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Review of Sidwell, Aristophanes the Democrat, in New England Classical Journal 38 (2011), 290-92.

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Keith Sidwell, *Aristophanes the Democrat. The Politics of Satirical Comedy during the Peloponnesian War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xv + 407. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-521-51998-4) \$99.00.

Sidwell's study of the nine comedies written during the Peloponnesian War offers an ingenious, original, and challenging view of Aristophanic comedy that is, I regret to say, almost completely unconvincing.

The point of departure is a close reading of the parabasis of *Clouds*. Sidwell posits that, because the existing play is an unperformed revision, the parabasis was addressed to Aristophanes' patrons and thus shows us the playwright speaking in his own, authentic voice. The surprising degree of sympathy that Aristophanes expressed here for the democratic politician Hyperbolus (*Clouds* 551–59) suggests to Sidwell that Aristophanes was really a supporter of the radical democracy and of the war against Sparta. Sidwell acknowledges that in other comedies Aristophanes attacked Hyperbolus by name twelve times but attempts to show, after examination of each of these instances, why they need not constitute evidence of Aristophanes' personal stance. Some of these attacks, for example, were put in the mouths of unsympathetic characters. Another clue that the playwright was a democrat is his statement that he does not wear long hair (*Clouds* 545), which Sidwell takes as evidence not of Aristophanes' baldness but of his refusal to follow a laconizing fashion characteristic of enemies of democracy. Finally, although for many readers Aristophanes' vehement attacks on the pro-war Cleon are signs that Aristophanes opposed the war and the

radical democracy, for Sidwell something else was at stake: Cleon represented a rustic and uneducated strand of the democracy whereas Hyperbolus was urban and educated (165).

All of these arguments are dubious. The usual consensus is that Aristophanes was opposed to the war, though many scholars regard the opinions voiced in his comedies as concoctions mixing genuine political ideals with festive invective, generic conventions, and a fictionalized identity. A challenge to the prevailing wisdom is always welcome, but Sidwell's contentions would be less tenuous if they addressed more of the evidence. For a book titled *Aristophanes the Democrat* surprisingly few facts or arguments are adduced to support the central claim.

In fact the book is less about politics than it is about Aristophanes' rivalry with other comic playwrights, above all Eupolis, whom Sidwell casts as Aristophanes' anti-democratic, anti-war rival. Certainly surviving fragments of Eupolis and passages in Aristophanes give us a glimpse into the competitive world of the dramatic festivals, and this leads in Chapter Two to the issue of metacomedy, whereby comic playwrights recycle and parody scenes of other playwrights. This discussion I found more instructive. Sidwell assembles criticisms Aristophanes leveled against low-brow comic routines, such as exhibiting a circumcised phallus, an old man beating people with a stick, bringing torches on stage, and people crying *iou iou* (*Clouds* 537–43, others at *Peace* 740–47; he excludes the jokes described at the opening of *Frogs* because they are not relayed directly by the poet). Sidwell notes that Aristophanes himself used these routines, but rather than condemn the playwright for hypocrisy Sidwell proposes that Aristophanes used them to parody Eupolis, seen as their

originator. Sidwell points to fr. 213 of Cratinus' *Pytine* (423 BC), in which Cratinus criticized Aristophanes for speaking like Eupolis, a criticism which may be related to Eupolis' claim in fr. 89 of *Baptai* that he (Eupolis) co-authored the *Knights*; Eupolis in turn evidently recycled plot elements of the *Knights* in his own *Marikas* (421 BC), replacing Cleon with Hyperbolus as the targeted demagogue.

Much of this interaction has been recognized before, but Sidwell presses the case much farther, arguing that Aristophanes' comedies are permeated with allusions to Eupolidean comedy. Chapters Four through Six treat this thesis in detail; readers should also consult Appendix 3, which gives a timeline and thematic entries for relevant comedies. Sidwell believes that Eupolis can be identified as the poet behind Dicaeopolis in the *Acharnians* and that the comedy constitutes a satirical attack both on Eupolis and Eupolis' use of Cratinus. The market scenes in *Acharnians*, suggests Sidwell, can be traced to a scene in a Eupolidean comedy in which Cratinus was shown in a market. Therefore the audience would recognize the behavior of Cratinus, but behind the mask is Eupolis.

Similar unmaskings are performed for the other comedies. Vulgarities in *Knights* may not be Aristophanes' vulgarities but Aristophanes parodying vulgarities created by Eupolis. According to Sidwell *Clouds* targets Socrates and his circle; Sidwell thinks that the Unjust Argument was recognized as Eupolis. Sidwell also thinks Alcibiades would be recognizable behind Strepsiades: both are associated with Socrates and are in debt, so the joke would be that Alcibiades was cast as a yokel. In *Peace* Eupolis would have been recognizable in Trygaeus: Trygaeus/Eupolis is proud to have stopped and driven out Hyperbolus (921,

1321), yet because Eupolis is being satirized the audience would understand that Aristophanes is a supporter of Hyperbolus. *Lysistrata*, in Sidwell's view, is actually a pro-war play because Lysistrata, the mouthpiece of the pro-peace movement, is undercut by the presence of men ogling naked Diallage and the women are generally shown as whores. Eupolis would be glimpsed behind the Relative in *Thesmophoriazusae*, a play that attacks Eupolis, Euripides, and Cleisthenes; the last would be understood to be pro-Spartan because he was teased for being homosexual and homosexuality was a marker of Spartan sympathies. Eupolis got revenge for this in *Demes*, which Sidwell dates to 410 and in which the lead character, Pyronides, would have been recognized by the audience as Aristophanes, a radical democrat trying to fetch back from Hades the dead doyens of democracy.

I have no doubt that the characters in Aristophanes have unstable, fluid identities; speculation about them is imperative when so much evidence is missing, but the interpretations offered by Sidwell rely far too heavily on conjecture and guesswork. At times the conjunction "if" introduces every other sentence. This makes for exceedingly difficult going for readers who might pause to think about whether they agree with the multiple assumptions being made. At least Sidwell is honest and offers occasional concessions such as, "This cannot, unfortunately, be demonstrated independently. Nonetheless, it is worth pausing for a moment to reflect upon the major inference we might make if it were true" (20), but a circular argument is bound to follow. Too often the author is transparently cherry-picking evidence and mustering any argument he can in support of his thesis. On page 203 a scholium is considered reliable because the scholiast is thought to have had access to now-lost sources, whereas a few pages

later (212) a scholium is dismissed as having no independent value; in truth neither scholium is proven to be more or less valuable than the other. Sidwell frequently invokes irony or parody to explain why something does not mean what it is usually taken to mean.

Sidwell has a formidable grasp of the ancient sources and modern bibliography, and this is a stimulating contribution that challenges orthodoxies. I have not done justice to many of his nuanced and complex arguments. Nevertheless, before tackling this book readers might first consult Zachary Biles, *Aristophanes and the Poetics of Competition* (Cambridge 2011), which offers a more accessible and persuasive account of the rivalry among the poets of Old Comedy. Interestingly, Biles has reviewed the same evidence and concludes that the rivalry with Cratinus outweighs in importance the rivalry with Eupolis.

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