comic audience see §3 above. It should be emphasised again that 'poor' means 'not rich', and that a graph showing the distribution of wealth in classical Athens would be steeply inclined at its upper end: see Davies (1981), 34-7.

⁸³ de Ste Croix (1972), 362; cf. 357: 'his frequent sneers at [dicastic pay] betray the irritation felt by the upper-class Athenian at this innovation of the radical democracy.'

⁸⁴ de Ste Croix (1972), 357 (original emphasis).

in judgement on their betters'.⁸⁵ But is it the political power exercised by humble men at the expense of the upper classes that affronts Bdelycleon? He complains that they have *no* power, that the power of which his father boasts is an 'unwashed arse' (*Wasps* 604). It is the power exercised by politicians at the expense of humble men that infuriates him. He does indeed think that the masses are being gulled by their political leaders, who keep them content on a pittance while pocketing for themselves nine-tenths of the city's revenue *and* huge allied bribes (664-79, 682-95). But the thing that he finds objectionable in this is that the <40> money wasted on self-seeking politicians could be used to keep decent, ordinary people in the lap of luxury (698-712); and this he thinks the right of the Athenian *dêmos*, earned by its military exertions—by land, be it noted, *and by sea* (684-5, 711); there is no social restrictiveness here.⁸⁶ Similarly in the parabasis the Chorus argue for restricted eligibility for dicastic pay; but the restriction they urge is to those who have seen active service by land or sea (1102-21, cf. 1075-1101).⁸⁷

In *Wasps* and elsewhere (in the satire on profiteers in *Acharnians*, for example, or on Cleon in *Knights*, especially 801-9, 1207-28), Aristophanes' line is not upper-class at all, but popular; it is the interests of the *dêmos* and of the ordinary man that he wants to see served.⁸⁸ Since the passages cited are, of course, jocular (no Athenian citizen could really have believed that the city's revenue might be devoted wholly to providing subsidised bird's milk for every citizen), this conclusion is consistent with the supposition of a devious strategy on Aristophanes' part. On that view he would be using populist comedy rather cynically to discredit the system to anti-populist ends, toadying to and deceiving the *dêmos* like the politicians of his fantasy. But there is nothing at all to suggest that this supposition would be correct. That is not to say that we can simply identify the political and social assumptions of the plays with Aristophanes' extra-theatrical political convictions. If my analysis is correct, the plays are so nicely attuned to the prejudices and expectations of the majority of Aristophanes' audience that one would hesitate to affirm of anything in them that it was put there in order to express Aristophanes' own <41> political views; on this point, agnosticism is in order. But for the purposes of the plays Aristophanes' 'views', the postures he adopts, are as I have described them. Poverty, tutelary deity of the

⁸⁵ de Ste Croix (1972), 362 n.9.

⁸⁶ Thus while we may agree with de Ste Croix that Aristophanes thought that 'the tribute should be used in the interests of "nicer" people' (1972, 368, quoting Forrest 1963, 1 n.3), we must add that for Aristophanes the 'nicer' people are those who have served the people well—citizens who are *khrêstos* in the sense of *Ach.* 595: those who have been good men with regard to the city (ἄνδρες ἀγαθοὶ περὶ τὴν πόλιν, *Ach.* 697)—and the people than whom they are 'nicer' are politicians.

⁸⁷ In *Knights* 565-8 the same polar expression shows that the Chorus is praising the forebears of *all* Athenians; in 576ff. they offer their own contribution to the public good, contrasting themselves with the self-seeking generals of 573-6.

⁸⁸ A final example of this kind of misrepresentation in de Ste Croix: 'of course Aristophanes is particularly hostile to those who brought prosecutions ("sycophants")... It was naturally the propertied class, to which Aristophanes himself belonged and with which he sympathised, which had most to fear from "sycophants"' (1972, 362-3 n.10). The latter sentence may or may not be true 'as a matter of historical fact'; but a quick census of those victimised by and objecting to sycophants in the passages which de Ste Croix there cites will show that it is not from the point of view of the propertied class that Aristophanes presents the matter.

ordinary man, will provide a summary (and on this point, at least, Chremylus concurs: *Wealth* 567-71): the men to be praised (the citizens who are *khrêstos*) are those who, even if they are poor, speak and act in the interests of the *dêmos* and the city; the villains are those who, enriching themselves at public expense, turn against the masses and make war upon the *dêmos*.

11. Conclusion

Let us now sum up briefly the conclusions that have been reached. In our discussion of *Clouds* (§2) we found external evidence suggesting that apparently bitter satirical abuse in comedy was compatible with the absence of hostile intent on the part of the poet; external evidence, in particular the case of *Knights* (§3), indicated that the audience's enjoyment of comic abuse was similarly compatible with a favourable attitude to the victim outside the theatre. The political and military context of *Lysistrata* (§4) deterred us from seeing peace as it appears in that play as a seriously intended programme in real politics; consequently the devices which render Lysistrata's speech in favour of peace comic could be accepted as a substitute for, rather than as a vehicle of, serious intent. An analogous view was taken of the comic devices surrounding Dicaeopolis' speech in favour of peace in *Acharnians* (§5), once arguments purporting to establish serious intent had been answered. The apparent inconsistency of this with Aristophanes' claims to the role of adviser disappeared when it was realised that this claim is itself usually treated light-heartedly in comedy (§6); similarly the abuse of the audience (§7) and of individuals (§8) proved to have been disarmed by incorporation into a purely comic and fantastic realm. We then found (§9) that the application of terms such as *khrêstos* and *kalos kagathos* in Aristophanes was primarily moral and patriotic; wealth was not a criterion (on the contrary, the wealthy were sometimes seen in a decidedly hostile light), except where the prestige of wealth was being exploited to satirise contemporary politics. The range of social attitudes displayed in the plays was shown to be characteristic of the modestly prosperous strata of society from which many of Aristophanes' heroes and probably the majority of his audience were drawn; consistent with the popular bias was the conclusion <42> that Aristophanes' writes from the standpoint of a defender of the power and interests of the *dêmos*, of the mass of ordinary citizens against their exploitative leaders (§10).

