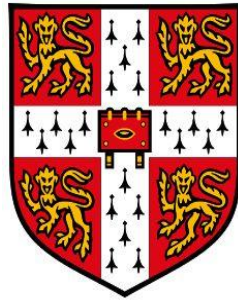


HYPER-DEMOCRACY: THE POLITICS OF ARISTOPHANES

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Preface

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee

Abstract

Hyper-Democracy: The Politics of Aristophanes

Zachary Case

My dissertation grapples with three significant areas of Classical scholarship: the politics of Aristophanes, the meaning of democracy, and the nature of ancient theatre. In the first place, I propose to re-conceptualize Aristophanes' political agenda, which has often been conceived in terms of the poet's personal antagonism towards democracy or in terms of the impossibility of pinning down any particular agenda in the first place. My dissertation, which rejects a biographical approach whilst remaining committed to a version of intentionalism, argues that Aristophanes advocates and theorizes – though only ever informally, implicitly, and incidentally – a conception of democracy that is more democratic (i.e. inclusive and egalitarian) than anything the Athenians themselves had ever practiced. That is what I call hyper-democracy, whose critical vocabulary is provided by modern political theorists, especially (but not limited to) Jacques Rancière and Hannah Arendt. This conception is embodied in Aristophanes' plays, particularly in those which stage and empower disenfranchised citizens, women, and slaves. What is at stake is also a new way of thinking about the theatre in classical Athens, which has for a long time been regarded as a predominantly civic affair and dominated by scholarship on tragedy. What my dissertation shows is not only that comic theatre is not strictly civic, but that it can even be considered strictly *non*-civic when it comes to Aristophanes' plays, which work to disrupt any notion of a unified citizen-audience and to denaturalise civic ideology. In support of this, I make the case for regarding the theatre as an extra-institutional body, much closer to the agora than to the assembly and lawcourts, and one which does not merely reflect but actively manifests political action on stage.

Like Aristophanes' plays, my dissertation falls into two distinct, though not unrelated, parts, with a kind of 'parabasis' falling in between. Part I, comprising episodes one ('Laughing Together... Not') and two ('Closure versus Anti-Closure...') that respectively focus on the first half of *Frogs* and the end of *Wealth*, explores the intended effect of comedy on the audience. Laughter and closure are two issues that are central to what comedy is 'about'; getting to grips with them is implicit in any interpretation of comedy, and, as such, my attempt to do so will lay the groundwork for the second half of my thesis. My central claim here is that if the spectators expect to laugh and for the endings to achieve closure, that is not always what they

get. The effect of this is divisive and alienating, amounting to a kind of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. With the audience members at times divided from each other and aware of the division, the contingency of their identities can be exposed, and Aristophanes' open, expansive, and egalitarian conception of democracy can accordingly be crafted.

If Part I considers the disruptive moments in the affective relationship between the plays and (members of) the audience, Part II, comprising episodes three ('Citizens'), four ('Women') and five ('Slaves'), considers the disruptive moments within Aristophanes' comic worlds, with close readings of *Acharnians*, *Lysistrata*, *Assemblywomen* and *Frogs*. We move, in other words, from Brechtian 'defamiliarization' to Rancièrian *dissensus* – a move Rancière himself makes when addressing the thorny issue of the political efficacy of art, discussed in my 'parabasis' ('From Defamiliarization to *Dissensus*'). These disruptive moments constitute democratic empowerment, as disenfranchised characters including Dicaeopolis, Lysistrata, Praxagora, and Xanthias make claims to the political by entering the 'space of appearance' (Arendt) and embodying the logic of *dissensus* (Rancière). The fact that the plays under consideration end by shutting down the egalitarian and emancipatory possibilities that they raise does not prove Aristophanes' conservatism. Rather, the patterns of the plays reflect the perpetually shifting nature of hyper-democracy: a form that, as Sheldon Wolin writes, is 'doomed to succeed only temporarily.'

At the same time as I engage with modern political theory, I remain committed to historicism. I show that the plays under discussion, which cover Aristophanes' career and the three main groupings of *polis* society, were staged around watershed moments in Athenian history, in particular the two oligarchic revolutions of the late fifth century. These can be seen to inform the development of Aristophanes' political thought. In my 'exodos', I re-interpret a much-debated testimony stating that *Frogs* was reperformed, using it to bolster my case for Aristophanes' commitment to what I call hyper-democracy ('Reperforming *Frogs* and Aristophanes' 'Commitment').

Acknowledgements

I could not have written my PhD alone. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor, Tim Whitmarsh, who makes me feel a lot cleverer than I am. His commitment and astuteness have been invaluable to me throughout. Tim was far from the only scholar to lend his support. I am particularly grateful to the Fellows of King's College: Rosanna Omitowoju and Robin Osborne for engaging with my work at all its stages and providing generous support, Ingo Gildenhard for conducting my PhD registration, and Simon Goldhill for prompting me to think harder. I am fortunate to have known and learnt from all of them, as well as John Henderson, over the past seven and a half years. I am indebted to several other scholars in the Classics Faculty as well: Rebecca Lämmle for her dedication as my second supervisor, Paul Cartledge for his substantial feedback on several chapters, Hannah Willey and Carol Atack for taking the time to read individual chapters, and David Butterfield for giving me the privilege of being a teaching associate at Queen's College for the past academic year and for lending me his office during Michaelmas 2019 (where episode five was written). I also owe a special thanks to Mario Telò, who read and gave feedback on my thesis in its entirety. He has always been kind and encouraging, and he took great care of me during the semester I spent at UC Berkeley between the submission of the thesis and the viva. Last but not least, I would like to thank my examiners, Renaud Gagné and Ralph Rosen, for their extremely constructive and thought-provoking feedback.

It is not just academics who have supported me. I also got by with more than a little help from my friends. Most of all at Cambridge, I have relied on Nir Stern, not just for his friendship but also for his intellect: many of my ideas were tested on him over coffees and pints, and many of his comments on my writing helped me reshape the final draft. I would also like to thank my housemates: Tig in the Rage Cage, and Stella, Ella, and Niall at River Lane. They have all been tremendous and tremendously fun. Speaking of which, I cannot ignore my friends at home, especially Max, Alex. P, Alex W., Jonah, Oli, James, Nathan, and Ben. They made writing a thesis during several national lockdowns so bearable, and, afterwards, like the Sirens of the *Odyssey*, distracted me with enticing trips to London and to various camp sites on the south coast that I could not resist. Above all, I owe a heartfelt thanks to Rachel Flint and Kate Marston, who were always there for me at the start and end of my PhD.

It is not easy to write a PhD thesis at the best of times, let alone during a global pandemic that impelled me to live at home during the long lockdown months in the middle of

things. Thankfully, I have a family that supported me through it. I owe my biggest thanks to them: to my parents, Cara and Andrew; to my brothers, Ben and Nate; to Weena and Medel. It was at home that I really was able to knuckle down and work out what my thesis was about; this is a fact which can no doubt be attributed to my daily walks with my mom. It is to her that my thesis is first and foremost dedicated – do I have a choice? I also owe everything to my dad, whose lawyer’s eye for detail was particularly handy in the writing-up phase. I am unbelievably blessed to have such loving and encouraging parents. I owe a special word, as well, to my grandparents – Richie and Harriet, Bill and Linda – who have given me their continual and unbounded love. My thesis is also for Grandpa Bill, whose jokes about my thesis being written in Greek and about whether my thesis is finished yet never get old...

Last but not least, I would like to thank my funding bodies. These include the Jebb Fund, the Faculty of Classics, and King’s College, whose generosity I could not have done without.

For my parents

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Notes

The texts of Aristophanes' plays and the relevant scholia are respectively that of Wilson 2007 and Wilson 1975. The texts and numbering of the comic fragments and testimonia are that of the appropriate volume of *Poetae Comici Graeci* (Kassel and Austin 1983-2001). Abbreviations of ancient authors and texts correspond to those used in the most recent edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Whitmarsh 2019).

All translations are my own, unless indicated otherwise.

All dates are given in BCE, unless obvious otherwise.

The total word count is 78, 978.

PROLOGUE

Aristophanes and Politics, Again

They say too that when Dionysius the tyrant of Syracuse asked to learn about the Athenian political system (τὴν Ἀθηναίων πολιτείαν), Plato sent him the work of Aristophanes (τὴν Ἀριστοφάνους ποίησιν), and advised him to study his plays and learn about their political system (αὐτῶν πολιτείαν).

What did Dionysius learn? We are not told in the anecdote from the principal ancient *Life of Aristophanes* (Ar. test. 1.43-5), whose testimonial value lies less in its historical accuracy than in its expression of an intrinsic relationship between the work of Aristophanes and the Athenian political system.¹ The nature of that relationship, which has tended to focus on Aristophanes' political outlook and the effect of his plays on contemporary society, is still being fiercely debated.² In fact, it has always been debated as long as Classics has been a discipline, particularly among scholarship since late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, a time when the meaning and value of democracy was being contested.³ My thesis, written in the wake of the Brexit referendum and two fraught US presidential elections, a time when the meaning and value of democracy is once more being contested, intervenes in this critical tradition. I argue that Aristophanes' plays embody a conception of democracy that is more democratic – inclusive and egalitarian – than anything the Athenians themselves had practised in their own political system. That is what I call hyper-democracy.

My argument may sound counter-intuitive at first. Overwhelmingly among those who have attempted to locate Aristophanes' political position, Aristophanes has been seen as one of the prime antagonists of democracy, or at least of the so-called 'radical' democracy of the late fifth century following the death of Pericles. This view is not too difficult to construct if we

¹ On the ancient critical tradition in this regard, see Olson 2010: 37-45.

² The most recent political reading of Aristophanes is the eclectic collection of essays in Foley and Rosen 2020, who state in their introduction that getting to grips with Aristophanes' politics in some form is inescapable, since questions of politics 'pervade *all* of the plays' (1). See also the surveys in Carey 1994; Van Steen 2007; Olson 2010; Bertelli 2013.

³ Walsh 2009, tracking the range of views from Gillies 1786 up to Murray 1933, and showing how those views 'laid the groundwork for modern discussions' (58). See also Gomme 1938: 97-102, surveying the various scholarly attempts to pinpoint Aristophanes' political outlook in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before rejecting that interpretive move altogether. For an overview of the parallel debates among non-Anglophone (mostly German) scholarship, beginning with the account of Müller-Stübing 1873, see Kraus 1985: 25-30 and Spielvogel 2003: 3-6.

take at face value certain features of his comedies: an elitist bias in Aristophanes' choice of political targets; criticism levelled at democratic institutions such as the lawcourts and democratic tendencies such as popular litigiousness; the offering of advice that might be taken as proof of conservative leanings, most notoriously in the *parabasis* of *Frogs* to re-enfranchise the oligarchs and to instate noble leaders (*Ra.* 687-92, 734-7).⁴ On this account, the debate has largely been about how far Aristophanes' political conservatism extends, the poet being tagged with varying degrees of hostility to democracy⁵: outright oligarch,⁶ closet or crypto-oligarch,⁷ moderate Cimonian,⁸ a tag sometimes anachronistically framed in terms of aligning with the 'right' over the 'left'.⁹ The idea that Aristophanes was personally a radical democrat has been aired by Keith Sidwell, it is worth mentioning, though his attempt to uncover a hidden political agenda on such terms is based on an esoteric and fanciful intertextual reading of Aristophanes' plays and the comic fragments.¹⁰

However, scholars have since fired back against the leading view that posits Aristophanes' personal antagonism towards democracy. Seeing Aristophanes' politics predominantly through the lens of personal abuse – which is not solely and exclusively targeted at demagogues or the poor in any case – lends to a rather blinkered view of what may be better regarded as the comic poet's oppositionism and opportunism.¹¹ Even the extreme satire of Cleon in *Knights* is not compelling evidence for Aristophanes' opposition to Cleon, let alone to democracy as a system.¹² Equally, criticisms of democracy's failings do not necessitate Aristophanes' ideological opposition to democracy per se – in fact, criticisms are invariably aimed at those who abuse the system, such as jurors who are only in it for the pay – while no alternative system of government is ever positively proposed in Aristophanes' plays, a fact accepted even by scholars who see Aristophanes as a broadly conservative figure.¹³

At the same time, any concrete political 'advice' that Aristophanes claims to give in the *parabasis* is not only rather scant, this poet usually being more interested in promoting himself

⁴ Esp. Ste Croix 1996. On the dominance of this view of Aristophanes' politics among modern scholarship, see Pritchard 2012: 18 with references; though it is a view which has been around for a long time: see Walsh 2009: esp. 67-70.

⁵ Cf. Walsh 2009, discussing the older scholarship: 'Those who have offered their opinions on his politics have maintained the relatively consistent view that he was an Athenian conservative, but substantive differences emerge in how 'conservative' is defined' (68).

⁶ Rosenbloom 2002: *passim*.

⁷ Sommerstein 2009f: 212; Olson 2012: 78 (not quite disavowed in either case).

⁸ Ste. Croix 1996: 63.

⁹ Sommerstein 1996b: 335; Storey 2011: 316-7; Henderson 2020: 51-2.

¹⁰ Sidwell 2009, with Lefkowitz 2010.

¹¹ Dover 1972: 33-6; Heath 1987: 21-41; Pritchard 2012; Ruffell 2020a: 75-7, 2020b: 125-7.

¹² Rosen 1988: 59-82; Hall 2018, 2019; Osborne 2020.

¹³ Henderson 1990: 310; Sommerstein 2014: 297.

or bashing his rivals.¹⁴ It is also, with the possible exception of *Frogs*, typically unspecific and uncontroversial or parodic and self-contradictory – even within the self-same *parabasis*, as in that of *Acharnians*, where the chorus rather nebulously boast that Aristophanes ‘says he will teach you many good things’ (φησὶν δ’ ὑμᾶς πολλὰ διδάξειν ἀγάθ’, *Ach.* 656), and, in a play generally promoting peace, proclaim that the Athenians ‘will more likely win the war by taking him on as an adviser’ (τῷ πολέμῳ πολὺ νικήσειν τοῦτον ζύμβουλον ἔχοντα, *Ach.* 651).¹⁵ This is not even to mention that for Aristophanes to be seen as writing plays that support a minority group of elites against the interests of the *dēmos* seems likely to have been inherently self-defeating in the theatrical context.¹⁶ The idea that unearthing Aristophanes’ political outlook exposes flagrantly, or even covertly, anti-democratic views is by now outdated.¹⁷

Taking a straightforwardly biographical approach to understanding the politics of Aristophanes seems at first sight to make perfect sense. This is especially because the fantasy of reconstructing Aristophanes’ ‘voice’ through his plays, above all in the *parabasis*, is a tantalising one, as Ralph Rosen explains: ‘If we think we are listening to the poet’s voice, and if that voice is loud and polemical, it is no wonder that we would want to understand the politics as emanating from a real person and that they were meant to be taken at face value.’¹⁸ However, the shortcomings of that approach are self-evident. We simply do not have enough independent information about Aristophanes (how he voted in the assembly or what his relationship was with Cleon, for instance), though even if we did that may not help us much when it comes to understanding his plays; while much of what we do know comes from his own comedies with their penchant for irony, exaggeration, and distortion.¹⁹ Naturally enough, pinning down the political position of a master comic poet and satirist is extremely tricky, a truism that applies to all comic satirists, even those about whom we know much more, such as Jonathan Swift or Jon Stewart.²⁰ How, exactly, can we tell when Aristophanes is expressing his own political views, or even whether he ever speaks ‘seriously’ about politics through his plays at all?

¹⁴ Biles 2002; Ruffell 2002; Bakola 2008.

¹⁵ Heath 1987: 18-21; Rosen 2010: 275-7, 2015a: 248-9, 2020: 19-20; Nelson 2014: 112-3. I discuss the *Frogs* exception in episode five and in my ‘exodos.’

¹⁶ Henderson 1990. None of the ways around this are convincing, for example positing an actual audience composed mainly of elites (qua Sommerstein 1997) or a target audience composed of literati (qua Wright 2012).

¹⁷ For the most recent attempt to untether Aristophanes from the tag of political conservative, see Miller 2019.

¹⁸ Rosen 2020: 10. Cf. Rosen 2010: ‘This sense that there lurks somewhere beneath the surface of the plays an authentic authorial voice, and the implicit assumption that Aristophanes is attempting to establish some sort of personalized relationship with the audience, make it easy to understand why critics have been so eager to see a “real” Aristophanes behind the autobiographical intimations that pepper his plays’ (229).

¹⁹ Rosen 2010: 229-41, 2020.

²⁰ Rosen 2012.

Scholars rejecting the biographical approach have thus argued that Aristophanes' plays actively frustrate and resist any form of explicit political commitment on the part of the poet.²¹ According to one reading, Aristophanes makes comedy solely to entertain,²² or (the more sophisticated version) constructs an image of the comic poet as a morally indignant political reformer to meet the demands of comic satire, to tantalise the interpreter, and to distinguish himself from his rivals.²³ According to another, Aristophanes writes plays that are vehicles for expressing and exploring ideological tensions in Athenian society, without ever disclosing a clear-cut political agenda.²⁴ In the light of all this, it might reasonably be concluded that interpretive efforts to locate Aristophanes' politics end up revealing more about the interpreters' own political inclinations than those of Aristophanes himself.²⁵ Perhaps it would be more fruitful to ditch politics altogether and focus on comic form²⁶; or, better, to focus on the 'autonomy' of comic form to get to grips with politics, an Adornoian strategy recently applied to tragedy.²⁷ The Author, after all, is 'dead.'²⁸

Just as Dionysus revived Aeschylus in Aristophanes' *Frogs* – even though, as Aeschylus boasts, his plays have not 'died with him' (*Ra.* 868), since they were still being reperformed after his death (thus strictly making *his* revival redundant)²⁹ – I will attempt to revive Aristophanes and authorial intent, but not in the positivist, wooden, and biographical manner of previous scholars. My version of intentionalism is not about reducing Aristophanes' plays to a manifesto advocating practical or pragmatic policies that may or may not be heeded by a *dēmos* often characterised in Aristophanes' plays as fickle (*Ach.* 630, 632; *Eq.* 624-82; *Vesp.* 919-21; *Eccl.* 193-6, 797-8, 812-29). Nor is it reliant on dubious nuggets of external evidence. One such nugget, often cited by scholars, is the comment of the 'Old Oligarch' that (every?) Old comedy fundamentally involves ridiculing powerful individuals instead of the power-holding *dēmos* at large (*Ath. Pol.* 2.18), a terse and polemical – and, with a play such as *Knights* in mind, surely misinformed – claim that has informed an influential reading of the

²¹ Cartledge 2020: 273-4 catalogues the three most common interpretive routes into (or away from) questions of politics, in terms of what might be called scepticism, positivism, and an attempt to wriggle between those polarities. Cartledge's case for the 'cunningly and committedly uber-political Aristophanes' (278) is the one I will be making, but in a rather different way.

²² Gomme 1938; Halliwell 1984a, 2004; Reckford 1987; Heath 1987; Bierl 2002; Olson 2010: 59-69; Holzberg 2010.

²³ Rosen 1988: 59-82, 2007: 3-42, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2020; Goldhill 1991; Bakola 2008.

²⁴ Konstan 1995; Pelling 2000: 123-40; Ober 2002: 122-55; Platter 2007; Zumbunnen 2012; Halliwell 2020.

²⁵ Van Steen 2007: 121-2; Walsh 2009: 70; Hall 2018: 354.

²⁶ Silk 2000.

²⁷ Wohl 2015; Telò 2021. Cf. Gurd 2017: 45.

²⁸ Barthes 1977.

²⁹ Dover 1993: 23.

genre as providing ‘vicarious pleasure in the triumph of the insignificant over the great’ and acting as a ‘safety valve for unofficial discontent before it became politically or socially disruptive.’³⁰ There is, it has been asserted, no objective ‘external control, evidence independent of our reading of the plays that would help us to calibrate our estimation of their tone or mood.’³¹

My version of intentionalism, by contrast, is still grounded in the comic plays in their original contexts, though in places typically overlooked by scholars. Paradoxically, perhaps, it is when the poet’s ‘voice’ filters through in the *parabasis*, with all its irony and indeterminacy, that the nature of Aristophanes’ intention is most clouded and intractable. Instead, it is precisely when Aristophanes is *not* talking about Athenian politics that his intention becomes discernible, above all in formal strategies, staging decisions, and plot dynamics. These are features of comedy that extend across Aristophanes’ oeuvre, something that cannot be said of Aristophanes’ comic persona(e), which only emerge(s) from the early plays with their quasi-autobiographical *parabaseis*.³²

We can put this in the terms espoused by Quentin Skinner and the ‘Cambridge School’ of intellectual history, building on J. L. Austin’s work on performative ‘speech acts.’³³ Aristophanes’ ‘utterances,’ scripted in plays written and staged in unique historical contexts, carry ‘illocutionary’ force, the ‘uptake’ of which amounts to understanding the poet’s intention or point: ‘*what* he may have been intending to do *in* writing what he wrote’ (e.g. 1988b: 75).³⁴ This approach, in which the author is not extraneous to the text, allows us both to take into account the context of the plays without reifying it as a determining key to their meaning, and to acknowledge a designing authorial intent without claiming to read the author’s mind or to understand the author’s motives *for* writing. It also helps us to be wary of comedy’s deliberate ‘oblique strategies,’ those in which what Aristophanes said does not match what he ‘may be said to have meant by saying what he said.’³⁵ This includes, among many things, meta-commentary on what is funny (see episode one) or the promotion of seemingly anti-democratic political goals (see exodos).

³⁰ Henderson 1998: 26. Cf. Henderson 1990, 1993, 1997; Spielvogel 2003.

³¹ Heath 1987: 8. Cf. Goldhill 1991: 201; Heath 1997: 248; Silk 2000: 309; Sidwell 2009: 3-5.