It will be clear from this summary that Aristophanic comedy is and is not, in my view, political. It is political, in the sense that contemporary political life is its point of departure; political reality is taken up by the poet and subjected to the ignominious transformations of comic fantasy. But the product of the fantasising process did not and was not intended to have a reciprocal effect on political reality; comedy had no designs on the political life from which it departed, and in that sense was not political. Politics was the material of comedy, but comedy did not in turn aspire to be a political force. This is a reading which some might decry as 'aestheticist'; but that would be a mistake. The view that literature in general or comedy in particular cannot or ought not to aspire to political effect has not been a premise of my argument (as it appears to have been in Gomme's, for example); it is in fact a view that I would reject. Rather, I have tried to set the plays in a

particular context and to make sense of the resulting corpus of historical data; right or wrong, it purports to be a historically rooted reading.

Consequently it is capable of throwing light on the context in turn; if my interpretation is correct, it will contribute something to our understanding of the way in which the *dêmos* maintained and exercised its political control in late fifth-century Athens, disarming the potentially critical platform that certain traditional concepts of the poet's role might have made available to the comic dramatist.⁸⁹ This is certainly the view taken by the pseudo-Xenophontine oligarch (*Ath. Pol.* 2.18). He oversimplifies somewhat when he claims that the *dêmos* is not a target of comedy (κωμωδοῦμενος); it is, regularly. But that, as we have seen, is part of an amiable and bantering intimacy between poet and audience; individual victims are, as the oligarch claims, in general rich, well-born or powerful.⁹⁰ On the available evidence, the oligarch possessed neither <43> the most attractive personality nor the most penetrating intellect of Athenians of his time; but he did have some insights into the workings of Athenian democracy, and on the control of the theatre by the *dêmos* he was right. Aristophanes told his audience what they wanted to hear; they rewarded him for it.

Appendix 1: Unity in Aristophanic comedy

In §6 we observed that the apparently serious intent of the parabasis of *Frogs* could not be discerned also in the action of that play. It is true that the rival poets are tested on their ability to give political advice, and that the advice which Aristophanes gave in the parabasis is repeated; but it is repeated by the poet who loses the contest, the result of which does not seem to reflect an evaluation of the advice offered that could be taken seriously outside the theatre. In short, the play's serious parabasis digresses from the comic fantasy in which it is embedded (n.36). A similar discrepancy was observed in *Acharnians*; here the credit which Aristophanes claims in the parabasis for his services to the Athenian *dêmos* is inconsistent with the premises of the satire of the *dêmos* in the preceding action, while the jocularly 'hawkish' stance he adopts in the parabasis is opposed to the (in my view, no less jocular) advocacy of peace in the play's action. Other instances were cited from *Knights*, *Clouds* and *Birds* (n.37)—and the survey was by no means exhaustive. The obvious conclusion is that Aristophanes adopts positions opportunistically. His comic purposes in any given play are not necessarily consistent with each other, and even when—as in the parabasis of *Frogs*—he has a 'serious' intent, he does not pursue that intent outside a limited and clearly marked context.

⁸⁹ Similarly in the case of tragedy: it will be noted that the political positions detected in Euripides by de Ste Croix (1972, 356-7 n.1) are all patriotic and democratic in tendency, reflecting the same ideology of 'those in the middle' (οἱ ἐν μέσῳ) that we found in Aristophanes; and I believe that the *Oresteia* should also be read as a patriotic and pan-Athenian play, consensual rather than partisan: see the discussion in Heath (1987a), 64-71. The reaction to Phrynichus' *Sack of Miletus* (Hdt. 6.21.1-2) may be the earliest evidence for the exercise of this kind of control by the *dêmos*.

⁹⁰ The terms used here he often restricts to right-minded oligarchs like himself; but no one who had seen a comedy could have intended that restriction here, excluding democratic leaders, and it need not be so read. Note Aristophanes' boast that he attacks the most powerful (οἱ μέγιστοι): *Clouds* 549, *Wasps* 1030, *Peace* 751.

If we are to think of an Aristophanic comedy as unified, therefore, it cannot be as the consistent exposition of some single theme or intention. But that is precisely the dominant approach to unity in recent criticism of Old Comedy, as of other Greek poetic genres.⁹¹ Does it <44> follow that an Aristophanic play is just ‘a loose string of cabaret turns’?⁹² In this appendix I shall argue that this is not the case, and that the unifying element in Aristophanic comedy is—perhaps surprisingly—plot.⁹³

Let us take *Frogs* as a first example. There are a number of objections which must be faced if we are to regard the plot of *Frogs* as providing the play with a coherent unifying structure. Like many Aristophanic comedies, the play falls into two parts around the parabasis. The first of these parts is a loose series of miscellaneous incidents lacking (it is sometimes alleged) the interconnection one expects of a well-ordered plot; the second part introduces the contest between the poets, a motif wholly unrelated to the quest-plot which the first part initiates; and when the quest-motif is reintroduced towards the end of the second part, it is presented in a light wholly inconsistent <45> with its original form. How can such a ramshackle structure be taken seriously as a unifying factor? Are we not compelled to look for some thematic integration of its dislocated parts—or else to accept that the play is indeed only a loose string of centrifugal jokes?

We may begin by examining the play’s chief inconsistency. Dionysus’ initial intention is to bring Euripides back from Hades: his desire is quite specific as to

⁹¹ E.g. Gelzer (1970), 1543: ‘Die Einheit der Komödien des Aristophanes ist, soweit sie überhaupt durchgeführt ist, bestimmt von Thema her, das in jedem Stück im Sinne des χρηστὰ τῆ πόλει λέγειν behandelt wird... Das Thema bildet jeweils ein außerhalb des Stücks liegendes Problem aus der Wirklichkeit in Athen. Personen, Handlung, phantastische und realistische Darstellungsmittel, dramatische und undramatische Teile sind nicht um ihrer selbst willen konzipiert, sondern zur Darstellung gewisser Aspekte und zur besonderen Charakterisierung dieses Themas... Darauf beziehen sich die Witze, dafür werden gewisse Symbole und Bilder erfunden, die durch das ganze Stück hindurch immer wieder den Bezug auf das Thema herstellen.’ (Gelzer cites Koch 1965.) A somewhat different version of the same general approach is found in McLeish (1980), 64, 66: ‘Unless what he sees is to seem merely chaotic, the spectator of a play must be aware... of some sort of unifying structure... Usually this structure is bound up with the main philosophical theme of the play, and the events of the plot serve as a particular demonstration of that theme applied to human affairs... Underlying all the hilarious incident of each plot is a unifying philosophical idea, as didactic as that of tragedy...’ I argue against this thematic approach to unity in Heath (1987a), 98-111, and generalise the argument to other genres in the more extensive discussion of ancient attitudes to literary unity in Heath (1989a).

⁹² Schwinge (1975), 199, argues that ‘die aristophanische Komödie ja nie eine lose Abfolge von Kabarettnummern ist; sie ist stets insofern von bestimmter Kohärenz, als jedes Stück, und zwar als Ganzes, von *einem* komischen Einfall gibt... Aber der komische Einfall ist nie etwas Autonomes... Aristophanes verfolgt mit dem komischen Einfall stets eine bestimmte politische Wirkungsabsicht; das komische Thema... verdankt sich immer einer kritischen Idee’ (Schwinge, like Gelzer, is indebted to Koch); the implied ‘either/or’ is revealing.

⁹³ ‘The loose plot-structure of Athenian Old Comedy has often baffled, perplexed and irritated historians of Greek literature. Measured against an Aristotelian ideal of unified plot, the unfortunate comic dramatist is pictured as struggling in the darkness with only limited success towards the light of Menandrian perfection’: Vaio (1973), 369; cf. Hulton (1972), 35: ‘Organic unity... was more the prerogative of Greek tragedy than Aristophanic Comedy.’ The contrast between comedy and tragedy is developed at length and (in my view) misleadingly by Landfester (1977), 1-15; as for Aristotle, we shall return to him later (n.108).

the poet in question (52-4, 66-7); towards the end of the play, however (1418-9), Dionysus claims that his intention was to bring back a poet—no individual is specified—and adds that his aim in so doing was the salvation of Athens (and so the perpetuation of his own annual celebration). This additional element is not only unmentioned in the original specific statement of intent; Dionysus there positively suggests otherwise: for example, the recovery of Euripides is seen as a rascally escapade (80-1), a view of the enterprise far removed from the elevated tone of patriotic service which subsequently emerges. There are sound comic reasons why Dionysus' initial desire must be for Euripides; Euripides, not Aeschylus or even Sophocles, is a stock joke on the Aristophanic stage, and the poet cannot afford to pass over the opportunity, not only to write jokes about Euripides into his opening scene, but also to put his audience into a receptive mood by engaging all the expectations they had acquired about Euripides in comedy. Moreover, the initial intention to recover Euripides sets up the splendid joke in 1469-71, where Dionysus turns back on Euripides his own morally dubious sophistry about oaths;⁹⁴ Aristophanes' careful preparation for this joke, and the clear reference back to Dionysus' original intention when the trap is sprung, strongly suggest that the inconsistency is calculated, rather than casual. If Dionysus' initial intent must be to retrieve Euripides, it is equally desirable that this intent should be suppressed during the agon; Dionysus is invited to adjudicate as an expert in the field (810-11), and if he were still seen as a partisan of Euripides, this partiality would interfere with his role. It is for this reason that the enthusiast for Euripides' trendy, pretentious jargon (λαλία, 89-107) has by 916-7 acquired more conservative sympathies—another inconsequentiality in the plot. But if the original intention of Dionysus' quest must be suppressed in the second part of the play, the quest-motif itself cannot <46> be wholly abandoned. For one thing, the successful achievement of a goal makes an effective climax to a play; more importantly, the motif has been too important in the first part of the play for it to be left unresolved—precisely because Aristophanes *is* concerned to secure continuity and completeness for his plot. Thus the quest has to be retained, but a new goal must be substituted: hence 1418-9. The intention of saving the city, which would have been quite out of keeping with the tone of the opening scene, obviously fits very well at the end of the agon, in which the didactic responsibility of the poet has been emphasised. And the infiltration of this new idea is eased by the existence in comedy of a typical plot, in which the city in direst extremity is saved by some ingenious device—such as the recovery of a dead poet (Eupolis' *Demes* is an apposite parallel: cf. §7 above); the familiarity of this plot-type would tend to distract the audience from the inconsistency which the insertion of its fundamental *topos* into *Frogs* produces.

The inconsistencies in *Frogs* do not show, therefore, that Aristophanes was not concerned to produce a coherent plot. On the contrary, he has cleverly ensured the continuity and completion of the quest-plot, while manipulating its elements

⁹⁴ Dionysus has not sworn an oath; but he starts with the firm intention of bringing Euripides back, and it is to this that Euripides appeals with an understandable (if, in the circumstances, ill-advised) exaggeration. Note that the inconsistency concerning Dionysus' intention is not just between the beginning and end of the play, but is built into this single scene (1418-9 vs 1469-71).

as unobtrusively as possible so as to maximise its comic effect at each point. This, so far from being a distinctively comic device, is a technique familiar from tragedy. An obvious example is Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, the plot of which is (rightly) much admired, but which depends on a whole web of concealed implausibilities and inconsistencies.⁹⁵ For example, Oedipus' failure to grasp the significance of Teiresias' accusations would be hard to accept if he were thought of at that stage of the play as possessing the knowledge which is later attributed to him—that his parentage had been questioned, and that Apollo's oracle had foretold his parricide and incest (*OT* 774-93). When Teiresias is on stage, however, the audience, having not yet been told any of this, is in no position to regard Oedipus in that light; they are therefore less likely to find his reaction implausible. In effect, Oedipus does not know in the earlier scenes of the play what he later has known all along; but this is an unobtrusive inconsistency. Oedipus' changing states of knowledge are analogous to Dionysus' retrospectively redefined intentions. The comic poet may take greater liberties than the tragedian—his genre is, after all, more relaxed; but the liberties which he takes <47> differ in degree, not in kind, from those of tragedy, and in neither genre is a libertine handling of plot incompatible with its unifying function.

How is the quest-plot treated in the first part of *Frogs*? It is true that the individual incidents do not follow one from another in necessary or probable sequence; the order in which the inhabitants of Hades appear once the travellers have arrived outside Pluto's palace, for example, is determined not causally, but by the requirements of the joke as Dionysus and his slave change places. Nevertheless, it is necessary or probable (once one has granted the fantastic premises of the plot, naturally) that incidents of this kind should occur on a journey to Hades; the travellers have these experiences not merely on the way to Hades, but *because* they are on the way to Hades. Indeed, the incidents all help or hinder their progress: the travellers seek advice from a previous visitor to the Underworld, cross (or circumambulate) the bottomless lake, are deterred by (perhaps imaginary) dangers, seek directions from the locals, and encounter various difficulties in gaining entry to Pluto's palace. Given a plot based on a quest or journey, then whatever events help towards or obstruct the attaining of the goal are causally integral to the plot; and in this case the much-delayed entry into the palace visibly enacts the travellers' arrival.⁹⁶ This is their first goal; but they have come here for a purpose, and the business yet to be transacted—the recovery of Euripides—must retain the audience's interest and carry their expectations across the interruption of the action in the parabasis.