³² On the early *parabaseis* as forms of autobiography, see Hubbard 1991; Sidwell 2009; Telò 2014. Sidwell 2009: 6-7 notes that the only choruses in the *parabaseis* of *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Clouds*, *Wasps*, and *Peace* claim to be representing the poet’s own views, a fact which leads him to single out *Clouds*, the play with the most autobiographical *parabasis* of the lot, in order to unearth Aristophanes’ political agenda.

³³ Austin 1962.

³⁴ Skinner 1988a, 1988b, 1988d.

³⁵ Skinner 1988a: 50.

Moreover, this approach prompts us to get away from trying to determine the actual effect of the plays on the original audiences, their ‘perlocutionary’ force in Skinner’s terms. That is something which has occupied many scholars of Aristophanic comedy, even though the evidence points in contradictory directions. This is exemplified by the purported (non-)influence of Aristophanes’ plays on Cleon versus Socrates: the *dēmos* were said to have elected as general the former *despite* his abuse in *Knights*, which included the direct wish for the politician’s destruction (*Eq.* 973-6), much to the chagrin of the poet (*Nu.* 581-7), at the same time as they were said to have executed the latter *because of* his portrayal in *Clouds* (*Plat. Apol.* 18b-c, 19c).³⁶ My focus is on ‘illocution’ (intended effect) not just because ‘perlocution’ (actual effect) is ultimately irreducible and speculative. It is also because Aristophanes is keenly aware that he cannot control how people will actually respond to his plays, not least when it came to the first *Clouds*, a professed masterpiece that ended up as a flop (*Nu.* 518-26; *Vesp.* 1016-7, 1043-8). On the flip side, Aristophanes actively advertises that intentionality is central to meaning, a point drawn out in the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides in *Frogs*, where it has been argued that the sense of each poet’s ‘good’ or ‘bad’ intention in writing tragedy feeds directly into their respective valuation.³⁷

Presuming authorial intent is to some extent inevitable for the literary critic as well.³⁸ Roland Barthes himself could not kill off authors and replace them with readers in ‘The Death of the Author,’ for he still had to maintain that there exists a ‘writer’ or ‘scriptor,’ one whose ‘only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others’ and one who has access to ‘this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt.’³⁹ Openly acknowledging the author is not a way to constrain possibilities of meaning for its own sake, something scholarship on comedy has rightly been accused of doing.⁴⁰ Nor is it to deny that

³⁶ On this and other evidence for and against comedy’s efficacy, at least on a simplistic model of cause and effect, see e.g. Olson 2010: 44-5; Ruffell 2020b: 124-5.

³⁷ Rosen 2008: esp. 147-53. The same implicit recognition of Euripides’ bad intentions is at issue in *Women at the Thesmophoria*, where the women accuse him – and not any other tragic poet – of personally slandering them (esp. *Thes.* 181-2).

³⁸ At the most elemental level, Sartre 1967 argues that no writer can fail to disclose a particular intention in the very act of writing, for ‘if a writer has chosen to remain silent on any aspect whatever of the world, or... to *pass over* it in silence, one has to ask him a third question: “Why have you spoken of this rather than that, and – since you speak to order to bring about change – why do you want to change this rather than that?” (15).

³⁹ Barthes 1977: 146-7. For a reading of that essay as a ‘defence of traditional authorship and of respect for biography,’ a ‘satiric *tour de force*’ which was in fact signed and copyrighted by the author himself, see Carlier 2000. Among other things, Carlier notes how at one point Barthes explicitly accepts authorial intent, when he announces that ‘Proust himself ... was visibly concerned with the task of inexorably blurring ... the relation between the writer and his characters’ (Barthes 1977: 144, discussed by Carlier 2000: 389-90). At any rate, does Barthes’ odd claim that the author is ‘a modern figure, a product of our society’ (1977: 142-3) allow authors to have existed in antiquity?

⁴⁰ Telò 2018. Cf. Barthes 1977: ‘To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing’ (147).

there are many different ways people may respond to comic plays, something sometimes prioritised at the expense of Aristophanes' designing intent (the possibility of different responses is, in fact, something I think Aristophanes recognises and capitalises on, as we will see).⁴¹ Rather, acknowledging the inevitability of intentionalism, especially when it comes to a genre such as Old comedy that is so infused by authorial voices and characters, is one way to read Aristophanes' plays responsibly and meaningfully in their original contexts.

For the present purposes, this will allow us to reclaim Aristophanes as a poet who, far from being one of democracy's greatest critics, might be its greatest surviving advocate and theorist, granted the well-known absence of any fully-fledged pro-democratic theory or singular foundation of democratic ideology.⁴² My version of intentionalism is capacious and discontinuous enough to allow Aristophanes apparently at times to contradict himself when it comes to the specifics of Athenian political affairs, for instance in commending the (democratic) enfranchisement of slaves but advocating the (aristocratic) re-enfranchisement of oligarchs in the *epirrhēma* of the *parabasis* of *Frogs* (Ra. 686-705), or promoting peace throughout *Acharnians*, *Peace*, and *Lysistrata*, but war in *Birds* (Av. 186, 640, 813-16, 1360-9). Yet it is consistent and committed enough for Aristophanes to project a model of what democracy means through embodied characters, particularly the marginalised and excluded, acting on the theatrical stage – Aristophanes' *Politics*, if you will. What Aristophanes advocates and theorizes, even if only ever informally, implicitly, and incidentally, is what I call hyper-democracy.

Hyper-Democracy

Democracy does not mean one single thing in classical Athens, let alone across ancient Greece or in the modern world.⁴³ Theoretically speaking, it has always meant different things to different people: for instance, rule by ignoramuses for Plato or by the poor for Aristotle and

⁴¹ Hesk 2000; Varakis-Martin 2019. Cf. Rosen 2010, describing Aristophanes' plays as didactic only in terms of 'an indirect didacticism that allows the audience to draw its own lessons from the play' (279).

⁴² A point famously made by Jones 1953, developed extensively by Ober 1996b, 2002: *passim*, esp. 32-3. The existence of certain pro-democratic theorists, purportedly contained amongst the prose writings of Protagoras, Democritus, and Thucydides, is posited by Farrar 1988. For a survey of informal expressions of democratic theory, not including the plays of Aristophanes, see Cartledge 2016: 91-104.

⁴³ Cartledge 2016: 49-227, identifying four distinct stages of democracy at Athens: 508/7 to 462/1, 462/1 to 404, 403 to 336, 336 to 322.

the ‘Old Oligarch’⁴⁴; or, in modern political theory, government by ‘agonal,’ ‘liberal,’ or ‘deliberative’ impulses.⁴⁵ The word *dēmokratia* itself, in existence probably since at least the mid-fifth century (though not attested until the 420s),⁴⁶ is not only polysemous but even contradictory.⁴⁷ It does not only embed a historical tension between a nominal ideal and an actual reality, famously captured by Thucydides’ assessment of Athens under Pericles as a democracy ‘in name’ (λόγῳ μὲν... ἔργῳ δὲ, Thuc. 2.65.9; cf. Plat. *Men.* 238c-d).⁴⁸ It also encodes an etymological tension between its constituent parts (δῆμος and κράτος), pointing to what political theorists have called ‘the paradox of democracy,’ as Mario Telò explains: ‘This phrase expresses the unresolvable contradiction between democracy as a dynamic, almost anarchic, principle of constant openness to the other and democracy as a form of government, which as such entails unifying people through constraint, conformity, and the incorporation of the outside within the inside.’⁴⁹ The word *dēmos* itself is semantically indeterminate as well, since it could mean the entire citizen body (which in Athens after 451/0 meant only freeborn adults with two Athenian parents), or the poor majority thereof; though it could not mean anything close to majority of the population of Athens, which included the women, children, metics, slaves, and foreigners expressly excluded from participation in public decision-making.⁵⁰

None of this is to say that democracy meaning ‘rule by the people’ – as opposed to rule by a single person (monarchy) or by a few people (oligarchy) – is incoherent or unintelligible. Rather, it is to say that democracy can be understood as an idea(l) that is neither contained by a monolithic political philosophy nor by a rigid set of principles underpinning an institutional framework. It is to regard democracy as something ‘inherently formless’ or ‘polymorphous,’⁵¹ something that comes into being ‘without waiting’ for a coherent foundational principle or theoretical justification.⁵² It is to conceptualize democracy in the sense of Jacques Derrida’s ‘democracy to come’ (‘démocratie à venir’) (2005: 9; cf. 28-41, 78-94):

⁴⁴ Plat. *Rep.* 494a; Arist. *Pol.* 1279b8-9, 1290a30-b20, 1317b40-41; Ps.-Xen. *Ath. Pol.* 1.2-4.

⁴⁵ Zumbrennen 2012: 1, with references.

⁴⁶ Cartledge 2016: 74, 92-3, 220.

⁴⁷ Lauriola 2017 discusses how this is reflected by the use of the word and its cognates within Aristophanes’ plays.

⁴⁸ Mossé 2013.

⁴⁹ Telò 2020a: 216, with reference to Derrida 2005 and Brown 2009.

⁵⁰ Atack 2019. Cf. Brown 2009, remarking that ‘there is an excluded inside in all democracies, whether slaves, natives, women, the poor, subordinated races or religions, or (today) illegals and aliens, *sans papiers*’ (131).

⁵¹ Wolin 2018b: 92.

⁵² Rancière 1999: 62.

‘In the end, if we try to return to the origin, we do not yet know what *democracy* will have meant nor what democracy is. For democracy does not present itself; it has not yet presented itself, but that will come. In the meantime let’s not stop using a word whose heritage is undeniable even if its meaning is still obscured, obfuscated, reserved.’

A different appreciation of the relationship between Aristophanes and politics would follow from a less constricting conception of democracy than the one often invoked by scholars, especially by those reading Greek drama predominantly in terms of its engagement with citizens and civic ideology (see below). This is a conception that certain modern political theorists can help us reconstruct in the necessary ‘gap’ left by the absence of any definitive definition of democracy – ‘a meaning in waiting’⁵³ – and one that we can simultaneously extract from Aristophanes’ plays themselves. It is Jacques Rancière and Hannah Arendt who may provide a distinctly useful critical vocabulary for understanding what democracy means for Aristophanes; though that meaning is not at odds with ancient views of democracy as represented negatively by the ‘Old Oligarch,’ Plato, and Aristotle in particular. Both Rancière and Arendt, after all, turn explicitly to the Greeks – and to Greek theatre – to make their respective cases.

For Rancière, democracy is less a system of government than an atelic, anarchical, and egalitarian set of relations which manifest themselves in sensory experience. Rancière’s premise is that perception underpins political arrangements, since they are ultimately based on who and what is, or is not, seen and heard: ‘What really deserves the name of politics is the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world.’⁵⁴ Aristotle’s foundational division between human ‘speech’ (λόγος) and animal ‘voice’ (φωνή) at the start of his *Politics* (1253a9-17), a division which comes to be perceived as self-evident, however arbitrary, provides the ultimate justification for rule and legitimation of inequality in the name of what Rancière calls *consensus*.⁵⁵ The resulting order of things is defined as the ‘police’ (‘la police’ / ‘l’ordre policier’), the name given to what is conventionally regarded as politics defined by Aristotle’s exclusionary legacy. It refers to ‘an order of the visible and the sayable that sees

⁵³ Derrida 2005: 8.

⁵⁴ Rancière 2010c: 152. This is why aesthetics (*aisthēsis*) is a form of politics, and works of art themselves instantiations of the political, as Rancière 2013 explicates: ‘[Aesthetics] is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time’ (8).

⁵⁵ Rancière 1999: 22-3.

that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.’⁵⁶

Politics, by contrast, is a form of disorder in which those sensible hierarchies are shattered. The process that achieves this is what Rancière calls *dissensus*, that which ‘breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the “natural” order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or of being ruled.’⁵⁷ Politics – by which Rancière strictly means democracy – is nothing but the momentary instantiation of *dissensus*; it is ‘not the enactment of the principle, the law, or the self of a community... politics has no *arkhē*, it is anarchical.’⁵⁸ For Rancière, the paradigmatic historical moment of Western politics is the empowerment of what became known in Athens as the *dēmos*, a term which did not designate the population or any particular subset thereof, but was rather an empty appellation that included equally all those different people who did not previously count, ‘the count of those unaccounted for’ (‘le compte des in comptés’).⁵⁹ The only qualification legitimating the *dēmos* to govern – with a major caveat being the extreme restrictions placed on Athenian citizenship, of course – is, paradoxically, the absence of any qualification, not birth or wealth as in archaic Greece (or wisdom for Plato, or virtue for Aristotle, or divine sanction for later Christians, or, or, or...) (2009b: 276-7):

‘Democracy means this astounding principle: those who rule do it on the grounds that there is no reason why some persons should rule over the others, except the fact that there is no reason. This is the anarchical principle of democracy, which is the disjunctive junction of power and demos.’

To the extent that there is anything that might positively justify rule, it is the principle of equality, ‘a universal that must be supposed, verified, and demonstrated,’⁶⁰ a principle already held by ancient sources to be the central feature of Athenian democracy along with freedom

⁵⁶ Rancière 1999: 28-9.

⁵⁷ Rancière 2010b: 147.

⁵⁸ Rancière 1992: 59. Cf. 2009b: 277, 2010a: 61, 2013: 95. On democracy as an anarchical form, see also, among others, Butler 2015, describing the “anarchist” interval or permanent principle of revolution that resides within democratic orders’ (163); and Wolin 2018b, regarding democratic politics as ‘revolutionary and excessive, irregular and spasmodic’ and whose ‘eruptive character’ ancient political theorists attempted to suppress (91).

⁵⁹ Rancière 1999: 1-19, 2010a: 27-44. By contrast, in the ‘police’ order there is strictly speaking no *dēmos*, since everyone has a defined place: ‘the essence of the police lies in a partition of the sensible that is characterized by the absence of void and supplement’ (Rancière 2010a: 44). For a convincing historical perspective on the empowerment of the *dēmos* during the ‘Athenian Revolution’ of 508/7, see Ober 1996a.

⁶⁰ Rancière 1992: 60.

(while older words for democracy contained the *iso-* root).⁶¹ And the only thing that guarantees equality, according to Rancière, is the capacity of anyone to speak and be understood by anyone, ‘the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being.’⁶² Democratic politics, on this account, is not encapsulated by or contained within any formal institutions or a constitution, even ones that (only ever) supposedly verify equality (‘...all *men* are created equal...’ in America’s Declaration of Independence that neglects women and slaves, for example). Rather, politics manifests itself momentarily, informally, and disruptively, as Hallward writes of Rancière’s central tenet: ‘Before it is a matter of representative institutions, legal procedures, or militant organizations, politics is ... the contingent dramatization of a disruptive equality, the unauthorized and impromptu improvisation of a democratic voice.’⁶³

If equality is at core of Rancière’s value-system, freedom is at the core of Arendt’s – both values together being at the core of democracy according to the ancient sources, as noted above.⁶⁴ Although in many regards opposed to Rancière with his argument for the manifestation of politics through dispute and disruption, Arendt turns to the classical Athenian *polis* – at least in her romanticised reading of it in the *Human Condition*⁶⁵ – as the paradigmatic space of ‘action’ in the public sphere, the sphere of uniquely human plurality and freedom.⁶⁶ The *polis*, as Arendt conceives it, is a ‘space of appearance’ where any individual could be ‘seen and heard’ in the presence of others.⁶⁷ It is not a fixed physical or geographical location, but rather ‘the organization of people as it arises out of acting and speaking together’ (2018: 198-9):

‘It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly.’

Arendt hereby follows an idealised version of Aristotle’s distinction between ‘political life’ (*bios*) or ‘living well’ (*to eu zēn*) and ‘bare life’ (*zoē*) or ‘existing’ (*to zēn*) – a biopolitical

⁶¹ Hdt. 5.78; Thuc. 2.37.1-3; Eur. *Supp.* 352-3, 404-8, 429-41; Plat. *Rep.* 557b-58a, 562c-63b; Arist. *Pol.* 1291b34-7, 1310a28-33, 1317a40-b17, 1318a2-10; Dem. 10.4; Isoc 7.20. For discussion of ancient notions of equality and freedom, see the essays in Ober and Hendrick 1996.

⁶² Rancière 1992: 59, 1999: 30.

⁶³ Hallward 2009: 142.

⁶⁴ See above n.61. For systematic comparisons of Arendt with Rancière, see Halpern 2011; Dikeç 2013.

⁶⁵ On the tension in Arendt’s writings between her idealisation of Greece versus Rome, particularly in *The Human Condition* versus *On Revolution* respectively, see Taminaux 2000.

⁶⁶ Arendt 2018: 7-8, 175-247.

⁶⁷ Arendt 2018: 50-8.

distinction developed (and ingeniously collapsed) by Giorgio Agamben in his extraordinary analysis of the underpinnings of totalitarianism.⁶⁸ For Arendt, *bios* is equated with the political, public sphere of ‘action,’ while *zoē* is equated with the anti-political, private spheres of ‘labour’ (that of biological necessity) and, to a lesser extent, ‘work’ (that of artificial utility).⁶⁹ If there is a bounded historical space that encapsulated ‘action’ for Arendt, it is not the general Athenian *polis* with its formal institutions, but rather the specific extra-institutional space of the Athenian *agora*.⁷⁰ The *agora*, to develop Arendt, may well be the truest ‘space of appearance,’ in the sense that there could women as well as men, slave as well as free, freely disclose themselves in public – that is, act as fully-fledged political agents.

What most closely ties Rancière’s and Arendt’s political thought together, not to mention their engagements with Greek drama (see below), is, Richard Halpern notes, ‘a shared conception of politics as a process of disclosure, appearance, or manifestation – as a field in which something is rendered publicly visible.’⁷¹ What also fundamentally unites them, Halpern adds, is ‘their shared insistence on the autonomy and dignity of the political – their refusal to subordinate it to either socioeconomic infrastructures or metaphysical ideals.’⁷² We can see both ideas unfolding in Aristophanes’ plays, where politics is an end that is achieved through characters stepping up and speaking out in the face of their consignment to mute invisibility. For Aristophanes dramatizes the empowerment of those who have no claim to political power – those who are unseen and unheard, even dehumanized – but who become seen and heard as full human beings in the presence of others. My reading will not merely say that Aristophanic comedy gives prominence to the downtrodden and temporarily restores popular sovereignty (that would not work, in any case, with a play like *Assemblywomen*, where the women do not give power back to the men at the end). Instead, my reading will show that Aristophanic comedy, with real people performing before the senses and with bodies as well as words, propagates a distinctive model of democracy that includes the excluded. As a result, Aristophanic comedy does not merely represent politics, in the sense of a second-order

⁶⁸ Agamben 1998: esp. 1-8.

⁶⁹ Arendt 2018: 7, 79-174.

⁷⁰ Arendt 1990: 81; 2006: 115; 2018: 160.

⁷¹ Halpern 2011: 564. Cf. Wolin 2018b, discussing the emergence of democracy from the reforms of Solon onwards: ‘The great achievement of self-government was to transform politics in sight and speech; power was made visible; decision-making was opened so that citizens could see its workings; ordinary men personified power, spoke to it unservilely, and held themselves answerable’ (87).

⁷² Halpern 2011: 571.

reflection of something that happens elsewhere. It actively *does* politics: what the spectators are watching is a form of democracy in action.⁷³

More specifically, the frameworks of ‘political’ *dissensus* versus ‘police’ *consensus*, as well as ‘action’ versus ‘labour’/‘work,’ can be seen to underpin Aristophanes’ comic plots.⁷⁴ At one level, Aristophanes stages movements from a ‘police’ order to a ‘political’ disorder, or from the spheres of ‘labour’ and ‘work’ and to the sphere of ‘action.’ We will see this with Dicaeopolis in *Acharnians* speaking out as an ‘unqualified’ beggar in the face of those who attempt to shut him up (episode three); with Lysistrata and Praxagora in *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen* respectively demonstrating that there is no reason for women, qua embodied, speaking beings, to be excluded from the political sphere in the first place (episode four); Xanthias in *Frogs* doing the same with regard to slaves (episode five).

In all these cases, however, the trajectory is not so straightforward, since the second halves of the plays or their endings seem to undermine the hyper-democratic energies of the first halves: Dicaeopolis sets up his own exclusionary and strictly economic *agora*; Lysistrata and the women return home, while Praxagora’s gynecocratic regime abolishes the public sphere altogether; Xanthias disappears from the action, before the ostensibly aristocratic Aeschylus is resurrected. This anti-political trajectory is crystallised in *Birds*, a play which involves a hero fleeing the litigious politics of Athens at the start (Av. 40-1), to establish his own exclusionary order of things as manifested in Cloud-cuckoo-land, where he ends up becoming tyrant (Av. 1708). I will not focus on that play, however, because it has been treated substantially in a recent article by Telò, who tracks the plot’s dynamics in terms of Peisetairos’ stifling *consensus* against the episodic moments of emancipatory *dissensus*.⁷⁵ Crucially, these anti-political gestures, even the ones sustained throughout *Birds*, are not proof of Aristophanes’ inherent conservatism or the ultimate suspension of comedy’s ‘licence’ to be transgressive. For Aristophanes’ plays become problematic, even dystopian, precisely when they are most conservative; that is, when triumphs of democratic empowerment turn undemocratic. These often scandalous reversals manifest how, in Derrida’s analysis, democracy is compromised by its proclivity to self-destruction, its inherent ‘autoimmunity’⁷⁶; or how, in Sheldon Wolin’s

⁷³ Cf. Wohl 2015: ‘Tragedy is not just a *mimēsis* of a political *praxis*; through its *mimēsis* – its aesthetic formation and transformation of reality – it is itself a political *praxis*’ (138).

⁷⁴ For readings of certain plays using Rancière, see Zumbrunnen 2012: 21-40 (*Peace* and *Lysistrata*), 60-80 (*Wasps* and *Birds*); Telò 2020a (*Birds*). Arendt remains unused when it comes to critical analysis of Aristophanes, as far as I am aware.

⁷⁵ Telò 2020a.