Yet this unfinished business is not taken up after the parabasis. Instead, the matter of the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides is introduced. Again, this development cannot be regarded as a necessary or probable consequence of

⁹⁵ See, for example, Bain (1979), 132-45, and Dawe (1982), 6-23. I have discussed the topic briefly in Heath (1987a), 111-5.

⁹⁶ Cf. Fraenkel (1962), 180-1: 'Hingegen finden wir in dem der Parabase vorangehenden Teil der Frösche zwar auch eine Reihe von Einzelszenen..., aber durch alle diese Einzelszenen läuft eine kontinuierliche Handlung, bis schließlich Dionysos, am Ziel seiner schwierigen Reise angelangt, mit seinem Diener in das Haus des Pluton eintritt.'

Dionysus' quest or of his arrival; nevertheless, the synchronicity of his arrival with the contest is not merely coincidental. The contest has come about because Euripides has died; and Euripides' death is what prompted Dionysus' journey;⁹⁷ <48> it is therefore hardly surprising that he arrives in Hades just when the contest is in prospect. The quest and the contest are related as necessary or probable consequences of a single cause;⁹⁸ and in 1414ff., Pluto's attempt to force his arbitrator off the fence cleverly links the two motifs: the result of the contest will supply Dionysus with the goal of his quest. Viewed in this light the plot of *Frogs* seems consequent and well ordered, well able to bear the weight of unification.

Another play in which the action is interrupted by the parabasis is *Wasps*. The two parts of this play are, considered thematically, only tenuously related: the first part is devoted to a political satire centred on the courts, while in the second part the comedy derives from the attempt to insert Philocleon into elegant society. This thematic divergence has, inevitably, caused concern to recent interpreters;⁹⁹ yet the causal integration of these thematically divergent elements could scarcely be improved upon. Bdelycleon's first problem is to curb his father's obsessive passion for jury service: he begins by confining him forcibly to the house, and in 514-21 manages to manoeuvre Philocleon into submitting the evaluation of his chosen way of life to arbitration—an advance, since Bdelycleon, being clever and right, is bound to win any rational debate. Bdelycleon's arguments are designed to show that the members of the *public* jury panels are being exploited by their political masters; it is therefore natural that he should try to temper the disillusioned Philocleon's despair by indulging his obsession with an innocuous *private* trial (750-66). But this is a trick: bemused by his son's tear-jerking rhetoric in defence of the dog Labes, Philocleon allows himself to be steered towards the wrong voting-urn; the shock of this acquittal finally breaks his dicastic morale. Philocleon's collapse immediately precedes the parabasis; what continuation is more natural after this interruption than that Bdelycleon should set about rebuilding his father's shattered life—and that he should find the old man somewhat less tractable material than he had hoped? In fact, this reconstruction of Philocleon's way of <49> life has been Bdelycleon's declared intention throughout (341, 503-6, 719-24); a reaffirmation of this plan is strategically placed before the parabasis (1003-6) to reinforce our expectations of the story's post-parabatic development. Not only, therefore, does the plot of *Wasps* possess an admirable causal continuity, but the dramatist has taken care to emphasise that

⁹⁷ Sophocles' death is presented as a *sine qua non* of Dionysus' desire (since it deprives him of the consolation of a good poet surviving), rather than as a cause. Whether or not his death supervened on a plot already conceived, Sophocles had to be elided, since he would obscure the old/new opposition on which the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides is based (see Dover 1972, 180-1); and this elision has been achieved with elegant compliments.

⁹⁸ Thus it is not true to say (e.g.) that 'Drexlers Thronosmotiv... von außen und zufällig auf die Achse der Handlung trifft' (F. Richter, quoted by H. Erbse, *Gnomon* 28 [1956], 273); still less that 'the presence of Dionysus alone... unites the two parts of the play' (Segal 1961, 208).

⁹⁹ E.g. Long (1976), 15: 'The great difficulty in defending the quality of the play is the relationship of the first part, with its theme of "juryitis", to the second with its attempts to re-educate Philocleon.'

continuity by the use of proleptic allusions.¹⁰⁰ To defend the unity of the play, it is not necessary to go beyond this causal structure in an attempt to establish some elusive thematic integration.¹⁰¹

Aristophanes' desire to underline the continuity of his plot is evident also in *Thesmophoriazusae*. Euripides' initial problem in this play is to infiltrate a sympathiser into the women's assembly—a persuasive speaker (184-7), who could pass himself off as a woman (190-2): Agathon is the obvious choice. When Agathon declines the commission,¹⁰² Euripides' relative volunteers to go; he lacks all the necessary qualifications, but in a crisis one cannot pick and choose, and with Agathon's assistance something can be done to make him look less blatantly incongruous. Nevertheless, the unsuitability of Euripides' agent makes a miscarriage likely (as it turns out, his inability to make a tactful and persuasive speech brings him to the verge of discovery in 566-70, even before Cleisthenes' arrival seals his fate); and the relative prudently ensures that Euripides is committed to his rescue if anything should go wrong (269-76)—a clear pointer to the subsequent development of the plot. This pointer is reactivated in 765-84, when the relative sends out his appeal for assistance; this immediately precedes the parabasis, and the allusion to Euripides' *Palamedes* is elegantly used to construct a bridge across the interruption: when the parabasis is over, the relative realises his mistake in choosing a play as bad as *Palamedes*—Euripides must be too ashamed to show his face (847-8). By choosing a play with a female principal, he can at least turn his disguise to advantage (850-1); this introduces the burlesques <50> of *Helen* and *Andromeda* to which the latter part of the play is devoted.¹⁰³ Rau remarks on 'die Verschiebung der Motive' in this play:

Durch die langen Parodie-Partien erhält das Befreiungsmotiv starke Selbständigkeit, während das Motiv des Gerichts über Euripides derart zurücktritt, daß V.1160ff. der Streit sehr rasch beigelegt wird, um die Befreiung zum Ende zu führen; dabei könnte sich die Befreiung nach der Versöhnung eigentlich sogar erübrigen. Die komischen Intentionen dominieren über die dramatische Ökonomie.¹⁰⁴

Like similar analyses of *Frogs*, this scarcely does justice to the causal interrelation of the 'motifs': the rescue becomes important because of the miscarriage of a plan to influence the women's decision. Although the resolution of the dispute between the women and Euripides is somewhat perfunctory, its mechanism is causally adequate: Euripides in effect surrenders and gives the women a pledge of his future good behaviour. The very fact that Aristophanes does take the trouble to

¹⁰⁰ Rightly emphasised by MacDowell (1971), 6-7.