⁷⁶ Derrida 2005: esp. 35-9, 74.

analysis, democracy is necessarily ‘fugitive,’ meaning something which ‘seems destined to be a moment rather than a form’ and ‘doomed to succeed only temporarily.’⁷⁷

It is no coincidence that Rancière and Arendt themselves turn to (Greek) drama as a template for the enactment of politics and conceive of the enactment of politics in theatrical terms.⁷⁸ The former asserts that politics ‘is always about creating a stage... [it] always takes the form, more or less, of the establishment of a theatre,’⁷⁹ while the latter declares the theatre to be the ‘political art *par excellence*’ where alone is ‘the political sphere of human life transposed into art.’⁸⁰ Yet neither takes Aristophanes into account – a fact which may not be so surprising, since comedy is regularly omitted when political theorists use Greek drama.⁸¹ Aristophanic comedy, however, offers a distinctly fitting paradigm for Rancière and Arendt in particular, not least with its anti-mimetic and episodic form that might befit Rancière’s ‘aesthetic regime’ of democracy,⁸² and with its staging of characters who might provide a more constructive (or less destructive) model than their tragic counterparts for Arendt’s notion of ‘action’ in the *polis*.⁸³ Above all, Aristophanic comedy may be useful for these thinkers and vice versa, because it can accommodate expanded visions of the political, that which Rancière expresses by his notion of ‘the count of those unaccounted for’ and Arendt by her notion of ‘plurality,’ by denaturalising the civic altogether.

Non-Civic Drama

What is at stake in my thesis is not just a re-conceptualization of Aristophanes’ politics, nor an idea of what democracy means that is radically different – though not at all unimaginably so –

⁷⁷ Wolin 2018c, quoted at 108 and 112.

⁷⁸ Halpern 2011 discusses in detail both thinkers’ engagement with Greek drama (meaning tragedy). See also Hallward 2009 and Euben 2000 on the importance of the theatre to the political thought of Rancière and Arendt, respectively.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Hallward 2009: 142.

⁸⁰ Arendt 2018: 188. Cf. Arendt 1961: 154.

⁸¹ For example, while the German Idealist tradition of seeing tragedy as the ultimate embodiment of human freedom is entrenched, it is surely comedy – where characters are genuinely free to change the world as they like – that offers the more appropriate model, something Hegel himself admitted as Marx recognised: ‘Hegel once observed that comedy is in act superior to tragedy and humorous reasoning superior to grandiloquent reasoning’ (Marx 1862: 248). Something similar could be said about the work of modern feminists such as Butler and Honig on, for instance, the politics of protest and refusal, even though both have written extensively on Greek tragedy (Butler 2000; Honig 2013, 2021); yet their work, as we will see in episode four, applies extremely well to Aristophanes’ ‘women plays’ (something already noted of Butler by Attack forthcoming: 3-4).

⁸² Telò 2020a: 217, 237-8.

⁸³ Halpern 2011: 549-50.

from mostly antagonistic surviving ancient ideas. What is at stake is also a whole new way of thinking about the politics of the theatre in Classical Athens.

The idea that comic theatre and democracy go hand-in-hand is hardly a new one. The introduction of comedy to the Great Dionysia in 487/6 (when, for the first time, archons were appointed by lot and not by election) and to the Lenaea in the 440s (after the reforms of Ephialtes and Pericles precipitating the ‘radical’ phase of Athenian democracy) – as opposed to the earlier introduction of tragedy during the tyranny of Peisistratus around 534 – attests to its intrinsic relationship with an already democratic *polis*.⁸⁴ Be that as it may – the aetiology of Old comedy and the development of the genre by its different practitioners are not my interests here⁸⁵ – the nature of the comic theatre’s relationship with democracy has typically been discussed in terms of Athenian citizens, meaning after 451/0 free adult males born from two Athenian parents (see introduction to episode three). This includes discussions of the representation of women on stage and of the presence of women in the audience, the former almost always framed in terms of what it says about men and focusing predominantly on tragedy, the latter usually presuming the unimportance if not absence of female spectators (see introduction to episode four). It also includes engagements with comic slaves, typically regarded as the quintessential ‘other’ of Greek culture (see introduction to episode five). This view of the theatre’s politics has come to be epitomised by the influential collection of essays in the 1990 volume *Nothing to Do with Dionysus?*, whose once radical repositioning of drama as inextricably bound up with its Athenian, civic context, and whose focus on the politics of tragedy as a stand-in for the politics of the theatre, now represents the scholarly orthodoxy.⁸⁶

That civic and tragic oriented view, however, has begun to come under increasing pressure. Instead of regarding the plays as vectors for reflecting, propagating as well as contesting civic ideology, it has been argued that the notion of civic ideology may be a restrictive form of positivism and determinism in the first place.⁸⁷ Similarly, instead of viewing ancient theatre through a civic and Athenian prism, it has been demonstrated that the ancient

⁸⁴ On comedy as a fully-fledged democratic institution, see Ruffell 2020b: 119-20, with further references. Note that Aristotle testifies to the democratic affiliations of even earlier comedy, according to which the Megarians regarded themselves the inventors of comedy ‘when their city was a democracy’ (δημοκρατίας γενομένης, *Poet.* 1448a31-2).

⁸⁵ On the early history of Old comedy, see e.g. Csapo 2015, and on the history of the word κωμῳδία in Classical Athens, see e.g. Silk 2020. For comprehensive studies of other comic poets, notably Eupolis and Cratinus, see e.g., respectively, Storey 2003 and Bakola 2010.

⁸⁶ Winkler and Zeitlin 1990. On that volume’s lasting legacy, see Rader and Collins II 2013, who deny that it is even possible to move on: ‘In one way or another, we might say, we are all the children (and grandchildren) of Winkler and Zeitlin... our “new” approaches to Greek drama cannot ever really break with the critical traditions of the past but they can employ those traditions in radical and innovative ways’ (1, 3).

⁸⁷ Halpern 2011: 572; Wohl 2015: 4; Telò 2021: 8-9.

spectators in the theatre of Dionysus were not a homogenous conglomeration of citizens,⁸⁸ and that the theatre festivals of the Great Dionysia and Lenaea hardly represented the totality of Greek theatre culture in and beyond Athens.⁸⁹ Furthermore, it has been contended that democracy itself should be conceived of as a more capacious form than used to be allowed, particularly if we take into account non-citizens' agency beyond public decision-making bodies and focus on extra-institutional spaces such as the *agora*, a quintessential 'free space' in Kostas Vlassopoulos' phrase.⁹⁰ These are arguments that will be discussed and developed over the course of this thesis.

Following from this, the model of hyper-democracy we will encounter in Aristophanes' plays is not strictly civic – or, better, strictly *non*-civic. What Aristophanes demonstrates is that civic ideology, 'the authoritative self-definition of the Athenian citizen,'⁹¹ is mere fiction in the first place. At the heart of Aristophanes' political agenda is the way in which he exposes the non-essentialism of identity by reducing political actors to nothing more than speaking and embodied beings, beings that are passionate as well as vulnerable, and therefore contends that there is nothing in nature to constitute an 'authoritative self-definition' that sets citizens apart from and above non-citizens (episodes three, four, and five). Robin Osborne has argued that it is Athenian artists who tend to undermine the categorical status distinctions that preoccupy Athenian writers, as reflected in the 'gap between verbal prescription and visual enactment' in their respective dealings with the body.⁹² Yet Aristophanes, employing a form which puts bodies on stage, might well be considered one writer who undermines those very distinctions, by creating imaginative and disruptive worlds, which, to adopt Rancière's analysis of the ultimate political force of art, 'help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible.'⁹³

More than that, Aristophanes primes his audience to embrace these political counter-worlds, or what Page DuBois has labelled '*heterotopias inside*' in discussing the ontological openness embodied by the swarming chorus of wasps in Aristophanes' eponymous play.⁹⁴ He does so by deploying strategies of defamiliarization, in the sense coined by Shklovsky and

⁸⁸ Roselli 2011. Aristophanes' plays are, in fact, one source which testifies to an eclectic audience in the theatre of Dionysus itself, composed of different groups of citizens (e.g. *Pax* 50-3, 295-8, 543-9) as well as non-citizens (e.g. *Ach.* 503-8, *Lys.* 1050): see Roselli 2011: 113-5, 154-6, 176-86.

⁸⁹ Csapo and Wilson 2015, 2020.

⁹⁰ Vlassopoulos 2007; Osborne 2011; Gottesman 2014; Kennedy 2014; Wijma 2014; Sobak 2015; Blok 2017; Kasimis 2018.

⁹¹ Croally 1994: 44.

⁹² Osborne 2011: 216-30, quoted at 228.

⁹³ Rancière 2009a: 103.

⁹⁴ DuBois 2020: 155. On heterotopias, see Foucault 1986.

developed by Brecht,⁹⁵ that serve to inhibit the spectators from coming together as a collective in the theatre and thus to shatter the notion of a monolithic citizen audience altogether. Two particular defamiliarizing strategies stand out for their central place in the experience of comic theatre: the resistance to shared laughter by constant reflections upon what should or should not count as being funny (episode one), and the structuring of plots to resist closure by the regular deployment of anti-closural devices (episode two). While it may appear common sense to say that Aristophanic comedy is primarily about generating shared laughter and about satisfying communal desires with a closed comic fantasy, at the very least in order to win the comic competition, it will turn out that, as far as Aristophanes' political agenda is concerned, the opposite is the case. If Aristophanes can at times divide the audience members from each other and make them aware of this division by their differing laughing responses and by their alienation from the comic fantasy, he can then expose the contingency of their identities and verify that the theatrical, hence political, community is only ever precarious and temporary, always liable to fragmentation and reconstitution.⁹⁶

To be clear, Aristophanes' non-civic conception of democracy, hyper-democracy, is not presented in the manner of a manifesto or in the form of Theory.⁹⁷ Rather, it is constituted by emancipatory moments scattered throughout Aristophanes' plays. These are moments of disruption that 're-distribute the sensible' in Rancière's characteristic phrase, moments of democratic politics that, as Rancière acknowledges, 'actually happens very little or rarely.'⁹⁸ It is these disruptive moments that are at the core of my argument about Aristophanes' politics.

Disruptive Moments

Aristophanes' plays have long been recognised as being formally disruptive: defying generic and theatrical conventions,⁹⁹ breaking fictional and spatial frames,¹⁰⁰ privileging nonsense over

⁹⁵ Shklovsky 1965; Brecht 1964.

⁹⁶ Cf. Latour 2005: 27-42, asserting that 'the central intuition of sociology should be that at any given moment actors are made to fit in a group – often in more than one' (28).

⁹⁷ For an attempt to explore the 'political theory of Aristophanes' – though loosely engaging with ancient political philosophy alone and focusing in a large part on *Clouds* – see the diverse collection of essays in Mhire and Frost 2014.

⁹⁸ Rancière 1999: 17.

⁹⁹ Silk 2000: 357-69, 415-7; 2013: 37-9.

¹⁰⁰ Whitmarsh 2013: 11-14.

sense,¹⁰¹ dethroning sites of literary authority,¹⁰² and transgressing the limits of comic ‘licence.’¹⁰³ They are also politically disruptive, in the sense that they undermine the idea that Athens’ always exclusionary, and increasingly institutionalised, democracy was genuinely democratic. My thesis brings together these two sides of comic disruption, the formal and the political, which Rancière signifies by the word *dissensus*.

Like Aristophanes’ plays, my thesis falls into two distinct, though not unrelated, parts, with a bridge – a ‘parabasis’ – falling in between. Part I, comprising episodes one (‘Laughing Together... Not’) and two (‘Closure and Anti-Closure...’), focuses on two of the main affective and formal aspects of comedy, namely laughter and closure, without understanding which we cannot construct a comprehensive account of Aristophanes’ political agenda. For these are two issues that are central to what comedy is ‘about’; getting to grips with them is implicit in any interpretation of comedy, and, as such, my attempt to do so will lay the groundwork for subsequent episodes. Laughter and closure are also archetypal forms of disruption and resolution respectively. Laughter, described in Homer as ‘unquenchable’ (ἄσβεστος γέλως, e.g. *Il.* 1.599; *Od.* 20.346) and said by Plato to be a force producing psychic instability (*Rep.* 388e), disrupts the normal functioning of the body and the stable self. Indeed, Freud devoted an entire study to jokes and the unconscious, in which he observed that the moment of laughter itself is resistant to epistemology, for ‘we do not know what we are laughing at.’¹⁰⁴ Closure resolves the plot that otherwise threatens to continue indefinitely, enlisting certain genre-specific features that mark The End; hence Byron could quip, ‘All tragedies are finish’d by a death, / All comedies are ended by a marriage’ (*Don Juan*, 3.9).¹⁰⁵ In the case of Aristophanes’ comedies, however, it is non-laughter and anti-closure that can be most tellingly disruptive. If the spectators expect to laugh and for the endings to achieve closure, that is not always what they get – and often, in fact, quite the opposite.

If Part I considers disruptive moments in the affective relationship between the plays and (members of) the audience, amounting to a kind of Brechtian ‘distancing-effect’ (‘Verfremdungseffekt’), Part II, comprising episodes three (‘Citizens’), four (‘Women’) and five (‘Slaves’), considers the disruptive moments within Aristophanes’ comic worlds. We move, in other words, from defamiliarization to *dissensus*. This is a move Rancière himself

¹⁰¹ Kidd 2014: *passim*.

¹⁰² Platter 2007: *passim*.

¹⁰³ Goldhill 1991: 176-88.

¹⁰⁴ Freud 1960: 102; cf. 94, 132, 154.

¹⁰⁵ On closure in classical texts, with the notable exception of comedy, see Roberts *et al.* 1997.

makes when addressing the thorny issue of the political efficacy of art,¹⁰⁶ as we will see in my ‘parabasis’ (‘From Defamiliarization to *Dissensus*’). These moments constitute democratic empowerment, since they entail characters who enter the ‘space of appearance’ and embody the logic of *dissensus*.

If Part I casts the net wide across Aristophanes’ extant corpus, though with special focus on (non-)laughter in the early *parabaseis* as well as the first half of *Frogs* and (anti-)closure at the end of *Wealth*, Part II reads four plays closely: *Acharnians*, *Lysistrata*, *Assemblywomen*, and *Frogs*.¹⁰⁷ These plays, which cover Aristophanes’ career and the three main groupings of *polis* society (Athenian men, women, slaves), were staged around watershed – disruptive – moments in Athenian history: *Acharnians* (425), during the initial phase of the Peloponnesian War following the outbreak of the plague; *Lysistrata* (411), in the aftermath of the Sicilian Expedition and shortly before the first oligarchic coup; *Assemblywomen* (391), at a time when a moderated form of democracy had been instituted after the democratic counter-revolution of 403; *Frogs* (405), following Athens’ victory at Arginousae, after which a decree to enfranchise the slaves who rowed at the battle was passed, and preceding Athens’ defeat at Aegospotami, after which the decree of Patrocleides was passed to re-enfranchise the oligarchs who had lost their civic rights during the first oligarchic coup.¹⁰⁸ *Frogs*, moreover, was apparently reperformed on the grounds of its *parabasis* according to two much-discussed testimonia (Ar. test. 1.35-9; Hyp. I.39-40), which I will re-interpret in my ‘exodos’ (‘Reperforming *Frogs* and Aristophanes’ ‘Commitment’’) to suggest that the Athenians themselves may have honoured Aristophanes for his very commitment to democracy – though our understanding of the politics of Aristophanes will not rely on such a reading.

We will see in due course how the specific context of each play can be taken to inform its meaning, but it is worth saying for now that Aristophanes’ interests seem to develop over time, at least according to what we see from his extant plays and fragments. His early plays show a marked interest in citizens and the civic, even if only to contest what that category might mean; thus, every extant play up to *Birds* (414) has a citizen hero (though it is hard to be certain about this from the early fragmentary plays). From *Lysistrata* onwards, it is women who seem to preoccupy him (here we can be more certain that the fragmentary ‘women plays,’ namely *Lemnian Women*, *Phoenician Women*, *Danaids*, *Women at the Thesmophoria II*, and

¹⁰⁶ Esp. Rancière 2009a.

¹⁰⁷ Of course, constraints of space mean that I could not consider in detail other relevant plays in this thesis. I acknowledge that, for example, consideration of *Knights* and *Wasps* would develop my reading of disenfranchised citizens, *Women at the Thesmophoria* of women, and *Wealth* of slaves.

¹⁰⁸ For the dates of plays, including fragmentary or lost ones, see Sommerstein 1980: 3-5.

Women Claiming Tent-Sites, postdate 411); while in *Frogs*, Aristophanes puts slaves in the spotlight, something that is also true of *Wealth* (388), where it is the slave Karion who steals the show, even as the play's protagonist Chremylus is an ordinary citizen akin to the heroes of the early plays. I will suggest that the two oligarchic revolutions, the first of which (411) heralded the possibility of moderating democracy that was realised with lasting consequences after the second (404/3), can be considered especially formative in the development of Aristophanes' political thought. For the more the Athenian *polis* risked becoming 'police,' the more drastically did Aristophanes unleash the forces of *dissensus* on the comic stage.

This trajectory can also help us account for Aristophanes' extant fourth-century plays, *Assemblywomen* and *Wealth*, which have sometimes been regarded as products of Middle rather than Old comedy and thus as rather different to the fifth-century plays, appearing formally restrained as well as politically egalitarian or else ironical of egalitarianism.¹⁰⁹ Those plays, whose formal differences may be overstated, only extend the emancipatory possibilities of hyper-democracy, the seed of which is already germinating in *Acharnians*. I will come to that play and others in Part II. Let me begin Part I, however, with something that we cannot fail to consider when it comes to comedy of any stripe: with laughter.

¹⁰⁹ For opposing views, see e.g. Sommerstein 1984 (positing a biographical change of Aristophanes' allegiance from critic to supporter of the poor) *contra* Flashar 1967 (suggesting a newfound interest in irony which undermines the egalitarian projects of those plays). For balanced appraisals of any apparent formal or political shift in Aristophanes' fourth-century plays, justifiably putting more emphasis on continuity than change, see Arnott 2010: 290-4; Ruffell 2014: 214-6.

PART I

EPISODE ONE

Laughing Together... Not:

The politics of comedy is bound up with the politics of laughter. For what is comedy without laughter? While no comic play is reducible to making people laugh, nor is raising a laugh the sole *raison d'être* for comic poets claiming among other things to be didactic, laughter is typically regarded as a, if not the, genre-defining response to comedy.¹¹⁰ It is certainly the case that comic performances are designed to be punctuated by laughter, and that there is no comic audience that comes to the theatre without the hope, or expectation, of laughing.¹¹¹

And yet, when it comes to Aristophanes' brand of comedy at least, laughter is only half the picture, as the chorus of initiates in the *parodos* of *Frogs* programmatically proclaim (389-90): 'May I say on the one hand much that is funny (πολλὰ μὲν γέλοια), on the other much that is serious (πολλὰ δὲ σπουδαῖα).' Seriousness is a feature of all Greek poetry from Homer onwards, since poets, tragic poets above all in the fifth century, were regarded as teachers.¹¹² Aristophanes sometimes assumes the role of civic educator himself in his plays (*Ach.* 633-5, 655-8; *Ra.* 686-7), also appropriating tragedy's prestige in doing so, as signified above all by the coinage τρυγῳδία as an alternative for κωμῳδία (*Ach.* 500; cf. *Vesp.* 650-1).¹¹³ Indeed, the only thing Aeschylus and Euripides agree upon in the *agōn* of *Frogs* (1009-10) is that poets – tragic poets are not specified – should be admired for their 'skill' (δεξιότητος) as well as their 'good counsel' (νουθεσίας), and because they 'make people better in the cities' (ὅτι βελτίους τε ποιοῦμεν / τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν).

Comic seriousness, of course, is a notoriously slippery category, far from an oxymoron but often inextricable from comic humour.¹¹⁴ As scholars have often recognised, the didacticism claimed by Aeschylus and Euripides during the *Frogs agōn* is to no small degree being parodied, neither poet giving particularly good advice at any point nor being able to

¹¹⁰ Halliwell 2014; Rosen 2015b; Lech 2020. Halliwell 2014: 189-90 notes that τό γέλοιον and κωμῳδία are often used synonymously among ancient writers.

¹¹¹ Noted by e.g. Taplin 1986: 172-3; Slater 1999: 353-4; Revermann 2006a: 34; Halliwell 2014: 190; Rosen 2015b: 455-6; Lech 2020: 137-9.

¹¹² Croally 1994: 17-47.

¹¹³ Taplin 1983.

¹¹⁴ Silk 2000: 301-49 discusses the issue in detail, though evading the political implications by arguing for comedy's aesthetic seriousness.

defend convincingly their respective claims to have made people better.¹¹⁵ Even so, it is telling that Aristophanes explicitly insists on a distinction (μὲν... δέ) between the ‘funny’ and the ‘serious’ in the *Frogs parodos*. The majority of my thesis addresses the ‘serious’ part of Aristophanic comedy, specifically its political seriousness in conceptualizing what democracy means; though I move away from the usual places that scholars have gone to address that issue, not least the *parabasis* with its (sometimes) didactic and paraenetic pretensions. For now, however, I will stick to the ‘funny’ part of comedy – or, rather, the relationship between the *not* funny and the funny.

Indeed, Aristophanes’ plays, one might reasonably say from reading today at least, are not exactly a laugh a minute. We might say that this is because all humour is culturally relative, especially humour designed for an original performance; or because there are plenty of ‘serious’ bits that are easily distinguishable from the ‘funny’ bits. Yet neither explanation is quite sufficient: humour can still be retrospectively, painstakingly, dissected¹¹⁶; while it is notoriously, frustratingly difficult to distinguish the ‘funny’ from the ‘serious’ on any account.¹¹⁷ But what if there were a different explanation? What if – and this is the argument of this episode – Aristophanes sometimes makes comedy without laughter, by design?

Given that spectators inevitably belong to different ‘interpretive communities,’¹¹⁸ it is bound to be the case (even assuming a relatively unified ancient audience), that some jokes fail in performance and that not everyone in the audience laughs communally at the same things.¹¹⁹ The effect of a ‘fissured audience,’ with some people laughing and others not, has already been recognized as a distinct possibility in (Euripidean) tragedy by Simon Goldhill, who has shown how disruptive jokes can be in a genre which does not contain many.¹²⁰ Yet if laughing poses a problem for the tragic audience who do not expect to laugh (and yet some people do), it might also be said to pose a problem for the comic audience who do expect to laugh (and yet some people do not). Those who do not laugh while others are in fits of laughter cannot fail to notice

¹¹⁵ See e.g. Heath 1987: 20-1; Heiden 1991: 99-106; Rosen 2004: 314-20; Pucci 2007: 114-7; Halliwell 2012: 122-32, 141-7.

¹¹⁶ See e.g. Ruffell 2011: 54-111. Applying the metaphor of dissection to Aristophanic humour, see Swallow 2020: 1-2.

¹¹⁷ See e.g. Kidd 2014: 1-3.

¹¹⁸ Fish 1976.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Beard 2014: 58-9; Rosen 2015b: 456, 461. See also Kidd 2014, observing that ‘those same verbal elements that are often marshalled as “comic techniques” (repetition, punning, rambling speech) often can produce very negative reactions as well – irritation, annoyance, disgust’ (121), and thus admitting that there is ‘no reason why one should not leave open the possibility of Aristophanic failure’ (141).

¹²⁰ Goldhill 2006: 92-9. As Goldhill writes of responses to incongruous flashes of humour, such as Menelaus’ joke about Helen’s weight in Euripides’ *Trojan Women* (1050): ‘Each member of the audience becomes self-aware of him or herself as an audience member and as different to other audience members’ (98).

that they are not ‘in’ on the joke; they may for this reason pretend to ‘get’ it, as Dionysus himself seems to do at one point during the *agōn* in *Frogs* (*Ra.* 1169).¹²¹ Conversely, those who do burst out laughing while others deem laughter inappropriate cannot help but stand out; that is something which the chorus of *Clouds* complain about in reference to the Athenians’ improper laughing during fasts for Memnon or Sarpedon (*Nu.* 621-3). After all, as Mary Beard writes, the ‘history of laughing is... about those who don’t (or won’t) get the joke as well as about those who do.’¹²²

It goes without saying that it is impossible to pinpoint precisely if or at what the different members of the audience in the theatre of Dionysus laughed, or did not laugh, two and half thousand years ago, there being no consensus on why human beings laugh in the first place.¹²³ Yet there are plenty of cases where we might reasonably imagine certain members of the audience of Aristophanes’ plays who ‘don’t (or won’t) get the joke.’ These might include ‘politically incorrect’ jokes about starving Megarians (*Ach.* 738) (a bad case of Megarian joking?) and Melian famine (*Av.* 186) (delivered after Athens’ destruction of Melos at around the same time as Euripides’ hard-hitting *Trojan Women*),¹²⁴ or those jokes possibly contained in Aristophanes’ *Babylonians*, a play which apparently was not found too funny by Cleon, who is said to have taken legal action against the poet for making fun of the *polis* (*Ach.* 377-82 with *Σ ad loc.*, 501-3, 630-1).¹²⁵ They might also include jokes that fail on a linguistic level, such as the bad puns and obscure references that Plutarch found rather distasteful in Aristophanes’ plays by comparison with Menander’s (*Mor.* 712a, 853a-54d).¹²⁶

However, rather than hypothesising about audience laughter (or not) from a more or less *ad hoc* perspective, what will be much more useful for the present analysis is the language Aristophanes explicitly uses to describe, reflect on, and produce – as well as stifle – laughter. We will see this particularly at issue in some of Aristophanes’ early *parabaseis* as well as in the first half of *Frogs*, where what is funny or not, or rather what is *described as being* funny

¹²¹ Dover 1993: 29, 34.

¹²² Beard 2014: 15. Cf. Rosen 2015b: ‘So it is no wonder that the history of comic genres becomes also a history of anxiety about misfires and misunderstandings. For a type of art that so often portrays itself as ephemeral and frivolous, it is striking just how often the laughter of comedy seems on the verge of going awry, and how high the stakes can be when it does’ (468).

¹²³ There are myriad explanations, with the main philosophical theories coming under the banners of ‘superiority,’ ‘relief’ and ‘incongruity’ (see e.g. Eagleton 2019), not to mention the various scientific accounts (see e.g. Hauser *et al.* 1997).

¹²⁴ On the distaste for so-called Megarian humour, see *Vesp.* 57, with Biles and Olson 2015: *ad loc.* On the allusion to Melos, see *Av.* 186, with Dunbar 1995: *ad loc.*

¹²⁵ On the putative dispute between Cleon and Aristophanes, see Pelling 2000: 132-3, 145-50, with further references.

¹²⁶ On the epitome of Plutarch’s *Comparison of Aristophanes and Menander*, see below n.143.

or not, is a matter up for dispute. This is not to say, of course, that Aristophanes' plays are designedly unfunny all the time. Rather, it is to say that the internal dynamics of laughter draws out a tension between laughter as collusive and cohesive, and laughter as disruptive and divisive.¹²⁷ Aristophanes sometimes scripts characters laughing at solitary outsiders, as with Dicaeopolis' derision of Lamachus in *Acharnians* (*Ach.* 1081, 1107, 1126, 1197) and Trygaeus' of the Arms Dealer in *Peace* (*Pax* 1245), examples which might be said to function as a 'kind of "social glue"' bringing the audience together as a community of laughers.¹²⁸ Set against this, Aristophanes sometimes deconstructs that community by drawing attention to the audience's laughter, or not, at awkward, self-conscious, and disruptive moments within those self-same plots. It is these moments that bear defamiliarizing potential that forms an important part of Aristophanes' political agenda (as I will explain in greater detail in my 'parabasis').

I

Aristophanes often tries to police what the audience should or should not be laughing at.¹²⁹ This comes above all in the *parabasis*, which might itself be considered an inherently agelastic formal feature of comedy, interrupting the comedic action of the plot and often claiming to introduce avowedly serious content.¹³⁰ What we get above all from the programmatic *parabaseis* of *Clouds* and *Peace* is a highly polemical conception of Aristophanes' brand of comedy as dripping with sophistication with an audience to match, the polar opposite of his rivals' and their audiences' vulgarity (esp. *Nu.* 534-44; *Pax* 748-50).¹³¹ In Aristophanes' evaluative terms, he is *sophos* and *dexios*,¹³² his rivals are *phortikoi*, *bōmolochoi*, *poneroi*, *agoraioi*.¹³³ As the chorus of *Clouds* declare, childish and uncouth humour (τοῖς παιδίοις ἔν' ἢ γέλως, 539; πονηρὰ σκώμματα, 542) is allegedly banished, setting the standard for comic

¹²⁷ On this tension and others associated with laughter throughout Greek culture, see Halliwell 1991b, 2008.

¹²⁸ The quote is from Ruffell 2011: 226, citing Provine 2000: 36-53. On the isolation of deviant individuals in comedy to reinforce collective identity, see Stark 1995; Asper 2005; Ruffell 2011: 275-84.

¹²⁹ Aristophanes may not be so unique among Old comic poets in this regard, though the evidence is limited: see e.g. Eupolis fr. 172 (punishing a character for delivering a bad joke) and Cratinus fr. 360 (sarcastically praising the crowd's wisdom for its untimely laughing response).

¹³⁰ That is not to say that the *parabasis* cannot be funny as well, of course: for its humorous elements, see Hubbard 1991: 1-15; Major 2005. That there is an inevitable tension between the funny and the not funny in Aristophanes' plays is, in fact, exactly what I am trying to pinpoint.

¹³¹ On Aristophanes' aesthetic self-evaluations, see Hubbard 1991: 28-33; Bremer 1993; Dover 1993: 24-37; Bakola 2008: 4-10; Sommerstein 2009d; Telò 2016.

¹³² Aristophanes as δεξιός (*Ach.* 629; *Nu.* 548; *Vesp.* 65), matched sometimes by his audience (*Eq.* 228, 233; *Nu.* 521, 527, 897; *Vesp.* 1059; *Ra.* 1114). Aristophanes as σοφός (*Nu.* 520, 522, 547; *Vesp.* 66; *Pax* 798), matched sometimes by his audience (*Nu.* 526, 535, 575; *Vesp.* 1049; *Ra.* 676, 1118; *Eccl.* 1155).

¹³³ φορτικός / φόρτος (*Nu.* 524; *Vesp.* 66; *Pax* 748; *Lys.* 1218; *Pl.* 796); βωμολόχος / βωμολόχευμα (*Pax* 748; *Ra.* 358); πονηρός (*Nu.* 542); ἀγοραίος (*Pax* 750; fr. 488).

propriety that is regularly trumpeted – and just as regularly ignored (see below).¹³⁴ The given reason why the original *Clouds* failed to win the first prize was precisely because the original audience, unlike the current one, simply did not ‘get’ his hyper-sophisticated jokes (*Nu.* 518-26; *Vesp.* 1016-7, 1043-8); that is also why Aristophanes explains in the prologue of his comeback play *Wasps* that it will be no more *dexios* that the spectators, but still more *sophos* than lowbrow buffoonery (*Vesp.* 56-7, 64-6). Even so, as it is affirmed in the *parabaseis* of the re-written *Clouds* as well as *Wasps*, not even the failure of the first *Clouds* could stop him finding favour with a sub-group of *sophoi* at the very least (*Vesp.* 1049-50; *Nu.* 525-36).

As a result, the ‘Aristophanic’ – read: sophisticated – audience constructed from these passages ought to know when to laugh and what to laugh at, so much so that at the end of the *parabasis* of *Clouds*, the chorus tendentiously instruct the spectators not to enjoy Aristophanes’ plays if they ‘laugh at’ (γελαῖ) those of his inferior rivals and to prove their intellect by delighting in Aristophanes’ creations (559-61):

ὅστις οὖν τούτοισι γελαῖ, τοῖς ἐμοῖς μὴ χαιρέτω·
 ἦν δ’ ἐμοὶ καὶ τοῖσιν ἐμοῖς εὐφραίνεσθ’ εὐρήμασιν,
 εἰς τὰς ὥρας τὰς ἐτέρας εὖ φρονεῖν δοκίσετε.

The case of *Clouds*, of course, hardly implies any deliberate failure to achieve a unified laughing response in the audience. Quite the opposite, since Aristophanes gives the impression of caring deeply about the failure of his humour in the play which he considered his *magnum opus* (though, of course, that was hardly *his* fault).¹³⁵ What is telling, however, is that when Aristophanes revisits his original failure in the play’s re-written *parabasis* and elsewhere, he makes the audience’s sense of humour a Big Deal. Given that Aristophanes, as everyone knows, blatantly does not banish vulgar gags but employs the very same comic techniques as his rivals (has Aristophanes never seen an Aristophanes play?), including throughout the re-written *Clouds* itself,¹³⁶ it is almost impossible to know exactly what the appropriate laughing

¹³⁴ Cf. Wright 2013: ‘When Aristophanes goes out of his way to tell us that he is doing something, it is usually a signal that he is really doing something else entirely’ (214).

¹³⁵ On Aristophanes’ self-canonizing discourse resulting from this failure, see Telò 2016: esp. 1-10.

¹³⁶ Among many examples, consider Aristophanes’ claim that his comedy does not ‘rush forth bearing torches nor shout “ow ow (ἰὸν ἰού)”’ (*Nu.* 543) in the middle of a play which begins with the exclamation ἰὸν ἰού (*Nu.* 1) and ends with the comic hero bearing a torch to burn down the Thinkery as a pupil screams ἰὸν ἰού (*Nu.* 1493-4). On Aristophanes’ well-known double standards and his self-consciousness about them, see e.g. Murray 1987; Edwards 1991; Hesk 2000; Platter 2007: 84-107.

response is, even if – or precisely because – the poet creates a ‘taxonomy of laughter.’¹³⁷ If we ought not laugh at (say) Cratinus’ bad jokes, ought we laugh at Aristophanes’?

The possibility of distinctive responses to comedic material is particularly flagged during the symposium reported by Xanthias at the end of *Wasps*, where there is an internal audience to Philocleon’s ‘clowning around’ (κωμωδολοιχῶν, 1318) and his ‘jesting boorishly’ (σκώπτων ἀγροίκως, 1320), including his derisive laughter at people (κατεγέλα, 1305). While most of the symposiasts wildly applaud as the watch on, one of the guests, Thoupkrastus, instead purses his lips, a response that projects his intellectual superiority (*Vesp.* 1314-15):

οἱ δ’ ἀνεκρότησαν, πλήν γε Θουφράστου μόνου·
οὔτος δὲ διεμύλλαινε, ὥς δὴ δεξιός.

On the one hand, the sophisticated but frigid Thoupkrastus may be a model for his scowling at lowbrow buffoonery and sticking true to the ‘Aristophanic’ principle of haughty sophistication, not least because he is described using the same adjective (δεξιός) that often is used of Aristophanes’ self-projection as well as the projection of his ideal audience.¹³⁸ On the other, he may be an anti-model for his being a total killjoy, Thoupkrastus’ pursed lips almost prefiguring (his near namesake) Theophrastus’ ‘Obnoxious Man’ hissing (συρίττειν) at actors whom others enjoy watching (*Char.* 11.3), as Philocleon’s riotous conduct is hardly out of place in a sympotic, let alone comic, setting.¹³⁹ These positions are, I suggest, pointedly incompatible, and particularly so for a play that had advertised itself as a real crowd-pleaser.¹⁴⁰ To laugh or not to laugh?

Laughter may not be directly at issue in the case of Thoupkrastus, though it is in many others. The verb *gelaō* and noun *gelōs*, used in some of the examples already mentioned (*Vesp.* 57, 1305; *Nu.* 539, 559), put a spotlight on the audience’s laughing response. These are not Aristophanes’ only pointed uses of gelastic vocabulary, meaning any Greek word relating to

¹³⁷ Rosen 2015b: 459-61, distinguishing ‘the unworthy laughter of the common crowds’ from ‘the discriminating laughter of the sophisticated spectator.’

¹³⁸ See e.g. Telò 2016, writing that ‘the staging of Philocleon’s return from the symposium in a sense gives the last laugh to the silent Thuphrastus (and, behind him, Aristophanes)’ (95-6).

¹³⁹ See e.g. Silk 2000, suggesting that the main victims of exclusion in Aristophanes’ plays are ‘the “agelasts”... who are bent on reining back the expansive spirits in their pursuit of possibility’ (406).

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Wright 2013: ‘The posture which Aristophanes adopts in *Wasps* is deliberately crowd-pleasing. That is, he claims to be going out of his way to appeal to a much broader section of the audience than he did with the esoteric *Clouds*. At the same time, though, he also aims to reinforce our sense of a distinctively Aristophanic comic ‘brand’ which is infinitely preferable to other brands in terms of seriousness and sophistication. Are these two aims compatible? Perhaps not –’ (209).

the range of acts of laughing (what we in English might consider chuckling, chortling, guffawing, and so forth). In the ‘gelastically saturated world’ of Old comedy there is a significant amount of such vocabulary.¹⁴¹ While Alan Sommerstein has categorized gelastic vocabulary in Aristophanes’ plays according to whether it denotes ‘hostile,’ ‘provoked,’ or ‘victimless’ laughter,¹⁴² what has been noticed much less is how the presence of the vocabulary of laughter might impinge on – contest as well as confirm – the laughter of the audience. Any old joke can fail, of course, but gelastic vocabulary gives us an empirical basis from the text for positing a joke’s success or failure. There being no objective measurement of humour (not unless you’ve heard Monty Python’s funniest joke in the world and survived its killer potency!), what constitutes the laughable (*to geloion*) – especially what is *said* to constitute *to geloion* – is a necessarily contested category.¹⁴³ It is not merely that Aristophanic comedy, like all comedy, inevitably produces a spectrum of responses from absence to fits of laughter. It is rather that Aristophanes sometimes draws attention to the nature of the laughing response – and thus to the inevitably different responses.

II

What follows will not cover every usage of gelastic vocabulary in Aristophanes’ surviving corpus. Rather, I will focus on some of its most loaded occurrences, above all in the first half of *Frogs*, where the issue of gelastic propriety is addressed more extensively and self-consciously than anywhere else in Aristophanes’ extant plays. If, aesthetically speaking, the second half of the play is about good and bad poetry at the tragic level (and implicitly at the comic level) and the responses tragedy ought to provoke, the first half is about comedy and laughter. Indeed, Dionysus’ catabasis is full of the kind of glorious, uproarious clowning frowned upon in the parabolic and prologic portions of *Clouds*, *Wasps* and *Peace* considered earlier; while the *agōn* between Aeschylus and Euripides incorporates the more ‘approved’

¹⁴¹ The quote is from Halliwell 2008: 245. Sommerstein 2009c catalogues the 85 cases, or 96 separate occurrences, of laughter words in Aristophanes’ extant plays. Cf. Borowski 2015: 135-6, counting 91 cases including the Aristophanic fragments.

¹⁴² Sommerstein 2009c.

¹⁴³ Consider, for example, Plutarch’s polemic evaluation of Aristophanes’ comic techniques as crude compared with Menander’s refinement (*Mor.* 853a-54d), an assessment which only reflects his own self-constructed elitism: see Hunter 2009: 78-89; or Aristotle’s fudgy attempt to define and regulate the sense of humour proper to the middle character in the face of laughter’s disruptive force (*EN* 1128a3-b12): see Goldhill 1995a: 14-20, 2006: 83-5, 2017: 482-91. Aristophanes’ wish in Plato’s *Symposium* (189b5-7) to say things that are ‘funny’ (ὄν τι μὴ γελοῖα εἶπω) but not ‘ridiculous’ (ἀλλὰ μὴ καταγέλαστα) may even be regarded as mocking that kind of (elitist) effort to categorise laughter – as if the line between the ‘funny’ and ‘ridiculous’ was so clear-cut.

elements of highbrow humour – exactly the false contrast that Aristophanes programmatically sets up between himself and his rivals, we will remember. *Frogs* merits extensive analysis not only because it contains quite a lot of charged gelastic vocabulary, but also because it is arguably the play most expressly devoted to issues of political inclusion and exclusion, especially in the context of the recent broadening of the citizen body with the enfranchisement of slaves after Arginousae (see episode five). The play’s aim to make the audience aware of itself as a body composed of people laughing differently from each other is bound up with its deconstruction of the monolithic notion of civic identity altogether.

The beginning of *Frogs* (1-20) is a frequently analysed scene, containing the most sustained play on jokes and laughter in the extant Aristophanic corpus.¹⁴⁴ It contains a barrage of gelastic vocabulary, which draws attention to the audience’s laughing response by describing what should *not* raise a laugh in the ‘sophisticated’ spectator, all for the very purpose of raising a laugh. The play opens with remarkable tongue-in-cheek (1-2):

Εἶπω τι τῶν εἰωθότων, ᾧ δέσποτα,
ἐφ’ οἷς ἀεὶ γελῶσιν οἱ θεώμενοι;

Xanthias’ assumption that spectators are so predictable that there are certain comic set-pieces that *always* get the audience laughing is immediately contested, when Dionysus rejects all of Xanthias’ proposals (‘anything except...’, 2-3, 5, 7-8) for being too vulgar (3, 8, 11) – even ones advertised by Xanthias as being ‘witty’ (ἄστεϊον) and ‘pretty funny’ (πάνυ γέλοιον). Dionysus is being quite the agelast here, doing his best to stifle the comic energy of the opening and thereby enacting the kind of pompous snobbery of Lord Chesterfield’s admonition to his son that ‘it is low buffoonery, or silly accidents, that *always* excite laughter; and that is what people of sense and breeding should show themselves above’ (my emphasis, picking up on ἀεὶ from the opening couplet of *Frogs*).¹⁴⁵ For Dionysus, the self-proclaimed sophisticated spectator here, the overriding effect of such apparently tried and tested buffoonery is said to be nausea (11) and boredom (16-18), not laughter.

This is all very ironic, of course, since the comic duo of Xanthias and Dionysus are still performing a version of the condemned baggage carrying routine, said to be a hackneyed gag typical of Aristophanes’ rivals Phrynichus, Lykis, and Ameipsias (12-15) – all successful,

¹⁴⁴ See e.g. Hesk 2000: 232-6; Silk 2000: 26-33; Slater 2002: 183-5; Ruffell 2011: 370-2; Griffith 2013: 107-8; Halliwell 2014: 191-2; Wright 2012: 92-3; Rosen 2015b: 459-60; Lech 2020: 145-6.

¹⁴⁵ Quoted by Stewart 1994: 30.

prize-winning comic poets, of course.¹⁴⁶ Dionysus even seems to admit that such routines are more sophisticated than he makes out, since they are said to cost Dionysus a year of his immortal life at the same time as they are called ‘clever tricks’ (σοφισμάτων, 17) – *sophismata* being the stuff that actually might appeal to a sophisticated spectator, exactly as the word is used on its two other appearances in the play, where it is translated by Jeffrey Henderson as ‘intellectualisms’ and ‘intellectualities’ (872, 1104). It has even been argued, not so preposterously I think, that Aristophanes himself is recognisably playing Xanthias, partly on the grounds that the slave here embodies the spirit of Old comedy.¹⁴⁷ If that is the case, then Xanthias’ complaint at the end of the gag is particularly ironic (19-20), since he complains that he cannot say anything ‘funny’ (γέλοιοι) in the very same breath as he is (re-)using the ‘I’m being squashed’ (θλίβομαι) joke, said to be guaranteed to raise a laugh but banned by Dionysus at line 5. More than that, Aristophanes himself already appears to have banked on a version of the θλίβομαι joke when he tried to milk the audience for an easy laugh in an alleged legal confrontation with Cleon (σκωμμάτιον εἶποτέ τι θλιβόμενος ἐκβαλῶ, *Vesp.* 1289).¹⁴⁸ So it is a funny joke, after all...