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Long (1976); Vaio (1971).

¹⁰² As a passive homosexual, Agathon is in sexual competition with the women, who are therefore even more hostile to him than to Euripides (203-9). Dover (1978), 141, surely misunderstands Agathon's excuse; $\mu\epsilon\nu\ \omicron\delta\upsilon\nu$ accepts Agathon's point, while substituting a stronger term—see Denniston (1954), 475. (Note that Cleisthenes, on much the same evidence, is treated as the women's sympathiser and *proxenos* [574-6]: a small example of Aristophanes' opportunism.)

¹⁰³ Another bridge across the parabasis is the fetching of the Prytanis: set in motion in 762-4, and taken up in 922-9, this entry is carefully placed to foil the *Helen*-rescue, and—by changing the relative's mode of confinement—to motivate the choice of *Andromeda* for the next rescue attempt.

¹⁰⁴ Rau (1975), 347.

untie both nodes of his plot—that the initial problem is not simply superseded and left unresolved—is significant of his care over plot-structure.¹⁰⁵ Dramatic economy is not neglected, therefore, although it is (of course) true that comic intentions are dominant, in the sense that just how and when the plot is resolved is determined by the comic effects at which Aristophanes is aiming.

Dramatic economy is not neglected, but is dominated by comic intention. A well-constructed plot, that is to say, is *a* goal of Aristophanic comedy, but not *the* goal—for it is in turn functionally subordinate to the play's comic effects. One could therefore look on plot as an indispensable unifying element in Aristophanes: it affords the organised and organising framework within which those comic effects may be developed. Our earlier denials that Aristophanes was particularly <51> concerned with the thematic integration of his plays would imply that, within the causal frame established by the plot, the comic effects will be pursued centrifugally. This, too, can be observed in *Thesmophoriazusae*. The play consists largely of a series of Euripidean burlesques, but Euripides is hardly a consistent target of those burlesques, since in each case the humour derives mainly from the intrusion of some grotesque and alien element into a promising tragic idea: the climax of the *Telephus*-burlesque is a refurbishing of the stock joke against bibulous women; the *Helen* is rendered comic (apart from the general incongruity of the situation) by the interjections of the old woman, *Andromeda* by the mischievous Echo¹⁰⁶ and by the interjections of the Scythian. The diversity of targets and of sources of humour drawn together in this play is striking; there is no need to find an integrating theme—nor, indeed, has this been done with any plausibility.¹⁰⁷

To discuss unity in terms of plot is inevitably to recall Aristotle; is it conceivable, then, that Aristophanic comedy is unified in an Aristotelian sense? The answer to that question will depend, obviously, on one's interpretation of

¹⁰⁵ Cratinus, we learn from Platonius, began his plots well, but failed to follow them through to the end (πολὺς δὲ καὶ <ἐν> ταῖς τροπαῖς τυγχάνει. εὐστοχος δὲ ὢν ἐν ταῖς ἐπιβολαῖς τῶν δραμάτων καὶ διασκευαῖς, εἶτα προῶν καὶ διασπῶν τὰς ὑποθέσεις οὐκ ἀκολούθως πληροῖ τὰ δράματα: II 6-8 Koster)—a point to which we shall return. (Platonius' source is likely to have been the third-century Alexandrian critic Dionysiades of Mallos; see Pfeiffer 1968, 160.)

¹⁰⁶ How can the idea that Echo is Euripides disguised have survived (e.g. H. Hansen 1976, 181-3)? She is evidently on stage at 1090-6, when the Scythian chases her, but Euripides has to be ready for his entry as Perseus at 1098 (presumably she enters at 1056 and retires to an inconspicuous corner at 1064: see Fraenkel 1962, 22-6; Taplin 1977, 334-5). The joke in 1059-61 depends on a literalisation, which is spoilt if Echo is not Echo but Euripides. When Euripides does appear in disguise, he never sustains the role so consistently. And why on earth should Euripides do such a thing? His role is that of rescuer.

¹⁰⁷ For example, H. Hansen (1976), 184: 'one should ask whether the play ultimately has two subjects or one: can the supposed failure of Agathon and Euripides as tragic poets, and the various perversions of sexual roles, be seen as aspects of the same phenomenon?... The play... is really a study of infertility or sterility, poetic as well as sexual, of barren wombs and barren minds, of the failure both to create and to procreate.' But where is it suggested that Euripides is 'barren'? The emphasis is rather on the fertility of his invention (93-4, 926-7); his failure is due to the stupidity of his audience (1128-32). 'Agathon's sexuality is linked closely with the quality of his literary output...; Euripides plays a woman not once but twice' (p.184): not twice (he does not play Echo—see previous note) but once—and that is *after* he has given up his customary tragic mode for a cruder, more comic device (1160-1209).

Aristotle's theory of unity, as well as on one's reading of Aristophanes, and it is not possible to discuss the *Poetics* in detail here.¹⁰⁸ Some brief observations can be made, however. First, <52> Aristotle's criterion of unity is not addressed directly to the dramatic (or epic) text as such, but rests solely on the analysis of plot—a play is unified if its plot is unified; that is to say, Aristotle is working at a certain level of abstraction from the text. Secondly, what he requires of a plot is modest: its elements must follow one from another 'in accordance with necessity or probability'—that is, in due causal sequence; and the series of sequential events must be complete—it must have a beginning and end as defined in *Poet.* 7, 1450b26-30. It will be evident at once that Aristotle's approach does not require, indeed displays no interest in, the thematic integration of dramatic texts; it is only causal integration that is required—the view taken here of Aristophanes. Secondly, Aristotle's theory admits the extension of a plot beyond the resolution of a play's initial problematic if (as evidently may be the case) that extension is causally consequential. Most important, however, is an implication of Aristotle's abstraction from text to plot. Commentators have not sufficiently observed the difference between saying (i) that a play must dramatise a unified (that is, a continuous and complete) plot, and saying (ii) that a play must contain *only* the dramatisation of such a plot. Aristotle is committed to (i), but not to (ii); and this is important, because (i), unlike (ii), permits the text of a play to contain elements which digress from the underlying plot. On this view, while the causal integration of the *plot* must be relatively strict,¹⁰⁹ the causal integration of the *play* may be handled liberally (with thematic integration still not a requirement). This is precisely the practice of Aristophanes, for although the plays we have examined are based on carefully organised plots, they also contain much which, while still contributing to the overall effect of the play, does not contribute to the development of the plot: isolated jokes and comic routines, digressive lyrics, and—above all—the parabasis.

Richard Janko has recently argued in an impressive study of Aristotle's theory of comedy that the *Tractatus Coislinianus* derives from an epitome of the lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*; he also argues that Aristotle regarded Aristophanes as a comic ideal—as 'middle' comedy, in the sense which that term originally bore when Middle Comedy was new and New Comedy yet to develop. These 'astounding heterodoxies', as Janko calls them, seem to me probably <53> correct.¹¹⁰ Even without venturing onto this controversial ground, however, a

¹⁰⁸ I have discussed Aristotle's theory of unity briefly in Heath (1987), 99-102, and in greater detail in Heath (1989a), 38-55. On the fundamental concept of necessary or probable connection, and the related concept of 'universality' in Aristotle, see Heath (1991).

¹⁰⁹ That Aristotle would have applied this criterion flexibly is suggested by his tolerance of concealed 'irrationalities' in plots (24, 60a11-60b2), and by his recognition that 'impossibilities' can be justified if they enhance the poetic effect (25, 60b22-9)

¹¹⁰ Janko (1984), 87. I venture a few adverse comments: (i) on p.244 Janko misinterprets *NE* 4.8, 1128a31 (σκώπτειν is parallel to λοιδορεῖν, and one must supply κωλύειν): this weakens his case; (ii) his reference on p.236 to Aristotle's views on unity and digression seems to me superficial and mistaken: my own account makes Aristotelian approval of Aristophanic comedy considerably more plausible; (iii) 'Plot is not as fully paramount as in *Poet.*, because the Treatise is not dealing with Menander' (p.216): this is dangerous—plot is essential to Aristophanes also; the crucial point

convergence of Aristophanic practice and Aristotelian principle is more probable than is widely supposed. Aristotle, after all, reached his theoretical conclusions by reflecting on the practice of the best poets; and even within the extant *Poetics* there is evidence that he thought that Aristophanes was to comedy what Sophocles was to tragedy and Homer to epic (the choice of these three paradigms in 48a25-8 can hardly be insignificant). Moreover, Aristotle himself dates the introduction of comedy structured by plot into Athens before Aristophanes; it was Crates, he says, who first abandoned the iambic form (ἰδέα) and composed ‘universalised’ (that is, necessary or probable) plots (49b5-9, cf. ch. 9).¹¹¹ Later evidence concurs with this dating. Of the treatises on comedy edited by Koster, one describes Pherecrates as a follower of Crates in this development (III 29-31).¹¹² Another sees Cratinus as moving away from the disorder (ἄταξία) of ‘old’ comedy, but failing to complete the move; this was left to Aristophanes, who indeed at the end of his career developed ‘new’ (i.e. Middle) comedy (V 15-27). We have already mentioned (n.105) Platonius’ observation that Cratinus began his plots well, but failed to follow them to the end (II 6-8). This consensus strongly supports the view that plot-structure is fundamental to Aristophanic comedy.

I have argued, therefore, that unity in Aristophanic comedy is unity of plot, liberally conceived so as to permit digression in the text that realises the plot; ‘digression’ must be understood here as *causal* rather than as *thematic* digression, for the simple reason that the thematic integration typically sought by recent criticism is not one of Aristophanes’ goals. I have also suggested that this account of Aristophanic <54> unity is Aristotelian. This conclusion should not be thought strange, since Aristotle himself and other Greek critics can be shown to have dated the origins of plot-structured comedy in Athens to the middle of the fifth century, considerably before the beginning of Aristophanes’ career. If this is correct, Aristophanes and his co-practitioners of the comic art in the 420s inherited a comic form based on carefully structured plots, and developed that form further; it follows that Aristophanes’ latest work does not, as is often thought, represent a new and surprising departure, but continues to develop a trend that antedates his earliest extant work. But this is not the place to pursue further the literary-historical implications of these conclusions.

Appendix 2: Silk on seriousness

Commenting on this book, Michael Silk claims that ‘at the centre of the questions is the word “serious”, and the question: is Aristophanic comedy serious?’ (2000, 302f.). That is not correct. The central question in my investigation was: is Aristophanic comedy *political*? Or, more precisely (since

is that Aristotle has already discussed plot at length in the first book, and can take that discussion for granted in the second book. On Aristotle’s theory of comedy see further Heath (1989b).

¹¹¹ ‘Abandoning the iambic form (ἰδέα)’ does not mean abandoning abuse, but abandoning the non-mimetic form of iambic abuse, that is, inserting abuse into the framework of a continuous and complete plot; see Heath (1989b), 348-9. Schwinge (1975), 183-5 completely misunderstands this point.

¹¹² If Koster correctly defends ὁδ as ‘in vicem: ut iam Crates’; in context, after the mention of Pherecrates’ rivalry with Crates, this seems likely.

Aristophanic comedy is clearly political in *some* sense), the central question was: *in what sense* is Aristophanic comedy political? When I introduced the word ‘serious’ into my discussion, I was picking it up from de Ste Croix (n.20). Like other contributors to the discussion of Aristophanes and politics, I found that this term provided a conveniently concise label for certain ways of being political. But the use of the word was a convenience, not an essential. It would have been possible to replace every occurrence of the word with more long-winded (and less idiomatic) periphrases. When I summed up my conclusion in the penultimate paragraph of §11, I did so without using the word at all.

Silk believes that my arguments are ‘fundamentally flawed’, and that these flaws may be traced to ‘a series of problematic assumptions’ (308) which I share with Jeffrey Henderson, chosen to represent a contrasting (but also comparable) tendency in the assessment of Aristophanes’ political comedy.¹¹³ The five problematic assumptions are as follows:

(i) ‘In the first place, they both assume that seriousness in Aristophanic comedy is dependent on, and referable to, the poet’s intentions’ (308-9). It is true that I ask questions about Aristophanes’ intentions; and I hold (not unreasonably) that answers to those questions are dependent on, and referable to, the poet’s intentions. But Silk is attributing to me a more radical view, ‘the mistake of supposing that acceptable interpretations in some way depend on the intentions ascribed’ (313 n.35). In fact, I do not believe that the acceptability of an interpretation is necessarily dependent on the author’s intention. The criterion of acceptability depends on the nature of the interest which underlies a particular interpretative project: for some purposes, intentions are indispensable; for others, they are utterly irrelevant. Since the highly compressed methodological statement in the second paragraph of §1 did not make this underlying qualification of my intentionalist commitments clear, I freely accept responsibility for the resulting confusion. Secondly, I distinguish interpretation from description or evaluation. This point, too, was not explicit in the original text; but in this case I am not so sure that the omission was culpable, since the distinction is not an arcane one. We are all familiar from experience with the fact that (for example) recognising that a remark was meant to be funny is not the same as actually finding it funny; and there are some would-be serious people whose earnestness merits politely concealed hilarity. So I have no difficulty in principle in dissociating descriptive or evaluative judgements of a text’s seriousness from interpretative attributions of serious intent to its author.¹¹⁴

(ii) ‘Secondly, and relatedly, interpretation of Aristophanic plays and their claims to seriousness is made to depend on externals: on what the Old Oligarch says

¹¹³ ‘Contrast (but also compare) the discussion by Jeffrey Henderson of “the *dêmos* and the comic competition” (1990) (306). I discuss Henderson’s paper in Heath (1997). Despite our disagreements, I have no doubt that Silk’s commentary misses the mark in Henderson’s case, too; but, mindful of the risk of misrepresentation, I have resisted the temptation to ventriloquise, and respond here only on my own behalf.

¹¹⁴ For a fuller explanation of the interpretation/description-evaluation distinction, the sense in which I am a pluralist in interpretation, the sense in which I am an intentionalist, what is and is not entailed by intentionalism, and my reasons for holding this position, see Heath (2002).

about contemporary comedy..., or the way Plato represents Aristophanes and Socrates..., or what Cleon, or the city, did to or for Aristophanes in response to his plays' (309). Silk comments: 'This is a bit like trying to decide whether a vehicle is or isn't a car... on the basis of whether it turns up at a car-park; a sensible course might be to take a closer look at the vehicle.' It might be—if you already know what a car is. If not, taking a closer look will not be enough to solve the problem. A different analogy may make the point more clearly. Imagine you are in a foreign country, with an unfamiliar culture, that you have observed a certain pattern of behaviour, and that you are uncertain about the significance of that behaviour within the culture. It would be sensible to observe the behaviour closely. But wouldn't it also be sensible to take notice of what participants in the culture say about it, and how they respond to it? As I point out in the last two paragraphs of §1, the position we are in with regard to Aristophanic comedy is precisely that of the foreign observer, unfamiliar with the local culture. So while it is, of course, essential to look closely at Aristophanes' comedies,¹¹⁵ we need also to take notice of contextual clues to their significance within their own culture. Plato, the Old Oligarch, and Cleon and the city are not external to the play-culture complex.

(iii) 'Third: the two interpreters assume that seriousness is better (more desirable, more valuable, more praiseworthy) than non-seriousness' (309). Silk does not provide any evidence to support this ludicrous assertion.

(iv) 'Fourth: they incline to assume that seriousness and humour come in separate packages' (309-10). In this case, Silk actually cites evidence that both of us *reject* the assumption he ascribes to us. Nevertheless (310):

In Heath, despite a single acknowledgement, in passing, that 'serious points can be conveyed in comic guise' [p.15], the imprint of this dichotomy is pervasive, so that, for instance, the *Frogs* parabasis *must* be serious because of its alleged jokelessness, and the rest of *Frogs* (and Aristophanes' 'political' comedy in general) non-serious, because of its evident jokefulness.

In my treatment of the parabasis of *Frogs* (§6) there is no *assumption* that seriousness and humour *must* come in separate packages; rather, there is an *observation* that this passage *is* (apparently) jokeless. If that observation is granted,¹¹⁶ then the conclusion that humour was not part of this particular package does not seem unreasonable. If there is an assumption here, it is the modest one that seriousness and humour do not *necessarily* go together. Nor do I ever argue that a passage *cannot* be serious if it is jokeful. Readers who follow up Silk's supporting reference may notice (as he apparently did not) that on the very first page he mentions (18) I repeat my acknowledgement that a serious point can be

¹¹⁵ The line of thought developed in this book was prompted precisely by a realisation that I had not previously been looking closely enough at the texts, or thinking carefully enough about their implications. See the brief account of the book's origins in Heath (2002), 102-3.

¹¹⁶ The observation might be wrong, of course: precisely because we face the 'outsider' problem described in §1, we are always at risk of missing the point, or even the existence, of Aristophanic jokes. So, for example, I argue in §4 that de Ste Croix was misreading Lysistrata's speech when he described it as 'without a single jest'. Silk's 'alleged' might be taken to imply that I have made a similar mistake with regard to the *Frogs* parabasis. Yet he goes on to describe the advice of this parabasis as 'joke-free' *propria voce* (312: see below).

conveyed by means of a comic vehicle. How often does one have to state the obvious?¹¹⁷

(v) ‘Fifth, and above all: the two interpreters are in tacit agreement that we know what seriousness is and why it matters, and that the challenge is to decide whether Aristophanes does, or does not, have it’ (310). That’s true: we do agree on that. We could do so because we both wrote as acculturated participants in an ongoing discussion of Aristophanes and politics, familiar with the way the term ‘serious’ has conventionally been used in the context of that discussion. So it seems a little presumptuous when Silk declares: ‘This is surely wrong.’ He continues: ‘The challenge is, precisely, to decide what seriousness is and why it matters. Our first task must be to scrutinize the notion of seriousness *per se*.’ But why? If we are already familiar with the way the word ‘serious’ is used in the particular context in which we are using it, what would we gain from scrutinising some other, context-free ‘notion of seriousness *per se*’? Silk’s answer emerges a couple of pages further on, when he differentiates ‘the’ notion of seriousness into three distinct senses (312). His contention is that Henderson and I (and ‘many others’) ‘confuse or equate’ these senses. If he is right, then we should indeed have scrutinised the notions of seriousness more carefully. Is he right?

The first sense is ‘serious: sober...; its opposite is “jokey” or “humorous”’ (312). Silk comments:

Is Aristophanes often serious in this sense? Clearly not. The *Clouds* chorus’s praise of Athens and the joke-free advice in the parabasis of *Frogs* do offer this kind of seriousness, and these passages are untypical.

Thus far, then, we seem to be in agreement: Aristophanes is typically jokey or humorous, and therefore not typically serious in the sense ‘sober’.