Dionysus does deploy more notionally sophisticated humour in the form of a parody of sophistic language game in the next part of the prologue (21-34), attempting to bamboozle Xanthias atop a donkey on the grounds that one cannot carry and be carried at the same time – *his* idea of what is funny. Yet this surely falls rather flat in the face of Xanthias’ bawdy and explosive wit, not least when Xanthias delivers the dialogue’s most potent punchline, as he cheekily admits defeat to Dionysus’ pedantry in order to allow him to slip in his second laughter-guaranteeing joke of the performance, the ‘I’m being squished’ (πιέζομαι) one this time (οὐκ οἶδ’· ὁ δ’ ὅμος οὐτοσὶ πιέζεται, 30; banned at line 3). Comic genius, that. It is easy to imagine the slave coming across as a likeable character who bears much of the comic energy, rather funnier than his pretentious, foppish bore of a master, who simply does not ‘get’ Old comic humour.¹⁴⁹ This, in fact, is not the only comedic duo in Aristophanes with the slave

¹⁴⁶ Griffith 2013: 107.

¹⁴⁷ Heiden 1994. Specifically, Heiden sees Xanthias’ protests, ‘but not a word about me’ (περὶ ἐμοῦ δ’ οὐδεὶς λόγος, 87, 107, 115), and the reference to other baggage-carrying comic poets (12-15) as being funnier if taken as metatheatrical jokes about Aristophanes, the glaringly present absence from the discussions about poetry in *Frogs*: see further Heiden 1991. In any case, we may see Xanthias as prefiguring the trope of the slave as an author figure that becomes crystallised in the *servus callidus* figure of Roman comedy; hence Xanthias may in a sense ‘be’ Aristophanes, particularly if he symbolises Old comic energy, even if Aristophanes is not playing Xanthias. Aristophanes himself, for what it is worth, was held to be a slave according to some ancient sources (Ar. test. 2a/b.9-10).

¹⁴⁸ On this confrontation, see Biles and Olson 2015: *ad* 1284-91.

¹⁴⁹ Heiden 1991 even sees Dionysus here as representing a ‘distinctly anti-comic spirit’ (97) and someone with ‘a powerful aversion to the poetic medium of Aristophanes’ (98 with n.9).

playing it comical and the master playing it straight.¹⁵⁰ While commentators have praised Dionysus' putative display of superior intellect against a 'slow-witted slave' as being 'worthy of Plato's Euthydemus and Dionysodorus,'¹⁵¹ they are giving credit where surely it is not due. As a matter of fact, it is often the case in Aristophanes that pretentious quibbling is the butt, not the source, of the joke, as it is at the end of this play, where it is precisely this kind of quibbling, that which involves 'pretentious conversation and hairsplitting twaddle' (ἐπὶ σεμνοῖσιν λόγοισι / καὶ σκαριφησμοῖσι λήρων, 1496-7, trans. Henderson), that is said to mark a 'man who's lost his mind' (παραφρονοῦντος ἀνδρός, 1499, trans. Henderson).

Dionysus, in any case, hardly proves himself to be of such sophisticated taste as the play goes on (to put it mildly). In fact, he already hints at his predilection for the vulgar and scatological by *praeteritio*, since he explicitly tells Xanthias not to use the θλίβομαι and πιέζομαι jokes (3-5), nor to say the one where 'you shift your baggage and say you need to shit' (μεταβαλλόμενος τὰνάφορον ὅτι χεζητιᾶς, 8).¹⁵² Dionysus has an odd knack for jokes he claims he does not like; not to mention that he does not merely talk about not talking about shitting, but actually goes on to shit himself on stage, not once but twice (308, 479-91). When the god explicitly talks about what he does find funny later on in the play, his sense of humour turns out to be hardly so refined as well (541-8, discussed below). This is the case even in the second half of the play, where he is sometimes seen as being more 'grown up' (so to speak),¹⁵³ above all in his hysterical response to an anecdote about a fart-propelled runner at the Panathenaea (ἐπαφηνάνθην ... γελῶν, 1089-90).

The multiple levels of bluff and double bluff, of nudge-nudge and wink-wink, of highbrow and lowbrow and everything in between make any diagnosis of what we are 'supposed' to find funny in Aristophanes' plays, above all in the opening of *Frogs*, difficult to pin down. Indeed, Aristophanes regularly stages characters who reflect on their own jokes and routines in contradictory ways, beyond what we have encountered so far in various prologues and *parabaseis*. On the one hand, there are some who commend the kind of humour that is typically condemned as vulgar and 'un-Aristophanic' (even if explicit gelastic vocabulary is not used in every instance): for instance, the two slaves at the start of *Knights* remarking on their 'pleasure' (ἡδύ) in a crude masturbation joke (*Eq.* 26-7), Strepsiades in *Clouds* stating

¹⁵⁰ See Walin 2009 on the unnamed slave with Trygaeus in *Peace* 819-1126, and Hall 2020b on Karion with Chremylus in *Wealth*.

¹⁵¹ The quotations are respectively from Dover 1993: *ad* 25 and Sommerstein 1996a: *ad* 25-32. Cf. Compton-Engle 2015: 105.

¹⁵² See Telò 2020b, on the masochistic 'pleasure-in-pain' of laughter here and elsewhere.

¹⁵³ This is particularly the case in 'initiatory' readings of the play: see below n.625.

that he ‘enjoyed’ (ἥσθην) hearing about Socrates being shat on with his mouth wide open (*Nu.* 172-4), and the maiden in *Assemblywomen* suggesting that an allegedly distasteful song might still be found ‘somewhat pleasant and comic’ (τερπνόν τι καὶ κωμωδικόν) (*Eccl.* 887-9). On the other, there are some who stick closer to the ‘Aristophanic’ principle: for example, the Athenian delegate in *Lysistrata* showing reluctance to gratify the audience’s predilection for a supposedly ‘lowbrow’ (φορτικόν) routine (*Lys.* 1218-21) and Plutus in *Wealth* refusing altogether to make the spectators feel ‘compelled to laugh’ (ἀναγκάζειν γελᾶν) by doing the ‘vulgar’ (φόρπον) thing of throwing them treats (*Pl.* 796-9; a strategy in fact used at *Pax* 961-2). The genius of Aristophanes may well be he is able to accommodate laughter on so many different levels, with the possibilities for eliciting laughter being indeterminable or (better) overdetermined (more on this point below).

There is, however, more to say about the *Frogs* prologue in particular. This is a prologue which, distinctly unlike other comic prologues featuring slaves, reveals nothing about the plot; that only formally begins with Dionysus’ arrival at Heracles’ house to ask for directions to Hades in the following scene. As such, at one level at least, it is functionally designed to elicit laughter, part of a broader comic strategy of ‘warming up’ the audience that is so often and so effectively deployed in Aristophanes’ plays. Dionysus, after all, emphatically agrees that Xanthias should say something funny in the first place (νῆ τὸν Δί’ ὃ τι βούλει γε, 3; νῆ Δία / θαρρῶν γε, 6-7). And yet – here is the critical point – what is described as laughable in this comic opening is flagged as a contested issue (literally) *ad nauseam*. A play that begins by raising a laugh also raises the issue of what an audience should be laughing at. How funny is the stuff that is said to make an audience always laugh?

The issue of the appropriateness of laughter resurfaces immediately in the subsequent door-knocking scene, another hackneyed routine in comedy,¹⁵⁴ as Heracles laughs out loud as soon as he sees Dionysus dressed up as himself. This is, in fact, an overreaction as Heracles repeats how he cannot stop himself from laughing (42-8):

Ηρ. οὔτοι μὰ τὴν Δήμητρα δύναμαι μὴ γελᾶν·
καίτοι δάκνω γ’ ἐμαυτόν· ἀλλ’ ὅμως γελῶ.
Δι. ὦ δαιμόνιε, πρόσσελθε· δέομαι γάρ τί σου.
Ηρ. ἀλλ’ οὐχ οἷός τ’ εἴμ’ ἀποσοβῆσαι τὸν γέλων, [45]
ὁρῶν λεοντῆν ἐπὶ κροκωτῷ κειμένην.

¹⁵⁴ Brown 2008.

τίς ὁ νοῦς; τί κόθορνος καὶ ῥόπαλον ξυνηλθέτην;
ποῖ γῆς ἀπεδήμεις;

Does Heracles' irrepressible laughter, like that of the imperial guards from the 'Biggus Dickus' scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, trigger further laughter in the audience?¹⁵⁵ Or does it awkwardly stifle it? It is, as Kidd has observed, perhaps surprisingly rare for laughter to be scripted and acted out in Aristophanes' plays, something which might be explained on the grounds of comic technique: 'that in order to elicit audience laughter, laughing is precisely the one thing that an actor ought *not* do.'¹⁵⁶ Heracles' guffaw at a god in an incongruously silly costume, after all, hardly meets the 'Aristophanic' standards of gelastic propriety paraded by Dionysus in the prologue and elsewhere in Aristophanes' plays. Who else laughed so hard at their first sight of Dionysus on stage? Notably, gelastic vocabulary describing Heracles' response is superfluous.¹⁵⁷ Heracles could have laughed in performance without saying – stressing – that he was laughing. His laugh, then, is a 'cue' that the audience may or may not heed. It is a form of performative speech-act, in Austin's sense,¹⁵⁸ though 'illocutionary' and 'perlocutionary' forces do not necessarily correspond if the spectators are not all laughing.

Frogs contains other such potentially failed speech-acts beyond the first two scenes, when characters assert that they are making a joke without any guarantee that the audience will respond with laughter. That is a possibility when the chorus in the *parodos* explain that the shabbiness of their costume was partly done 'for a laugh' (ἐπὶ γέλωτι, 404), a joke which trades on the chorus' character as initiates in appropriately shabby clothing, as well as on the ill-funded practice of *choregia* amidst the financial difficulties of Athens in 405.¹⁵⁹ Yet it need not be flagged as such for the joke to be made. Just after the chorus famously pray to utter a mixture of the 'funny' (γέλοια) and the 'serious' (σπουδαῖα) (389-90), they offer something that is perhaps a little too serious to be funny, by reminding the spectators of Athens' impending defeat in the Peloponnesian War and its harsh economic consequences. Aristophanes may never quite exploit the Athenians' οἰκία κακὰ in the manner of Phrynichus' disaster play *The*

¹⁵⁵ As suggested by e.g. Taplin 1996: 190; Ruffell 2011: 226.

¹⁵⁶ Kidd 2011: 457-8. Kidd counts only thirteen occurrences of laughter, four of which seem to involve an interjection of the sound of laughter (αἰβοῖβοῖ: *Pax* 1066; ἡῦ: *Ach.* 1206, *Vesp.* 1335, *Pax* 195) (457 with n.57). Cf. Lech 2020: 140-41, 154-5.

¹⁵⁷ Ridiculous costumes or funny appearances are not unusually highlighted by gelastic vocabulary (*Av.* 92-106, 801-8; *Lys.* 742-59, 1020-4; *Thes.* 226, 942; *Eccl.* 121-7; fr. 898), though the focus on Heracles' laughing response to Dionysus' appearance is unique.

¹⁵⁸ Austin 1962.

¹⁵⁹ Dover 1993: *ad* 56-7, 62-3.

Capture of Miletus as reported by Herodotus (Hdt. 6.21.2), but this is not the only moment in comedy where the joke might well be ‘too soon.’¹⁶⁰

The most sustained example of the possibility of a divergence between what a character predicts and how the audience might react occurs shortly thereafter. With Xanthias in the role of Heracles, he is spotted by a slave-girl who invites him inside Pluto’s palace. This leads Dionysus, having taken up the role of his slave, to exclaim that he was just kidding about the costume exchange and to demand to swap back. Xanthias concedes, prompting Dionysus to imagine how ‘funny’ (γελοῖον) it would have been to have let his slave play on as master, revealing a sense of humour that is exceptionally obscene – even by Old comic standards (541-8):

οὐ γὰρ ἂν γελοῖον ἦν, εἰ
Ξανθίας μὲν δοῦλος ὢν ἐν
στρώμασιν Μιλησίοις
ἀνατετραμμένος, κυνῶν ὀρ-
χηστρίδ’, εἴτ’ ἤτησεν ἀμίδ’, ἐ-
γὼ δὲ πρὸς τοῦτον βλέπων
τοῦρεβίνθου ὄραττόμην, οὔ- [545]
τος δ’ ἅτ’ ὦν καὶ τὸς πανοῦργος
εἶδε, κᾶτ’ ἐκ τῆς γνάθου
πύξ πατάξας μούξεκοψε
τοῦ χοροῦ τοὺς προσθίους;

‘Wouldn’t it be hilarious...?’ ‘Not really’ is one easily imaginable response to Dionysus’ masturbatory and masochistic joke. The fact that this is presented not only in the form of a question without an answer in the script, but also with the addition of metatheatrical signals (βλέπων, τοῦ χοροῦ τοὺς προσθίους) directly implicates the audience in its assessment. The word γελοῖον here, moreover, might be said to share the same semantic doubleness that the English word ‘funny’ can contain in the sense of ‘funny ha-ha’ and ‘funny strange.’¹⁶¹ Reading

¹⁶⁰ Cf. e.g. *Lys.* 588-90, where the Proboulos cuts off of Lysistrata before she can mention deaths during the Sicilian Expedition, as if to show an awareness that comedy usually does not ‘go there.’ For other instances where Aristophanes risks triggering collective trauma, see Sfyroeras 2020.

¹⁶¹ Morreal 1987: 188. The *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* offers a similar distinction for γέλοιος: 1) amusing, funny; 2) ridiculous, absurd. Other examples of this ambiguity in Aristophanes’ plays might include Dicaeopolis sharing his private peace with the newlywed couple (*Ach.* 1058-60), or Karion boasting about farting in Asclepius’ presence (*Pl.* 697-9).

‘strange’ rather than ‘hilarious’ here would certainly provoke a different response, particularly in a play where the master and the slave turn out to be entirely indistinguishable. One of the political ‘messages’ we could easily draw from the *Frogs* – as we will develop in episode five – is that it is *not* strange, even if it may be hilarious, for a slave to play the role of master (and vice versa), which here means to be free to enjoy sex, to not have to carry a chamber pot, and to be able to inflict violence without fear of retaliation.¹⁶² In any case, the joke will rebound on the joke-maker, as we will also see later: it may not be so funny anymore when Dionysus himself is violently abused like a slave in the upcoming torture scene.

The interrogative form of Dionysus’ joke may be unique in Aristophanes’ plays for its direct implication of the audience, but there are other cases where characters question what is so funny (*Ach.* 1126; *Eq.* 161; *Pax* 1066; *Vesp.* 1406; *Pl.* 880). Usually, however, the question comes not from the joke-maker seeking to beg a positive response as in the example cited above, but from the butt of the joke in frustration at being ridiculed. The example in *Peace* is particularly revealing in this regard. There, the question ‘why are you laughing?’ (τί γελᾷς) follows Trygaeus’ distinctive scripted laugh (αἰβοιβοῖ) in response to Hierocles’ oracle-mongering, or convoluted nonsense (1063-6):

Ιε. ὦ μέλαιοι θνητοὶ καὶ νήπιοι, –

Τρ. εἰς κεφαλὴν σοί.

Ιε. οἵτινες ἀφραδίῃσι θεῶν νόον οὐκ αἰόντες
συνθήκας πεποίησθ’ ἄνδρες χαροποῖσι πιθήκοις, –

Τρ. αἰβοιβοῖ.

Ιε. τί γελᾷς;¹⁶³

Τρ. ἥσθην χαροποῖσι πιθήκοις.

While characters who raise a question in similar situations typically do not get an answer, Trygaeus here explains – and perhaps, as the old adage goes, kills – the joke: ‘I was amused by “fierce-eyed monkeys”’ (ἥσθην χαροποῖσι πιθήκοις). There is certainly incongruity at work, as Sommerstein explains in his commentary: ‘The poetic adjective *kharopos* “fierce eyed” is usually applied to such animals as lions (*Hes. Thg.* 321) or dogs (*h. Hom. Herm.* 194), and

¹⁶² Cf. Griffith 2013: 210-11.

¹⁶³ Note that Olson 1998 *ad loc.* assigns this to a slave and describes Trygaeus’ exclamation as a ‘spontaneous cry of joy’ rather than a laugh. Even though it is hardly uncommon for unwanted interlopers to ask why comic heroes are laughing at them, for my purposes the identity of the speaker and the nature of Trygaeus’ interjection are less important than the fact that the question τί γελᾷς is asked at all.

Trygaeus finds its use to describe monkeys laughably incongruous.¹⁶⁴ The extent to which this is actually *laughably* incongruous, however, is surely disputable. After all, *χαροποῖσι πιθήκοις* does not strike me as a joke with enough punch to make anyone laugh out loud, not least given Freud's observation that jokes predicated on their outrageous or transgressive content are much more likely to produce hearty laughter than those predicated on their linguistic form.¹⁶⁵ That it is particularly weird for Trygaeus to be laughing out loud may even be signalled by the use of the interjection *αἰβοῖβοῖ*, which represents a unique, and uniquely weird, scripted belly-laugh in Aristophanes.¹⁶⁶ Why, indeed, is Trygaeus laughing – or why at least is he laughing so hard? Even in a more communally-oriented play like *Peace*, which has been described as a 'drammaturgia della partecipazione',¹⁶⁷ and even in a scene involving sacrifice to foster a sense of community,¹⁶⁸ gelastic vocabulary can prompt division. For the spectators become hyper-aware of themselves as different from one another if some laugh and others do not, as Goldhill points out: 'It is always easier to laugh in an audience when everyone laughs. When only one person or a small group of people laugh in a theatre audience, it provokes a small crisis of sociability.'¹⁶⁹ The divisive potential of laughter thus lends itself to Brechtian 'Verfremdung,' the political implications of which we will return to later on.

III

What we have seen so far is that Aristophanes sometimes encodes resistance to communal laughter. He does this in general by setting up an image of what comedy should be and what spectators should laugh at, but never quite living up to those standards; and in particular by employing gelastic vocabulary to make the spectators aware of the various possibilities for and enactment of their own and each other's laughter. It might, however, at this point be contested that Aristophanes is less interested in resisting communal laughter, than in accommodating the taste of everybody in the audience. Martin Revermann has argued that Aristophanic comedy is

¹⁶⁴ Sommerstein 2005: 184 n.1065. We might add that the substitution of 'monkeys' for 'Spartans' constitutes another such incongruity grounded upon the oracle monger's (unwitting) clash of register: see Halliwell 2008: 301 n.94 with references to the perception apes as 'comically quasi-human' in antiquity.

¹⁶⁵ Freud 1960: 96.

¹⁶⁶ That exclamation, though clearly expressing laughter as the response makes clear (τί γελαῖς), is also not necessarily an obvious expression to convey its sound. Indeed, laughter is scripted in Greek as *ἄ ἄ ἄ ἄ* or *χα χα* among later Greek lexicographers and grammarians as well as in magical papyri, and typically as *hahahae* in Roman comedy: see Kidd 2011: 447-53. For a scientific perspective on the sound of laughter – not *aiboiboi*! – see Provine 2000: 55-74.

¹⁶⁷ Cassio 1985: 37.

¹⁶⁸ Sfyroeras 2004.

¹⁶⁹ Goldhill 2017: 485.

extraordinarily apt at managing the possibility of different levels of what he terms ‘theatrical competence’ through a ‘double act of being appealing to all – a *sine qua non* for success at the competitive dramatic festivals – while inviting layered responses and creating strata of connoisseurship.’¹⁷⁰ To miss the relatively obscure parodies of Euripides’ *Telephus* in *Thesmophoriazusae*, to take one of his examples, need not render those parts of the play dramatically ineffective; there is plenty else by way of more obvious paratragedy to chew on.¹⁷¹ There is, by extension, ‘something for everyone’ to laugh at in Aristophanes’ plays as well.¹⁷²

However, this argument for ‘layered inclusion’ betrays a messier possibility, particularly when it comes to laughter.¹⁷³ For in Aristophanes’ plays, the spectators’ sense of humour is always a markedly contested issue. We might even go so far as to say that Aristophanes writes plays that exactly do *not* fit the sense of humour of everyone. There is one explicit image of a divided audience at the end of *Assemblywomen*, in which the chorus split the judges (μὲν... δέ) by ordering that they vote for the play either according to their sophistication or according to their sense of humour (1155-6):

τοῖς σοφοῖς μὲν τῶν σοφῶν μεμνημένοις κρίνειν ἐμέ
τοῖς γελοῖσι δ’ ἡδέως διὰ τὸ γελοῖον κρίνειν ἐμέ·

Being sophisticated is not balanced by having a sense of humour but, counter-intuitively, it comes at its expense; you either remember the clever bits or you laugh sweetly at the jokes. At the same time as Aristophanes is trying to win the judges’ vote, he is openly priming different responses framed in terms of laughter or sophistication.¹⁷⁴

That Aristophanic comedy does not typically project a model of collective laughter in the theatre might be confirmed if we look at the responses of comic choruses, an internal audience who hardly ever laugh. Unlike tragic choruses, who regularly proclaim their feelings in terms that conceivably map onto the feelings of the entire audience (for example, expressing pity and fear),¹⁷⁵ comic choruses typically do not express laughter (the only time they do so themselves is at *Pax* 335-6, though there it is one among several verbs denoting collective, though premature, joy). Aristophanes’ comic choruses are, in fact, only rarely representatives

¹⁷⁰ Revermann 2006b: 103.

¹⁷¹ Revermann 2006b: 115-17.

¹⁷² Cf. e.g. Hesk 2000: 247, 261; Platter 2007: 57-60; Griffith 2013: 41-2, 108-10; Wright 2013: 220.

¹⁷³ The quote is from Revermann 2006b: 101.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Wilson 2007: 283, discussing the alienating force of the entire passage (*Eccl.* 1154-62).

¹⁷⁵ See e.g. Taplin 1986: 173, 1996: 194; Lada 1993: 108; Easterling 1997: 163-5.

of a communal, civic body in the first place, more often being non-Athenian, non-male, and non-human; and even when they do represent Athenian men (as in *Acharnians*, *Knights*, and *Wasps*), they are narrow and antagonistic subgroups of them. They are, moreover, more regularly internally divided (*Acharnians*, *Lysistrata*) and eclectic (*Babylonians*, *Peace*, *Birds*, *Frogs*) than their tragic counterparts. If the active and engaged comic chorus are a model of response for the audience who are allowed and encouraged to interrupt the play by their laughter, as has been suggested,¹⁷⁶ they are not a model for a *unified* laughing response.