Secondly, there is ‘serious: honest... This kind of seriousness is opposite to “pretending” or “posing”’ (312-3). Here we part company. Honesty and pretence are not opposites. The people who proliferate e-mails fraudulently claiming to be from banks are serious (they really do want to get hold of my account details and password) but not honest. However, their dishonesty does not consist simply in the fact that they are posing as my bank: it is possible to adopt a pose without attempting to deceive. And while such designedly transparent pretences may be humorous, they need not be. For example, volunteers who pose as casualties for the purposes of a first-aid training exercise are not being dishonest or insincere, any more than they are being jokey or humorous. So I do not believe that Silk’s scrutiny of ‘serious’ is sufficiently differentiated to account for actual usage. Nevertheless, we may still be able to find some points of agreement here. First, I

¹¹⁷ Silk adds further evidence in a footnote (310 n.28): ‘Heath quotes with evident approval a naïve “axiom” enunciated by de Ste Croix that the comedian “must always be funny”.’ I cite this axiom in §10 to illustrate a paradox in de Ste Croix’s position, which holds that Aristophanes’ jokes about the jury system would not have been funny to a large proportion of his audience. That argument does not depend on my accepting the axiom. Suppose, for example, that someone were to suggest that there is something paradoxical in insisting that we do not have access to authors’ intentions while confidently identifying authors’ implicit assumptions and unstated (though somehow evident) approval: she would not thereby be endorsing the anti-intentionalist premise.

believe that Aristophanes often adopts poses of the designedly transparent kind. Silk's anti-intentionalism might make him reluctant to commit himself with regard to design,¹¹⁸ but he does at least agree about the poses: 'with all its characteristic discontinuities and its shifting stances and distances, most of Aristophanes is (whatever else it may be) poses, large and small' (314). Secondly, I believe that when Aristophanes offers advice, this is almost always a designedly transparent pose, in the sense that he does not expect or intend the audience to regard his advice as something on which they are being called to act (§6). Silk again might have qualms about the reference to intention; but he does agree that Aristophanes' adoption of the adviser's pose does not usually involve the proposal of courses of action, since the case of Aristophanes must be subsumed under his larger generalisation: 'in literature (dramatic or other) "courses of action" in the ordinary sense are not usually "proposed" at all' (313).¹¹⁹ Thirdly, we are agreed that there are passages in Aristophanes that are 'untypical' (312), such as the *Frogs* parabasis. In my view, a possible explanation of this passage's untypical character might be that Aristophanes *is* (unusually) proposing a course of action and *does* want the audience to be influenced by it. In that sense, it would be a serious proposal.¹²⁰

Finally, 'serious: substantial...; its opposite is "trivial"' (315). It is here that Henderson and I fall into alleged confusion (316):

In the first place, they seek to transfer to serious-sober the value appropriate to serious-substantial: hence the exaggerated interest in the joke-free parabasis of *Frogs*... But then again they contrive an alternative conflation of serious-substantial and serious-honest, and hence require of Aristophanic comedy that, when dealing with politics, it should cultivate a kind of political commitment that one would expect of, and indeed (under the heading of serious-honest) require of, a democratic politician.

Silk's diagnosis is vitiated by the failure to distinguish interpretative hypotheses from evaluative judgements which I noted in my discussion of assumption (i). In *interpreting* the parabasis of *Frogs* as serious-sober in *intent*, I was not expressing an opinion about the *value* of the passage at all; so the question of 'transferring'

¹¹⁸ But using the word 'pretend' entails *some* ascription of intentionality. We could not say that someone is *pretending* to be (for example) a doctor if their behaviour is delusional.

¹¹⁹ So, even if we do agree on this point about Aristophanes, we do not agree on the grounds. I drew this conclusion by looking more closely at Aristophanes' plays, in their cultural context (n.115), and have no confidence in the value of generalising about 'literature'. Silk adds: 'In Kantian and post-Kantian aesthetics, of course, the whole conception of literature and art as a whole precludes any such proposal' (313 n.36). Of course: but non-Kantians might wonder what has become of the objections to making the interpretation depend on 'externals' (309). Kantian aesthetics is not internal to Aristophanes' culture, let alone to his plays.

¹²⁰ But whether it was also 'sincere' in the sense 'not... merely self-serving' (313), I have no way of knowing. Perhaps he was bribed to support the recall of the exiles, perhaps he was secretly hoping for an oligarchic coup, perhaps he wanted to gain prestige by jumping on an already moving bandwagon...; or perhaps he thought it would be in Athens' best interests to do this. My original comment on the opacity of Aristophanes' extratheatrical political convictions (§10) remains.

value from one kind of seriousness does not arise.¹²¹ But even if we overlook this mistake, where (I would like to know) has Silk found me praising the parabasis of *Frogs* for its joke-free seriousness? Where has he found me demanding that Aristophanes display political commitment,¹²² or condemning him for his failure to do so? He does not say.

Silk maintains that I hold that seriousness and humour come in separate packages (309-10) *and* that the comedian must always be funny (310 n.28) *and* that Aristophanic comedy is required to be serious (316). He is, in fact, wrong on all three counts. But his claims lack even internal credibility: it is difficult to see how any reasonable person *could* be committed to a package so hopelessly and blatantly inconsistent as this. Admittedly, people are sometimes unreasonable. But interpretations that entail irrationality on the part of the person you are—or should be—trying to understand must be a last resort. Though they are temptingly convenient devices for polemic, they need to be supported by meaningful evidence if they are to constitute a serious contribution to debate.¹²³

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¹²¹ I took an (‘exaggerated’?) interest in this passage because, as a serious (that is, serious-honest) interpreter, I felt I ought to acknowledge an apparent exception to my general account of Aristophanes’ lack of serious intent in the adviser’s role. This exception has (not unreasonably) been seen as weakening my case, but I do not believe that there is any inconsistency: see Heath (1997), 247 n.35; (2002), 103.

¹²² Not, I hope, from the opening paragraph of §1. I deny that political commitment necessarily impairs artistic or literary value: to conclude from this that I maintain that artistic or literary value is necessarily impaired by the *absence* of political commitment would require a catastrophic failure of logic on the part of the reader.

¹²³ Olson (2002), 108-9: ‘Silk routinely adopts a hostile or dismissive attitude toward the work of other scholars, not always with adequate cause. Despite the assertions made in chapter 7, for example, the long discussion among Heath, Henderson, and Sommerstein about the politics of Old Comedy has not gone astray over confusion about the significance of the English word “serious.” The debate is about what a politically aware audience would have made of dramas that were performed at state-sponsored festivals but were highly critical of democracy, a point obscured by Silk’s analysis.’

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