Needless to say, for Aristophanes the point is evidently not to divide the audience by their (non-)laughter all the time. It is often held that ‘the *telos* of comedy is the shared pleasure and the shared laughter it brings,’¹⁷⁷ something which may be a pragmatic goal for a comic poet aiming to win a comic competition: ‘one audience, one taste, and therefore one (naturally victorious) poet.’¹⁷⁸ However, even if we accept that Aristophanes did ultimately seek to unite the audience, if nothing else but to give him the best chance of winning the comic competition,¹⁷⁹ a consistently high quality of jokes bringing everyone to fits of laughter may not even be so important in that regard. Consider once more the passages from *Assemblywomen* (*Eccl.* 1155-6), where laughter is only one reason to vote for Aristophanes as opposed to his sophistication, or the *parodos* of *Frogs* (*Ra.* 389-90), where the chorus pray to utter much that is funny as well as much that is serious. As a matter of fact, if we take Aristophanes at his own word, it is hardly clear that ‘the most important thing in any performance of Aristophanes is, and always has been, to make people laugh.’¹⁸⁰ When advertising comedy’s value in various *parabaseis* and elsewhere, Aristophanes’ main selling point comes from his self-righteous position as an aesthetic reformer (e.g. *Pax* 739-64) or civic educator (e.g. *Ach.* 633-64), rather than joke-maker – a form of self-praise that seems to distinguish Aristophanes from his comic rivals, it has been argued.¹⁸¹ Generating laughter among the spectators is self-evidently important to all comic poets, no doubt, but its importance for Aristophanes may lie more in its discomforting absence among some than in its rip-roaring presence among all.

There are, of course, plenty of other moments that I have not discussed where laughter is flagged as a contestable issue. Perhaps most alienating for the audience are cases where

¹⁷⁶ Taplin 1986: 173.

¹⁷⁷ The quote is from Sommerstein 2009c: 114. For a smattering of similar sentiments, see e.g. Hubbard 1991: 14; Taplin 1996: 190; Slater 1999: 361; Silk 2000: 406-7; Revermann 2006a 16, 161; Ruffell 2008: 49; Hall 2014: 316.

¹⁷⁸ Slater 1999: 361.

¹⁷⁹ Although this view, which appears to be the case from several passages (e.g. *Pax* 765-74; *Av.* 445-6; *Eccl.* 1155-62), has been contested by Wright 2012.

¹⁸⁰ Swallow 2020: 9.

¹⁸¹ Bakola 2008.

laughter is linked to acts of aggression and shame, already discussed in extensive detail by Stephen Halliwell.¹⁸² In *Wasps* and *Clouds* in particular, Philocleon and Strepsiades violently and illegally beat up their opponents – also citizens – at the same time as they ‘laugh derisively’ (καταγελάς) at them to their humiliation (*Vesp.* 1406; *Nu.* 1238).¹⁸³ Yet it is not self-evident that the audience is meant to laugh ‘with’ these comic heroes, even as – or especially because – they invite the audience to do so by employing gelastic vocabulary. There may be a certain amount of sympathy felt for their innocent opponents (as there is for other victims of comic violence including slaves, as I will argue in episode five), the result of which may be the blocking of laughter altogether.¹⁸⁴ As matter of fact, it has been argued that it is characters in supporting roles, in particular slaves, who are the real comic stars to be laughed ‘with’¹⁸⁵; and that it is the often obnoxious, idiotic, and impotent citizen men who are the butts of jokes to be laughed ‘at.’¹⁸⁶ This includes, for instance, Philocleon himself, who gets a taste of his own medicine when the flute girl aggressively derides his impotence (κάγχανει τούτω μέγα, *Vesp.* 1349). How funny is the behaviour of Aristophanes’ unruly protagonists?

What is particularly interesting about these examples of gelastic vocabulary – and this is where I will move the discussion on – is that they come towards the end of the plays. Here is where the audience, being thoroughly ‘warmed up’ by this point, may be more predisposed to laugh heartily and vicariously at the antics of incorrigible protagonists like Strepsiades and Philocleon. Yet it is also where those old men’s rampant transgressions threaten to go out of control, to the point where ‘das Lachen eher im Hals stecken bleibt,’¹⁸⁷ as Hellmut Flashar writes of Strepsiades’ sudden, moralising, and violent decision to burn the Thinkery – perhaps the kind of non-laughing spectatorial response modelled by Thoupkrastus that we encountered above (*Vesp.* 1314-5).¹⁸⁸ Yet it is not just laughter that is at stake in those endings, but the very nature of the comic fantasy and the spectators’ engagement with it as a whole. In other words, what is at stake is comic closure.

¹⁸² Halliwell 2008: 206-14, 243-63.

¹⁸³ Cf. *Ach.* 1081, 1107, 1126; *Pax* 1245; *Av.* 1407; *Pl.* 880.

¹⁸⁴ On the incompatibility of sympathy and laughter, see e.g. Bergson 1921: 4-5, 196-8; Silk 2000: 387.

¹⁸⁵ See above n.150.

¹⁸⁶ Ruffell 2013.

¹⁸⁷ Flashar 1994: 68.

¹⁸⁸ Silk 2000: 350-435 regards the endings of *Clouds* and *Wasps* as fundamentally opposed in spirit, the former effectively displacing the kind of humour which the latter epitomises.

EPISODE TWO

Closure and Anti-Closure ...

The politics of comedy is also bound up with the politics of comic form.¹⁸⁹ This includes, above all, the formal structure of Aristophanes' plays, something which has always received plenty of attention in its own right.¹⁹⁰ And yet, even though it is the end that typically bears a significant interpretive load on any given text,¹⁹¹ there has historically been less interest in the endings of Aristophanic comedy – sometimes held even to be detached from the rest of the plot – until recently, with Marta Di Bari's *Scene finali di Aristofane*, being the most comprehensive study.¹⁹² Increasingly, scholars have looked to the end, particularly of the early plays, where they have unearthed a certain tension: between the triumph of the comic hero and utopian project as well as comic poet on the one hand, and the increasingly troubling behaviour of the comic hero as well as the impracticability of translating utopian impulses into concrete reality on the other.¹⁹³ Nevertheless, even if the recent trend is to regard Aristophanes' endings 'non come soluzione, ma come problema',¹⁹⁴ there has been much less interest in making sense of them in terms of *closure*.¹⁹⁵ This is clear in the light of comedy's omission from the seminal collection of essays on closure in many of the main ancient genres,¹⁹⁶ and by comparison with extensive interest in tragic closure.¹⁹⁷

By closure, I mean that which concerns the 'functions of an ending: to justify the cessation of narrative and to complete the meaning of what has gone before.'¹⁹⁸ The foundational studies of Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1968) and Frank Kermode (1967),

¹⁸⁹ The phrase 'the politics of form' comes from Wohl 2015, focusing on Euripidean tragedy.

¹⁹⁰ See the extensive summary in Di Bari 2013: 9-31.

¹⁹¹ See e.g. Dunn 1996: 'It is the end, after all, that defines the whole both prospectively and retrospectively. Looking forward from the beginning of a work, the expectation of a certain end or a certain kind of end gives the reader or viewer the basic framework, the map and compass as it were, with which to navigate the work, and looking backward, a recognition of how this end has or has not been reached makes clearer the nature of this particular journey' (7).

¹⁹² Di Bari 2013, focusing on the finales of *Knights*, *Clouds*, and *Women at the Thesmophoria*. Cf. Napolitano 2015b; Pirotta 2016: 34-5.

¹⁹³ Wilson 2007; Loscalzo 2010: 231-71; Napolitano 2014, 2015a; Pirotta 2016.

¹⁹⁴ Napolitano 2015a: 84.

¹⁹⁵ Wilson 2007 is an important exception.

¹⁹⁶ Roberts *et al.* 1997.

¹⁹⁷ Pucci 1977; Roberts 1987, 1988; 1993; Segal 1996; Dunn 1996; Goldhill 2012; Wohl 2015; Telò 2021.

¹⁹⁸ Miller 1981: xi n.2. Cf. De Jong 2014: 'While the end simply is the concluding section of a narrative, *closure* is the degree to which narratees come to see that end as satisfyingly final, answering any remaining questions and resolving any tensions' (90).

respectively a formalist analysis of patterns of closure focusing on the English sonnet and a metaphysical disquisition on the literary patterning of human life, have laid the framework for further discussions of closure and, more extensively in the light of postmodernism and deconstruction, anti-closure or aperture.¹⁹⁹

Formally, closure can fail²⁰⁰; metaphysically, endings are superficial and literary rather than cosmic and real.²⁰¹ That there are tensions between closure and anti-closure is not simply a result of readers engaging with those texts from their own ‘interpretive communities,’²⁰² such as Romantic Ironists for whom the artificial nature of literature renders endings inevitably acts of make-believe.²⁰³ Closural tensions are a constituent part of the literary, since ‘narratability’ – narrative’s condition of possibility ‘within a logic of insufficiency, disequilibrium, and deferral’ – necessarily ‘discontents’ the prospect of closure.²⁰⁴ Thus, in an important article bringing these literary-critical studies of closure to Classical texts, Fowler writes: ‘All works leave things undone as well as done; all great works have that paradox at the core of their greatness.’²⁰⁵ Likewise, in a later article focusing on reader-responses to literary endings, he maintains: ‘All ending, however “good”, has to be, in the end, just stopping. But equally, any stopping can be made good, if the game is played right.’²⁰⁶ Simply put, no text is ‘hermetically sealed.’²⁰⁷

Crucially, the nature of closure in any text and genre does not only represent an aesthetic choice, but it also bears ideological, cultural, ethical, and political ramifications.²⁰⁸ There is as much at stake in comic (anti-)closure as in any genre. This is not just the case in a theatre without external confirmation of The End beyond the emptying of the stage (red curtain down, lights on, applause in a modern theatre; blank space following the last line of a printed text).²⁰⁹ It is especially the case in a dramatic genre without ‘easy’ closural techniques, as the speaker in a fragment of Antiphanes’ *Poesis* (fr. 189.) complained polemically, by contrasting comedy, with its need to invent everything including a resolution (πάντα δεῖ εὐρεῖν ... τὴν καταστροφήν... 17-21), to tragedy, with its mythic precedents that merely require the poet to

¹⁹⁹ For a survey of modern critical approaches to closure, mostly focused on the modern novel, see Dunn 1996: 8-9.

²⁰⁰ Smith 1968: esp. 210-60.

²⁰¹ Kermode 1967: esp. 35-64, 178-80. Cf. Brooks 1984: 90-112, 314.

²⁰² Fish 1976.

²⁰³ Fowler 1994.

²⁰⁴ Miller 1981: 265-6.

²⁰⁵ Fowler 1989: 80.

²⁰⁶ Fowler 1997: 22.

²⁰⁷ Fowler 1989: 80.

²⁰⁸ Roberts *et al.* 1997: esp. 13, 111, 207-8.

²⁰⁹ Dunn 1996: 13-14.

jog the audience's memory (ὥσθ' ὑπομνήσαι μόνον / δεῖ τὸν ποιητὴν, 4-5) and its ability to resort to using a *deus ex machina* when the poet has run out of ideas (ἔπειθ' ὅταν μηδὲν δύνωντ' εἰπεῖν ἔτι, 13).²¹⁰ Comic poets – Old ones in particular – must work hard indeed to achieve closure, something which seems at odds with the boundless energy of comic action.²¹¹ I will begin this episode by surveying the various closural techniques, 'formal' and 'thematic' to adopt the critical vocabulary of Smith (1968), that are used across Aristophanes' oeuvre to justify cessation and complete meaning. The show, after all, must not go on indefinitely.

In Aristophanes' plays, however, there is a distinct and revealing tension between the forces of closure and those of anti-closure, one which goes beyond any tension within the comic plot 'tra trionfo e disincanto' in the titular phrase of an article by Michele Napolitano.²¹² On the one hand, 'closed' plots involve the construction of fantastical utopias that appear to fulfil intuitive, simple, and communal desires (peace, freedom from trouble, universal wealth, and so forth). On the other, these plots remain 'open,' not only because they do not 'wind up' so smoothly, but also because they invariably rupture the boundedness of the fantasy. Scholars are well aware of comedy's frangible boundaries on a spatial level, above all in the form of the *parabasis*, the 'stepping forward' of the chorus in the middle of the play to cross the symbolic space between actors and audience in addressing the audience directly.²¹³ What could equally be said is that Aristophanes' open endings work as a frame-breaking device on a temporal level, working to parade the fragility of the comic *kosmopoïēsis* and the ephemerality of the community invested in it.²¹⁴

We will see how Aristophanes militates against closure by taking *Wealth* as a case study. Being situated at the end of Aristophanes' career (and his last complete extant play surely merits an essay on endings), *Wealth* displays many of the typical closural gestures which an audience might have come to expect from an Aristophanes play. Like all of Aristophanes' plays, it is far from being 'hermetically sealed'; the fact that Aristophanes had staged an earlier play under the same title in 409/8 may itself be considered anti-closural, as if Aristophanes

²¹⁰ The speaker is probably a personification of Poetry or Comedy: see Olson 2007: 172-3.

²¹¹ Cf. Charney 1987: 'the conclusion of the comic action violates the feeling we have that comedy is dimensionless, nontemporal, infinitely extensible, and not amenable to finite solutions or resolutions' (92, cited in Sharrock 2009: 250). Surveying the closural techniques in the more narratively and socially prescribed genres of New and Roman comedy respectively, see Katsouris 1976 and Sharrock 2009: 250-89.

²¹² Napolitano 2014.

²¹³ On the *parabasis*, see Taplin 1986; Hubbard 1991; Goldhill 1991: 196-201; Imperio 2004; Whitmarsh 2013: 11-14. On the spatial dynamics of comic theatre more broadly, see Revermann 2006a: 107-29. Other forms of physical frame-breaking include direct contact between actors and audience: for example, throwing treats (*Pax* 962-7) and directly engaging with the front row (*Pax* 871-908).

²¹⁴ On temporal frame-breaking and the aperture associated with it in tragedy, particularly in the form of concluding prophecies or aetiologies at the end of Euripides' plays, see Dunn 1996: 45-83.

were, in a sense, un-ending that play.²¹⁵ While the achievement of universal wealth in the play represents one of Aristophanic comedy's most communal and fantastical successes, it is also one of his most scrutinized and ultimately hints at being unrealised, perhaps even unrealisable. As is the case with most of Aristophanes plays, it ends happily, but, pointedly, not happily-ever-after.

Wealth, moreover, along with *Assemblywomen*, is sometimes seen as marking a shift from Old to Middle comedy. One argument that may support this is the absence of a *parabasis*; though there are still forms of audience address, as well as aesthetic and political commentary, in Aristophanes' late plays.²¹⁶ Another may be that the ending does not appear to be particularly 'loaded' compared to other Aristophanic endings: consider the scandalous endings of *Clouds* and *Frogs* with the burning of the Thinkery and the resurrection of Aeschylus; the restorative endings of *Lysistrata* and *Women at the Thesmophoria* with the return of the women to the household and the comic salvation of Euripides' Kinsman; the exuberant endings of *Knights* and *Wasps* with the rejuvenation of Demos and wild dancing of Philocleon. However, as I am going to argue, any such shift is overstated, both in terms of Aristophanes' poetics and in terms of his politics (a point I will make more extensively in my reading of *Assemblywomen* in episode four). Closural tensions pervade *Wealth* as much as any other play – or perhaps even more so because it is predominantly in the procession at the end, not in the *parabasis* in the middle, where the boundaries between the world of the stage and the world of the audience are most obviously collapsed. Here, as in any Aristophanic ending, I maintain, the forces of anti-closure outweigh those of closure. The effect of this, as it was with non-laughter, is defamiliarizing.

Before we get to the political implications, discussed in my 'parabasis,' I will end this episode with a coda. I will suggest that, beyond any affective impact on the audience, Aristophanes' resistance to closure fittingly embodies the temporality of hyper-democracy.²¹⁷ This is encapsulated by what Derrida calls 'democracy to come,' a phrase which refers not to a future form of government as an ideal or a *telos*, but rather to something unpredictable, unforeseeable, and 'interminable in its incompleteness beyond all determinate forms of incompleteness.'²¹⁸

²¹⁵ On relation between two versions of *Wealth*, not the only play Aristophanes rewrote or altered in some form, see the discussion in Sommerstein 2001: 28-33.

²¹⁶ Hubbard 1991: 248-51; Farmer 2017: 225-6.

²¹⁷ On the different conceptions of temporality in Classical Athens, and the phenomenological nature of conceptualizing time itself, see Whitmarsh 2021.

²¹⁸ Derrida 2005: 38.

I

Aristophanes' plays come to an end and they mark that ending formally and thematically, though each play does so in its own way, of course. The archetypal formal feature of closure in Greek drama is the procession off-stage.²¹⁹ *Exeunt omnes*, play over. The comic exit procession is not just enacted but it is explicitly announced at the end of Aristophanes' plays. In some cases, the protagonist leads it and bids everyone to follow (*Eq.* 1406; *Pax* 1357-9); in others, the chorus announce they will follow (*Ach.* 1232-4; *Av.* 1755-8; *Vesp.* 1535-7; *Pl.* 1208-9); and in others still, the chorus announce they will lead (*Nu.* 1510-11; *Ra.* 1524-7). It is also sometimes accompanied by torches (*Nu.* 1490, 1494; *Pax* 1317; *Ra.* 1525; *Eccl.* 1150; *Pl.* 1194), items which had already been present at the arch-closural procession concluding Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (*Eum.* 1003-1047),²²⁰ and whose presence seems to have accordingly become a traditional feature of the endings of New comedy.²²¹

Closure is also sometimes formally secured by explicit calls for or paeans to victory at the end of the play (*Ach.* 1227-34; *Av.* 1764; *Lys.* 1293; *Thes.* 1229-31; *Eccl.* 1155-62, 1182). This is particularly apt in the context of the comic competition, and generally apt because *Nikê* served as 'a master closural device in Greek culture.'²²² More ubiquitously, singing and dancing feature in most comic endings, though the conventional exit songs that are sometimes heralded, as in the final lines of *Acharnians* (1233-4) and *Lysistrata* (1320-1), appear not to have been transmitted in the texts that went into circulation.²²³ This may provide an extra dimension of closure, insofar as song and dance may be 'particularly effective for smoothing out rumples and overriding reservations.'²²⁴ That seems a particularly fitting assessment for the ending of *Wasps*, where the ecstatic dancing of the actors infects the chorus, who profess to lead a novel balletic procession offstage (1535-7).²²⁵ Now *that* is how to end a play, the

²¹⁹ Dunn 1996: 13-25.

²²⁰ Herrington 1963; Taplin 1996: 198.

²²¹ Arnott 1965.

²²² Wilson 2007: 259. Cf. Dunn 1996: 19-21; Rutherford 2001: 45-7, 55-7.

²²³ Sommerstein 1980: *ad* End; Henderson 1987a: *ad* 1273-1321. For an alternative view of this aposiopesis, which does not accept the argument from silence but in fact posits the chorus departing – disturbingly – in silence, see Wilson 2007: 277-8.

²²⁴ Taplin 1996: 196.

²²⁵ For one assessment of that claim, see Wright 2013: 221-5, suggesting that the novelty consists in the chorus appropriating a tragic style of dancing in keeping with the play's broader appropriation of tragic closural techniques.

chorus of *Wasps* boast, a vigorous and self-consciously closural form of exit that is then restaged in *Lysistrata* (1276-1321) and *Assemblywomen* (1163-84).

Less frequent, but perhaps most closural of all, is the choral ‘tag’ that explicitly asserts the end of the action in the very last lines of the play. This is something deployed with a particularly formulaic quality in Euripidean tragedy, especially in the five plays where an identical tag is used (*Alcestis*, *Medea*, *Andromache*, *Helen*, and *Bacchae*).²²⁶ Such a device concludes *Clouds*, which is unique in its *coup de théâtre* that sees Strepsiades hoist by his own petard as he is outsmarted by his own son, and then inflict violent, divinely sanctioned revenge on Socrates by burning down the Thinkery. That done, the chorus announce their exit and proclaim the end of the action in marching anapaests, a closing meter in drama: ‘Lead the dancers on their way: we’ve done enough performing for today’ (ἡγεῖσθ’ ἔξω κεχόρευται γὰρ / μετρίως τό γε τήμερον ἡμῖν, *Nu.* 1510-11, trans. Henderson).²²⁷ There is another distinctly closural choral tag at the end of *Women at the Thesmophoria*, which follows the resolution of the plot, inasmuch as Euripides has come to a truce with the women and has rescued his Kinsman: ‘Well we’ve had our share of fun. Now it’s time for each woman to go on home’ (πέπαισται μετρίως ἡμῖν / ὥσθ’ ὦρα δὴ ᾽στι βαδίζειν / οἴκαδ’ ἐκάστη, *Thes.* 1227-9, trans. Henderson). In both cases, enough (μετρίως) is enough, we are told. The End is also strongly marked in *Wealth*, where the choral tag employs the language of propriety (εἰκός) and necessity (δεῖ), as if the chorus have become aware of the formal conventions of closure with which they are conforming: ‘Well, we shouldn’t be tarrying; let’s take up the rear! / We should follow along behind them in song’ (οὐκέτι τοίνυν εἰκὸς μέλλειν οὐδ’ ἡμᾶς ἀλλ’ ἀναχωρεῖν / εἰς τοῦπισθεν δεῖ γὰρ κατόπιν τούτων ἄδοντας ἔπεσθαι, *Pl.* 1208-9, trans. Henderson). These closural gestures ensure that the audience is not left to expect anything more – at least formally speaking.

Connected to this are thematic techniques of closure. One is the sexual union and/or feasting which ends many of Aristophanes’ plays²²⁸: a marriage ceremony comprises the end of *Peace* and *Birds*; men are left sexually satisfied at the end of *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Lysistrata*, *Assemblywomen* (and the Old Woman ostensibly is so at the end of *Wealth*); an extravagant celebratory feast concludes *Acharnians*, *Peace*, and *Assemblywomen*. These *topoi* represent stereotypical end points for comedy, perhaps equivalent to death and burial in

²²⁶ Showing how that tag is formally closural but thematically anti-closural, see Dunn 1996: 16-18; Wohl 2015: 132-3. I will make a similar point below in relation to comedy.

²²⁷ On the meter, see Whittaker 1935: 190-1; Dunn 1996: 15.

²²⁸ See e.g. Sommerstein 1980: 11.

tragedy.²²⁹ On top of these generic end points, it is worth noting, Aristophanes sometimes incorporates ‘closural allusions’ as the end approaches, meaning references to natural stopping points from non-literary experience that may not strictly be relevant to the plot.²³⁰ Consider, for example, the Priest’s farewell (χαίρειν, *Pl.* 1187), Chremylus’ premonition of completion (πεπράξεται, *Pl.* 1200), and the reference to evening (εἰς ἑσπέραν, *Pl.* 1201) at the end of *Wealth*.

More generally on thematic closure, Aristophanes’ plays tend to follow a triumphal structure that ends in celebration.²³¹ There is particular cause for celebration when the end heralds communal, let alone personal, *sōtēria*, the salvation of civic order that serves to complete the plot or at least offer an impression of things being settled. Thus, the city is saved by the rejuvenation of Demos in *Knights*, by the restoration of the goddess Peace in *Peace*, and by the revival of the civic-minded Aeschylus in *Frogs*. These comic triumphs, in which the good and the bad – meaning Paphlagon-Cleon, the Arms Dealer, and Euripides in the cases above – also end up in opposite ways, provides an overarching source of thematic closure that Aristotle held to be characteristic of comedy with its ‘wish-fulfilling’ (κατ’ εὐχὴν) pleasure (*Poet.* 1453a34-6).

In *Wealth*, Chremylus brings about one of Aristophanic comedy’s greatest triumphs by restoring Ploutos’ sight. Closer to Trygaeus than Dikaeopolis, Chremylus achieves success for both *oikos* and *polis*. The play ends with the incorporation of interlopers into Chremylus’ household (with the customary exclusion of the sycophant), and with the installation of Ploutos himself in the *opisthodomos* of the Parthenon. The potential twist of divine retribution, explicitly realised at the end of *Clouds* (1452-64, 1478-85), is allegedly forgotten since Chremylus in *Wealth* claims that Zeus is emphatically willingly onboard (ὁ Ζεὺς ὁ σωτὴρ γὰρ πάρεστιν ἐνθάδε / αὐτόματος ἦκων, 1189-90).²³² However, as we will presently consider, even this triumphal ending may be less incorporative and settled than it appears.

II

²²⁹ Roberts 1993.

²³⁰ Smith 1968: 101-2, 117-21, 172-82.

²³¹ See e.g. Taplin 1996: 196-9. *Clouds*, of course, is the obvious exception, and perhaps the exception that proves the rule with its tragic overtones: see Silk 2000: 351-65.

²³² Assuming that ὁ Ζεὺς ὁ σωτὴρ refers not to Ploutos, as some contend, but to Zeus himself: for discussion, see Sommerstein 2001: *ad loc.*

Aristophanes' endings are designedly porous. It is generally *not* the case, as the recent scholarly trend would suggest, that Aristophanes 'tends towards closed, wrapped-up, reassuring endings.'²³³ Part of this is a result of the formal structuring of the plot, in which the hero's success often comes in the middle of the play and thereby raises the possibility of a 'false ending' or 'false closure.'²³⁴ Indeed, the second half of many plays is episodic, structured around a series of meetings with interlopers who serve to problematise the hero's success: the farmer Dercetes who is refused a share of Dicaeopolis' private peace (*Ach.* 1018-36) or the selfish man who refuses to share in the communal redistribution of property (*Eccl.* 853-76) are just two notorious examples. A see-sawing plot is hardly unusual of Aristophanes in this respect, as we will see in Part II with regard to *Acharnians*, *Assemblywomen*, and *Frogs*, insofar as the forms of democratic empowerment enacted in the first halves appear to be undermined in the second. Even when the triumph coincides with the climax of the play, as in *Lysistrata* with the achievement of peace and *Frogs* with the resurrection of Aeschylus to save the city, there may also be a discomfiting sense of anti-climax to accompany it, as I will also suggest in Part II. In the former, the return of the wives to the household may be at least as scandalous as the decision to pick Aeschylus or (possibly) to exclude Xanthias from the closing triumphal procession in the latter. The most discussed ending when it comes to the possibility of an anti-climax, of course, is that of *Knights*, where the rejuvenation of Demos and the replacement of Paphlagon-Cleon by the all-too-similar Sausage Seller has been treated with major scepticism.²³⁵

Anti-closure may be most pertinent when there appears to be more to come after the play has ended. At one level, this is because the plays frequently end by explicitly bridging the gap between the world of the play and the world of the theatre. In this way, the references to victory may be thematically anti-closural even as they are formally closural: the play ends on a note of triumph sometimes involving a feast, with an invitation sometimes extended to the audience (*Lys.* 1050-71, 1188-1217; *Eccl.* 1141-8) – though in both cases it is retracted –, and then the winning choral troupe participates in celebratory procession (*kōmos*) followed by a feast (*epinikia*).²³⁶ Similarly, exit processions embed closural tensions, since they formally

²³³ Taplin 1996: 196. See above n.193 for readings which stress the problematic or destabilising nature of the comic endings, particularly of the early plays.

²³⁴ See respectively Fowler 1989: 87-101 and Smith 1968: 67-9. Fowler describes this feature as 'where the text seems to pause or end but the external division has not yet been reached' (87).

²³⁵ For surveys of 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic' readings of that ending, see Di Bari 2013: 33-188; Pirota 2016: 36-45.

²³⁶ See further Wilson 2007: 271-8, showing how the 'comic' triumph within the plot sometimes sits uneasily with the predicted 'comedic' victory of the poet.

mark the end of the play at the same as they thematically signal the continuity of action outside the theatre, either with eastern exits towards the Street of Tripods or with western exits towards the civic space of the Acropolis, specifically the Prytaneum in *Knights* (*Eq.* 1404-5) and the Parthenon in *Wealth* (*Pl.* 1191-3). These are routes which at least part of the audience will follow upon leaving the theatre.²³⁷

At another level, this is because the plots are sometimes at pains to hint at an aftermath within the fictional world itself. Whilst it has been argued that comedy is so un-Aristotelian that it undoes causal logic and thus prohibits against asking “and what happens next?”,²³⁸ there is nothing that can pre-emptively shut down the prospect of an aftermath for the audience. Aristophanes’ plays are not utterly random; all narrative, Aristophanic comedy included, is a way of working through the consequences of action (cf. Arist. *Poet.* 1450a15-b4). The fact that the future tense is sometimes used right at the end of Aristophanes’ plays might especially justify our thinking about events beyond the plot (*Eq.* 1397-1398; *Pax* 1357-8; *Ra.* 1515; *Eccl.* 1181; *Pl.* 1201). The end of *Clouds* and *Wasps* are particularly anti-closural in this respect, since both plays involve protagonists who have failed to change their ways and will eventually be taken to court for their violently anti-social behaviour (*Nu.* 1239-40, 1296-1310; *Vesp.* 1388-1449).²³⁹ Even if both plays achieve a strong degree of formal closure, as we encountered above, there is a significant degree of thematic aperture, since there appears to be more to come.

In fact, in both cases, the final scenes are not even over before those plays end, making these ‘surprise’ endings as well,²⁴⁰ since it is unclear whether Socrates and his pupils are going to survive as the Thinkery burns down in *Clouds*,²⁴¹ and uncertain who wins the dance-off in *Wasps*.²⁴² It is as if a curtain drops upon the chaos, mid-action, following the unexpected antics of Strepsiades’ revenge and Philocleon’s unruliness as well. This is something which could also be said of the ending of *Women at the Thesmophoria*, where the surprisingly non-‘tragic’ stage action is still ongoing as the Scythian Archer sets off after ‘Artamuxia’ just as play is brought to a halt. There, in fact, the chorus, in cahoots with Euripides and his Kinsman, are actively prolonging the act by deliberately misleading the Scythian in the lines before the

²³⁷ Revermann 2006a: 174-5, 293-5; Wilson 2007: 284-7.

²³⁸ Silk 2000: 271-6.

²³⁹ Cf. e.g. Dover 1968, commenting that Strepsiades ‘still has to live with his son and his creditors’ (xxiii); and Pirotta 2016, noting that ‘Philocleon has recovered from his trial-mania, but has developed other annoying illnesses’ (47).

²⁴⁰ Fowler 1989 describes this feature, complimentary to the ‘false’ ending, as ‘when the external division comes upon us unawares’ (97).

²⁴¹ Kopff 1977 *contra* Harvey 1981.

²⁴² Vaio 1971: 348-9.

closing choral tag (*Thes.* 1216-26).²⁴³ The verb δῖωκω, used towards the end of that play (*Thes.* 1223) as well as that of *Clouds* (*Nu.* 1509), in particular implies ongoing and unresolved action, ‘pursuit’ without a catch. All is not well that ends well – and Aristophanes’ plays do not always end well.

The abrupt ending of *Wealth* exemplifies these aspects of aperture, namely incorporating a false ending and signalling the prospect of an aftermath. As soon as the Priest deserts his post, Ploutos is ‘immediately’ (αὐτίκα, 1191) brought out of the house, engendering a sense of haste that is common in Aristophanes’ endings (cf. *Vesp.* 1536; *Lys.* 1187-8; *Thes.* 1214; *Eccl.* 1140); though the ending of this play is especially hasty, as the procession begins and the play ends within a mere twenty-five lines. It thus concludes on a note of bathos, exacerbated by the fact that the processional offering of boiled vegetables, carried by a grotesque *kanēphoros* in the form of the old woman, is surely too cheap for the god of wealth (1197-9; cf. 940), and that there is a noticeable lack of participation in the procession from the characters of the play as well.²⁴⁴ Apart from deflating the celebratory spirit, this sprint finish does not satisfactorily reconcile some of the immediate issues which Chremylus faces (as well as broader issues about reconciling universal wealth within a meritocracy: see below). While the old woman twice raises the question of the settlement of her ‘problem’ in being snubbed by the young man (1197, 1200), there is little sense that Chremylus’ ‘pledge’ (ἐγγυῶ, 1202) to help her is about anything other than getting her out of his house. Considering how the Young Man resolutely rejected her earlier (1081-6), there is hardly any reason for believing Chremylus that everything will be easily ‘settled’ (πεπράζεται, 1200) for the old woman. As a matter of fact, while sexual union is a common feature of Aristophanes’ comic endings as we saw above, it is not rare for there to be sexual disunion as well: Philocleon is rejected by Dardanis (*Vesp.* 1342-63), the Scythian Archer is left scrambling for ‘Artamuxia’ (*Thes.* 1225-6), and Epigenes is dragged off by competing old women against his will just before Blepyrus arrives with younger girls (*Eccl.* 1098-1111). In fact, even the most ‘closed’ form of sexual union at the end of *Lysistrata*, which sees the wives return home to their husbands, might be considered considerably bathetic and downright scandalous (see episode four).

More disconcertingly in *Wealth*, as the procession culminates in the image of inversion (τάναντία, 1204-7; the pun on γράυς, meaning both ‘scum’ and ‘old woman’, is a form of linguistic inversion too), there is a tacit sense that Zeus’ settlement with the new circumstances

²⁴³ Cf. Stehle 2002: 398-401, discussing the ‘centrifugal movement’ and the failure to restore masculinity in this ending.

²⁴⁴ Sommerstein 2001: ad 1197; Revermann 2006a: 294-5.

will be also subject to inversion to come. For the protagonist's professed reconciliation with the god can perhaps be read in two ways (1188; cf. 347):

θάρρει· καλῶς ἔσται γάρ, ἢν θεὸς θέλῃ.

'Don't worry. It'll be OK, god willing,' or, 'Don't worry. It'll only be OK if the god permits it to be so.' The former is far less threatening and a better rendering of the 'future more vivid' construction, but the latter, in the context of Zeus' characterisation throughout the play as a misanthrope (87, 1117), seems more likely. For the threat that Zeus will take revenge frames the play, from Ploutos' initial reluctance to carry out Chremylus' plan to restore his sight (116-27) to Hermes' belated admonition against its consequences (1107-9). There are, moreover, potentially alarming allusions to narratives which display divine power throughout: to Sophocles' *Inachus* in the description of household plenty (802-22) and possibly in Zeus' position inside Chremylus' house (1189), to (ps.-)Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* in Ploutos' position as enemy of Zeus (87-92) and benefactor of humanity (160-1), and, most explicitly, to the story of Midas (287).²⁴⁵ One wonders whether these mythic hypotexts offer proleptic hints that things may also turn sour in *Wealth*, if Zeus is unwilling to allow Chremylus' success to stand. The Priest's affirmation that there is no problem rests only on what Chremylus 'says' (πάντ' ἀγαθὰ τοῖνον λέγεις, 1190); we have neither verbal nor visual proof of reconciliation from Zeus himself, who has not been 'deceived' in this play, unlike in others of Aristophanes (*Pax* 376-425; *Av.* 1504-5). The fact that he remains offstage is, perhaps, all too reminiscent of his absent presence in tragedy, where he inexorably gets his revenge.²⁴⁶ The idea of a cosmic settlement with Zeus himself may just be a product of Chremylus' wishful thinking.

The entire play, in fact, seems to follow an opening misdirection that renders the ending less settled than it appears; hence, any closure is inevitably going to be 'discontented.'²⁴⁷ *Wealth* begins with Chremylus asking Apollo how his son can make the most out of life (32-7) – not exactly a question with the civic good in mind in the first place – and receiving an apparently disconnected reply that instructs him to keep hold of the first person he meets on exiting the temple (41-3). Recollecting the false oracle given to Xouthos in Euripides' *Ion* (534-6), this passage possibly raises a question as to whether Chremylus, like Xouthos, is being deceived. More importantly, the oracle, communicated to us only indirectly via Chremylus, is

²⁴⁵ Bowie 1993: 279-84, 288.

²⁴⁶ On other tragic elements in *Wealth*, see Tordoff 2012a; Compton-Engle 2013; Farmer 2017: 212-28.

²⁴⁷ Miller 1981.

more ambivalent than Chremylus and Carion claim. Not only is there ensuing debate about the god's meaning (40-52), but there is also a considerable amount of irony generated by the confidence of the two men in interpreting divine prophecy, which is seldom given as 'clearly' as they make out (σαφῶς, 40; σαφέστατα, 46; δῆλον, 49; οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅπως, 51). In response to Chremylus' acknowledgement that Apollo already knows about his Zeus-defying plan, Ploutos seems to be about to offer a word of caution (ὀρᾶτε, 215; cf. δέδοικα, 197) – before he is cut off by Chremylus' bold reassurance which, perhaps unsettlingly, entails his willingness to *die* at the cost of carrying out his plan (μὴ φρόντιζε μηδέν ὦγαθέ / ἐγὼ γάρ εἴ τοῦτ' ἴσθι καὶ δὴ μ' ἀποθανεῖν / αὐτὸς διαπράξω ταῦτα, 215-7; cf. 350-1, 480-4).²⁴⁸ The end of this performance is not necessarily the end of this story, which, as we saw, repeatedly hints at mythic prototypes of human transgression and divine retribution. As we know from the ending of *Clouds* (esp. *Nu.* 1303-20, 1452-66, 1476-1509), and possibly from the ending of *Birds* with the constant comparisons of Peisetairos' usurping of cosmic rule to Gigantomachy (*Av.* 553, 824-5, 1249-52), the presence of a fearful Prometheus (*Av.* 1506), and the ominous thundering at the end (*Av.* 1750-2), even comedy is not immune to those kinds of narratives.

Besides raising the prospect of an aftermath within the comic world, *Wealth* undermines closure because its ending does not bring about clear-cut resolution. There may thus once again be false closure precipitated by the healing of Ploutos halfway through the play, described in the form a quasi-tragic messenger speech (649-770), that which typically heralds the 'beginning of the end' in tragedy as well.²⁴⁹ Many commentators, as James McGlew summarises, have been troubled by the fact that there appears to be a contradiction between the play's 'logical consequences and its dramatic outcomes.'²⁵⁰ The core problem lies in the connection between universal wealth and virtue, in that the enrichment of the virtuous and the elimination of poverty should go hand-in-hand, though the connection is only once made explicit (κᾶτα ποιήσει / πάντας χρηστοὺς καὶ πλουτοῦντας δήπου τά τε θεῖα σέβοντας, 496-7). Initially it looks as if healing Ploutos has precipitated a link between wealth and virtue, as the case of the newly rich honest man and newly indigent sycophant suggests (823-958).²⁵¹ As the play goes on, however, that link is increasingly less clear. As sceptical scholars point out, the young man gives little evidence of meriting his newfound prosperity as he insults the old woman much to her chagrin (τάλαιν' ἐγὼ τῆς ὕβρεος ἧς ὑβρίζομαι, 1044), while the complaints

²⁴⁸ Cf. Roberts 1997, regarding death as the only 'true' literary end.

²⁴⁹ Tordoff 2012a.

²⁵⁰ McGlew 1997: 35.

²⁵¹ Although even this scene is not always read 'straight': see e.g. Konstan & Dillon 1981: 376-8.

of Hermes and the Priest that men have ceased sacrificing to the gods ‘*because* they are all rich’ (ὅτι πάντες εἰσὶ πλούσιοι, 1178; cf. 1112-6, 124-43), as well as their observation that temples are being grossly misused (1184), appear to contradict the initial promise to punish rather than reward impiety (489-97).²⁵² The idea that wealth inevitably corrupts had, after all, already been present from the start of the play (107-11, 233-44, 249-51). While there is much debate about how ironic this play’s fantasy actually is,²⁵³ it seems fair to say that some ingenious interpretive work must be done to make Chremylus’ plan an outright, *closed* success. After all, the play does not end with the restoration of Ploutos’ sight, but upon its more or less ambivalent consequences.²⁵⁴

That the play may be designed not to resolve cleanly at the end is arguably prefigured by the failure of the *agōn* between Penia and Chremylus, often regarded as the play’s hermeneutic crux, to resolve cleanly in the middle. Although Penia’s sophistically superior arguments seem not to be logically refuted, Chremylus still technically wins the debate by resorting to force (598-619; cf. 526, 592). While this has been read as an ironic victory for Penia or a *reductio ad absurdum* of her position, Chremylus’ paradoxical outburst at the end of the *agōn* most of all suggests that the whole thing is a sham: ‘You won’t persuade me, even if you persuade me’ (οὐ γὰρ πείσεις οὐδ’ ἢν πείσης, 600). This ambivalent position is supported by the fact that, in contrast to Aristophanic precedent, this *agōn* does not conclude with an out-and-out winner and loser, decided by a third party.²⁵⁵ In failing to resolve, the end of the *agōn* functions, in a sense, as a *mise en abyme* for the play’s ending. Just as with the closing procession, the *agōn* fizzles out quickly, as Penia is forced to hurry off (ἀλλ’ οὐ μέλλειν / χρῆν σ’, ἀλλ’ ἀνύειν, 606-7) and Plutus is hastened to the civic space of the temple of Asclepius (ὥς τάχιστα, 620; μὴ διατρίβωμέν, 622). And just as with the hints of an aftermath in the form of Zeus’ revenge, the divine figure of Penia may be gone but she will not be forgotten, as she says herself (ἢ μὴν ὑμεῖς γ’ ἔτι μ’ ἐνταυθοῖ / μεταπέμψεσθον, 608-9) – and even Chremylus accepts that she will one day return (τότε νοστήσεις, 610). The *agōn* thus concludes on a note of aperture that recurs in the ending, where the central tensions which drive the plot remain suppressed rather than resolved.

²⁵² Flashar 1967; Heberlein 1981; Barkhuizen 1981; Bowie 1993: 268-91.

²⁵³ For one summary, see Ruffell 2006: 68-76, arguing that we should ‘embrace the multi-stranded nature of the discourse’ and ‘resist the temptation to boil things down to a simple position’ (75). See also Tordoff 2012b, suggesting that the different socio-economic positions of the spectators inform different interpretations.

²⁵⁴ That there are bad as well as good ‘consequences’ flowing from the ‘realization’ of the ‘great idea’ is already noted as a typical feature of Aristophanes’ plays by Sommerstein 1980: 12-13.

²⁵⁵ Noted by Sommerstein 2001: *ad* 487-618, writing that ‘the impression is less that of a formal debate than of a running argument.’ The only comparable *agōn* is the second one of *Clouds*, esp. 1448-51, in which, unusually, the first and not the second speaker triumphs.

Though *Wealth* ends with a formally closed choral tag and procession (1208-9), even in that case the degree of closure remains contestable. The chorus' claim that they *should* not delay but *should* follow the procession (εἰκός, δεῖ) suggests closure that is forced rather than natural, as if the plot had not yet wound up, but had simply 'timed out.' Moreover, while the pronoun ἡμᾶς (cf. *Vesp.* 1536; *Thes.* 1228) asserts an end for the chorus and the plot, it does not mean that the story is over, since, as we saw, the play breaks temporal boundaries by intimating a darker aftermath and leaving its central dilemma open. It also breaks spatial boundaries by ending with a procession that is heading towards the adjacent Acropolis (1191-3) via the western *eisodos*.

Wealth exemplifies the tensions between closure and anti-closure, and the inevitable predominance of the latter, that underly any Aristophanic comedy. The play comes to an end by incorporating generic markers of closure that are common across Aristophanes' *oeuvre*. On a formal level, there is an exit procession accompanied by song and the script is ended by a choral tag; on a thematic level, Chremylus' comic project to cure Plutus' vision is a triumph that appears to merit a concluding celebration. At the same time, *Wealth* ends almost too quickly, providing glimpses of an unstable future and failing to smooth out the tension between universal wealth and meritocracy, anti-closural gestures already staged at the end of the central *agōn*, and ultimately breaks into the world of the audience.

The effect of these closural tensions is that closure comforts, anti-closure alienates. On a formal level, closure provides aesthetic completeness and marks the end of the literary (and ritual) experience in time; on a thematic level, it bounds the utopian world of the comic fantasy. Anti-closure does not necessarily dispute the formal effectiveness of closural gestures, which draw down the red curtain (so to speak); although, as we have glimpsed, sometimes those formal gestures only offer false closure inasmuch as there are still issues to resolve and the action may even still be ongoing when the play ends. It mainly disrupts thematic closure, keeping the issues alive and salient for the audience, creating interpretative channels between the fictional and the real worlds, and, above all, inhibiting the audience from coming together as one body joined by shared pleasure in the comic fantasy. 'Fictions too easy we call "escapist",' asserts Kermode, 'we want them not only to console but to make discoveries of the hard truth here and now, in the midst.'²⁵⁶ Aristophanes' plays are never purely escapist: they are expressly about the 'here and now' of Athenian life, breaking the fictional frame

²⁵⁶ Kermode 167: 179.

spatially and temporally, and, as result, implicating and alienating the audience – or, rather, the different members of the audience, with their different experiences of the comic fantasy.

III

Aristophanes' preference for aperture over closure is not just an affective move. It might also be considered a reflection of comedy's hyper-democratic form. Democracy, Rancière writes, is a form without an *archē*, which means 'rule' – as in, 'the absence of *arkhê*, the sheer contingency of any social order' (1999: 16) – as well as 'beginning' (1999: 62):

'In the form of democracy, politics is already in place, without waiting for its theoretical underpinnings or its *arkhê*, without waiting for the proper beginning that will give birth to it as performance of its own principle.'

The converse is that democracy is also without a *telos*, an end. While Rancière focuses on democracy's anarchic side, Arendt focuses on its atelic side, regarding political 'action' as something that is inherently 'potential.'²⁵⁷ For Arendt, 'action' is a form of continual beginning (*archein*) that is characterised by 'boundlessness' and 'unpredictability,' and stands in contrast to 'work' as that which aims to provide finitude and predictability (2018: 196):

'In any event, work, such as the activity of the legislator in Greek understanding, can become the content of action only on the condition that further action is not desirable or possible; and action can result in an end product only on the condition that its own authentic, non-tangible, and always utterly fragile meaning is destroyed.'

From a historical perspective, Athenian democracy itself employed what might be called anti-closural strategies on an institutional level, strategies that resist sovereignty's characteristic 'finality and decisiveness' and befit the 'activity of self-constitution that is renewable, iterable, and open-ended.'²⁵⁸ Consider the fact that citizens participated in the Council and in the lawcourts through a continual process of selection by lot, considered the distinctive stamp of

²⁵⁷ Arendt 2018: 199-200. See also Agamben 2000: 'Politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediativity without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought' (117).

²⁵⁸ The quotations are from Brown 2009: 118 and Butler 2009: 300, respectively discussing Derrida's notion of 'democracy to come.'

democracy by Aristotle (*Pol.* 1273b40-41, 1294b7-9); or the fact that assembly decrees were decreed impersonally and impermanently in the language of ‘seeming’ (ἐδόκει τῷ δήμῳ).²⁵⁹ The notorious capriciousness of democratic decision-making, caricatured by Aristophanes’ description of the Athenians as a people ‘quick to make up their minds’ (ταχυβούλοις, *Ach.* 630) and ‘just as quick to change them’ (μεταβούλους, *Ach.* 632), testifies to ancient ideas of Athenian democracy as a form of disorder – something that democracy’s critics liked to draw attention to, of course.²⁶⁰ This is not to mention the unbounded and unpredictable extra-institutional spaces that were open to all, the *agora* in particular, spaces of political activity as much as anything in the Athenian *polis* (more on this point in Part II).

Democracy’s ephemerality and disorderliness, however, must necessarily be tempered in order for government to be practical and sustainable. This constitutes the ‘paradox of democracy,’ as Telò, citing Brown’s discussion of Derrida’s *Rogues*, remarks: “‘democracy is what ... carries the dream of freedom and equality,” which are, in a sense, compromised when one side wins, when what was unfixed and open experiences a kind of closure.’²⁶¹ Yet Aristophanes’ conception of hyper-democracy is not constrained by practicality and sustainability, or the need for closure; it is genuinely utopian in this regard.²⁶² Aristophanes’ plays which end but do not provide total closure epitomise the form of a democracy which seeks to ‘reinvent the political periodically, perhaps even continually’ and which ‘does not complete its task by establishing a form and then being fitted into it.’²⁶³ Democracy, on this account, always remains a promise, something ‘to come’ in Derrida’s phrase, something intangible yet longed for, as encapsulated by the lyrics of Leonard Cohen’s 1992 song *Democracy*:

It’s coming from the feel
That this ain’t exactly real,
Or it’s real, but it ain’t exactly there.

²⁵⁹ For a more developed account of the functioning of fifth-century democracy on these terms, see Wolin 2018a, 2018b. Cf. Ober 2002: 35-6.

²⁶⁰ Ps.-Xen. *Ath. Pol.* 1.5; Thuc. 1.70.2, 1.102.3, 2.65.3-4, 3.38.5; Plat. *Rep.* 562d-63a; Xen. *Hell.* 1.7.34-5; Isoc. 8.52; Arist. *Pol.* 1310a25-36, 1319b1-32.

²⁶¹ Telò 2020a: 216, citing Brown 2009: 122-3.

²⁶² Wohl 2015: 61-2, 87-8, 110-31 makes a similar point about the utopian impulse of Euripidean tragedy by virtue of its anticipatory temporality.

²⁶³ Wolin 2018b: 96.

Or, to adopt Aristophanes' most famous image from the end of *Knights*, we might say that democracy is always, necessarily, engaged in an open-ended process of remaking itself – of rejuvenating...

PARABASIS

From Defamiliarization to *Dissensus*

What does Aristophanes' resistance to laughter and closure amount to? My answer comes from a formalist notion coined by Shklovsky, and then adapted and politicized by Brecht: defamiliarization.

Shklovsky's fundamental claim that the 'purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known' is pertinent to Aristophanic comedy *tout court*.²⁶⁴ At the most general level, Aristophanes' topsy-turvy projection of Athens on stage presents the known (for example, the assembly) in the form of the unknown (for example, women in the assembly); at the most local level, defamiliarizing techniques abound in Aristophanes' language, with its 'physical,' 'accumulative,' and 'discontinuous' aspects, as Michael Silk has extensively shown.²⁶⁵ The use of gelastic vocabulary and of anti-closural devices are especially defamiliarizing, however, because the dynamics of laughter and closure are at the heart of the audience's theatrical experience, since the spectators come to the theatre with the expectation of laughing and indulging in a closed comic fantasy. Yet Aristophanes creates a critical distance between the expectation and experience of laughter and closure.

While defamiliarization is an end in itself for Shklovsky,²⁶⁶ it is only the means to an end for Brecht, who explicitly adopted Shklovsky's coinage and applied it to his highly politicised and committed brand of theatre.²⁶⁷ The renowned 'distancing-effect' ('*Verfremdungseffekt*') of Brechtian drama applies the Shklovskian principle of making the everyday appear surprising or unfamiliar, in order to zap the spectators out of habituation and force them to notice things (which for Brecht meant noticing capitalism's exploitative grip on society). Distanced from the drama, the individual spectator is able to adopt a 'critical attitude' towards the social forces driving the changeable events depicted onstage and is thereby primed to act upon them outside the theatre. One important defamiliarization technique for Brecht is the resistance to closure, something about which he is most explicit in retrospectively adding

²⁶⁴ Shklovsky 1965: 4.

²⁶⁵ Silk 2000: 98-159, esp. 157-9.

²⁶⁶ Shklovsky 1965: 12.

²⁶⁷ Brecht 1964: 99.

an epilogue to *The Good Person of Setzuan*,²⁶⁸ in which the audience are told that the play's end is not a real end (1966: 109):

‘It is for you to find a way, my friends,
To help good men arrive at happy ends.
You write the happy ending to the play!
There must, there must, there's got to be a way!’

Another defamiliarizing technique, though used less regularly and explicitly in Brechtian drama, is the use of humour.²⁶⁹ Armed with these and other techniques, Brecht criticizes what he tendentiously terms ‘Aristotelian’ drama (namely tragedy) for its focus on ‘identification’ between spectator and play, along with its alleged aim to produce catharsis, and contrasts his own brand of ‘epic’ drama (1964: 78):

‘[This dramaturgy] does not make the hero the victim of an inevitable fate, nor does it wish to make the spectator the victim, so to speak, of a hypnotic experience on the theatre. In fact, it has as a purpose the “teaching” of the spectator a certain quite practical attitude; we have to make it possible for him to take a critical attitude while he is in the theatre (as opposed to a subjective attitude of becoming completely ‘entangled’ in what is going on).’

What I have been arguing, in effect, is that Aristophanic comedy too is designed to resist the ‘hypnotic experience’ of theatre, in the form of spectators laughing together and sharing a closed comic fantasy. A corollary of the ‘Aristotelian’ dramaturgy, for Brecht, is its unifying effect, in which the audience is made a ‘collective individual,’ as opposed to the divisive effect of his own ‘epic’ drama, in which the audience is turned into a ‘collection of individuals.’²⁷⁰ As Brecht explicates (1964: 60):

²⁶⁸ The example is also cited by Dunn 1996: 65.

²⁶⁹ Silbermann 2012; Eagleton 2019: 53-4. Note also that one of Shklovsky's examples of defamiliarization comes from an episode of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (IV 13.14), which relates the ‘conspicuously strange’ laughter of a soldier (Shklovsky 1965: 17).

²⁷⁰ Brecht 1964: 79. Cf. 23, 37, 78. The tension between the audience as a unified collective and the audience as a group of diverse individuals is, of course, endemic to the theatre as a whole: see e.g. Hardwick 2013: 11.

‘In calling for a direct impact, the aesthetics of the day call for an impact that flattens out all social and other distinctions between individuals ... A collective entity is created in the auditorium for the duration of the entertainment, on the basis of the “common humanity” shared by all spectators alike. Non-Aristotelian drama ... is not interested in the establishment of such an entity. It divides its audience.’

What I have also been arguing is that Aristophanic comedy too divides its audience, exploding the idea of a collective entity of citizens sharing the theatrical experience together.²⁷¹ This is not to say that Aristophanes’ plays are resolutely opposed to fostering a sense of a shared theatrical experience. On the contrary, the more spectators laugh together and the more the comic fantasy is bounded, the more explosive are the moments where (some) spectators do not laugh and where the fantasy is ruptured.²⁷²

There are, generally speaking, more than a few similarities between Brechtian and specifically Aristophanic – both non-Aristotelian – drama: the episodic arrangement of plots, the historical situatedness of the narratives, the strangeness of the language, the self-consciousness of the fiction and breaking of the ‘fourth wall,’ the insistence on the didactic, and, above all, the constant possibility for things to be otherwise than they are. In fact, in 1940 Brecht himself produced an unfinished version of Aristophanes’ *Wealth* in the ‘Pluto Revue’ (vol. 10 of the ‘Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe’), though no reference is made to Aristophanes in his theoretical writings, while only once does he explicitly link the ‘altes Kunstmittel’ of ‘Vermfremdung’ to comedy.²⁷³ That said, as scholars who do make the comparison maintain, Brecht with his explicitly Marxist and revolutionary agenda may not be appropriate for thinking about Aristophanes, even if Aristophanes’ plays anticipate many of Brecht’s prescriptions for fully-fledged ‘epic’ drama.²⁷⁴ Defamiliarization for Aristophanes is evidently not about fomenting communist revolution in the fifth century BC. Yet it is about putting the audience in a critical position to acknowledge the non-naturalness of civic identity

²⁷¹ The opposite argument is made by Silk 2000: 350-435, writing that ‘as far as solidarity is concerned, the comedy of Aristophanes is a world away from Brecht’s divisive drama’ (408). See also Ruffell 2011: 261-313, maintaining that ‘while comedy acknowledges debate, disagreement, and division, it takes great pains to construct and manipulate its audience as a collective’ (263); and Roselli 2011: 19-62, suggesting that ‘even when the spectre of division is revealed, the plays attempt to combine these divisions into a single group united in its role in the dramatic competition and in its support for the individual performance’ (62).

²⁷² Cf. Brecht 1964: ‘it is a peculiarity of the theatrical medium that it communicates awareness and impulses in the form of pleasure: the depth of the awareness and impulse will correspond to the depth of pleasure’ (230).

²⁷³ Brecht 1964: 102.

²⁷⁴ Bain 1977: 3-7; Foley 1988: 44-5; Silk 2000: 236-7 with n. 64, 259-60 with n.9, 276-77, 406-8; Ruffell 2011: 219-20. For more detailed appraisals focusing on the relationship between Brechtian theory/drama and Greek tragedy, see Lada 1993, 1996; Revermann 2016.

and to notice marginalised figures above all, as we will see in the next episodes. Reflecting on the possibility of restaging the *Threepenny Opera* in capitalist America, Brecht suggested that it was only possible if ‘people understand how to provide entertainment and, at the same time, bite instead of mere cosy absurdity.’²⁷⁵ Aristophanic comedy too, for all its absurdity, provides bite.

It is moments of defamiliarization that provide the bite to prevent ‘that stamp of familiarity’ from tethering an audience to ‘socially-conditioned phenomena.’²⁷⁶ In Part II, I will turn to some of those socially conditioned phenomena, namely the exclusion of disenfranchised citizens, women, and slaves, from the political sphere, and to the moments within the comic plots in which they are disrupted. In other words, I turn from Brechtian ‘defamiliarization’ and the relationship between comic form and audience response, to Rancièrian *dissensus* and the dynamics of democratic empowerment within Aristophanes’ comic worlds.

Rancière, in fact, makes an explicit move from defamiliarization to *dissensus* himself in his work on the politics of aesthetics. According to Rancière, Brechtian defamiliarization only ever goes so far as a political strategy of art. For all its capacity to engage the audience critically and prevent passive spectating,²⁷⁷ Rancière argues that Brechtian drama and similarly engaged art forms are too paternalistic and explicit in their commitment to a political agenda: ‘Art thus risks becoming a parody of its alleged efficacy.’²⁷⁸ No work of art can guarantee that its audience will take heed of, let alone act upon, its spurs to action; none can ‘avoid the aesthetic cut that separates consequences from intentions and prevents there from being any direct passage to an “other side” of words and images.’²⁷⁹ The twentieth-century, after all, provides plenty of examples besides Brecht’s plays for what Adorno making a similar point calls ‘tendentious’ political art, meaning art that took for granted a model of instrumentality and efficacy that presupposed the potential to mobilise an audience to act in a certain way outside the theatre.²⁸⁰ It was this kind of repeated failure that allowed Auden to lament of Yeats (*In Memory of W. B. Yeats*, II. 3-5):

‘Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.

²⁷⁵ Brecht 1979: 102.

²⁷⁶ Brecht 1964: 192.

²⁷⁷ Rancière 2009a: 4.

²⁷⁸ Rancière 2010b: 148, discussing Brecht’s *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.

²⁷⁹ Rancière 2010b: 151.

²⁸⁰ Adorno 1974. Also referencing Brecht’s *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, Adorno writes that ‘[f]or the sake of political commitment, political reality is trivialized: which then reduces the political effect’ (81).

Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: ...'

Yet that is to take a rather limited view of the political possibilities of poetry. For Rancière, the 'emancipatory practice' of art lies rather in its non-explicitness and non-instrumentality: "Aesthetic efficacy" means a paradoxical kind of efficacy that is produced by the very rupturing of any determinate link between cause and effect.²⁸¹ It is enabled by the artist, like the 'ignorant schoolmaster' of Rancière's earlier work,²⁸² who 'does not teach his pupils *his* knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified.'²⁸³ Art's political teaching is, strictly speaking, contentless, a point made about philosophy's teaching by Arendt, who wrote of Socrates (the one of the early Platonic dialogues) that 'as a philosopher he truly had nothing to teach his fellow citizens.'²⁸⁴ The same could be said of comic teaching. If we thought otherwise and regarded Aristophanes as teaching specific lessons to the *dēmos*, then those lessons tend to fail as well: nobody listens to Lysistrata with the nude figure of Reconciliation on stage alongside her in *Lysistrata* (1128-61, esp. 1148-, 1157-8), to take just one example – a parody of alleged efficacy right there.²⁸⁵ While Aristophanes' plays may be Brechtian in their defamiliarizing force, they are not Brechtian in their lack of a clear alignment with a specific agenda. Their political force lies elsewhere.

It ultimately lies, I suggest, in what Rancière calls *dissensus*, the breaking down of social, political as well as aesthetic hierarchies in the name of equality. Nothing is predetermined or set in stone in Aristophanes' plays, whose language, style, plot patterns, and characterization are 'discontinuous,' 'mobile,' and 'recreative,' to adopt some of the critical language of Silk in his formalist analysis.²⁸⁶ Formally speaking, Aristophanic comedy might be said to represent an 'aesthetic break' with what Rancière terms the 'mimetic' (Aristotelian) and 'ethical' (Platonic) regimes of art, which respectively correlate to art designed to represent people in their prescribed places or to prescribe moral values.²⁸⁷ Aristophanes' plays, by

²⁸¹ Rancière 2009a: 63.

²⁸² Rancière 1991.

²⁸³ Rancière 2009a: 11.

²⁸⁴ Arendt 1990: 78.

²⁸⁵ Cf. Heath 1987: 14-16. In my 'exodos' I will discuss the counterexample of *Frogs*, in which the proposal of the *parabasis* to re-enfranchise the oligarchs was apparently (or coincidentally) followed through with the decree of Patrocleides.

²⁸⁶ Silk 2000: *passim*.

²⁸⁷ Rancière 2013: 15-25, with each 'regime' connected to the philosopher's ideal political society.

contrast, represent people unconstrained by their social situations, while they refuse to be straightforwardly instrumental.²⁸⁸

If, as Victoria Wohl has argued, the tragedies of Euripides do not ‘put forward a specific political content: as dramas that is not really their job,’ something similar can be said of the comedies of Aristophanes, whose political force also lies ultimately in how they ‘shape political sensibilities, create political attachments, structure political feelings.’²⁸⁹ It is this more intangible sense of politically engaged art that likewise interests Rancière, who writes (2010b: 149):

‘Practices of art do not provide forms of awareness or rebellious impulses for politics. Nor do they take leave of themselves to become forms of collective political action. They contribute to the constitution of a form of common-sense that is “polemical,” to a new landscape of the visible, the sayable and the doable.’

And reaffirms (2013: 59):

‘The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle.’

Aristophanes repeatedly creates a ‘new landscape of the visible, the sayable and the doable’ and does so ‘without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle’ through his plays, especially through those which stage and empower disenfranchised citizens, women, and slaves.

That does not mean we need to follow Rancière all the way to say that the political work of art is ‘indifferent’ or ‘intransitive’ in relation to its immediate context (how could it be?), and that its decontextualized meaning is then taken up and shaped by an empowered audience, an argument Rancière makes with exemplary reference to Schiller’s reading of the Juno

²⁸⁸ Cf. Gurd 2017: esp. 44-5, making a case for the ‘function of dramatic non-functionality’ with respect to tragedy.

²⁸⁹ Wohl 2015: xii. Cf. Ober 1996b, writing that the critics of democracy (including Aristophanes) ‘expanded the ground in which resistance to ideology was possible and fundamental change conceivable. And thus (perhaps unwittingly) the critic helped to guarantee the potential revisability of the democratic regime through the performative act of constructing an alternative political paradigm’ (159-60).

Ludovisi and to the novels of Flaubert.²⁹⁰ As a matter of fact, even if Rancière's claim regards the 'politics of literature' rather than the 'politics of writers,' Rancière's own model of political art still implies having an *artist* who 'does not teach.'²⁹¹ Aristophanes' plays bear political meaning, I suggest, precisely because the comic poet has chosen to intervene in particular historical moments, by writing plays that actively resist and disrupt the order of things in the Athenian *polis*. It is Aristophanes who sketches what Rancière would call 'new topography of the possible.'²⁹² It is that topography which we will now traverse in four of his plays.

²⁹⁰ Rancière 2009a; 2010c; 2013. This is the aspect taken up by Zumbrunnen 2012: 21-40 in his reading of *Lysistrata* and *Peace*, whose emancipatory possibilities are said to lie not in any commitment on the part of the poet, but rather in the act of interpretive engagement on the part of the audience. Apart from anything else, the risk of taking this approach is that it allows for endless possibilities of meaning so as to threaten interpretive vacuity. For critiques of Rancière's aesthetics along these and other lines, see Hallward 2009; Rockhill 2009.

²⁹¹ The same could be said of Barthes' 'dead' author: see above n.39.

²⁹² Rancière 2009a: 49.

PART II

EPISODE THREE

Citizens

Athenian democracy, it is well-known, excluded the vast majority of the population from public office-holding and decision-making. From this perspective, Attack aptly observes, ‘democracy itself starts to look more like a broad-based oligarchy, with an identity rather than a wealth qualification.’²⁹³ It is this identity qualification that has largely tended to preoccupy scholars, especially since the 1980s under the influence of structuralism. What structuralism helped to show is how the Greeks constructed their world through a series of hierarchical oppositions that pitted the human, male, free, Greek ‘self’ against various categories of ‘other,’ namely animals, women, foreigners and slaves.²⁹⁴ Such is the view epitomised in the anecdote about Thales (or Socrates), who counted his blessings that he was ‘born first human not animal, second man not woman, third Greek not Barbarian’ (πρῶτον μὲν ὅτι ἄνθρωπος ἐγενόμην καὶ οὐ θηρίον, εἰτα ὅτι ἀνὴρ καὶ οὐ γυνή, τρίτον ὅτι Ἕλλην καὶ οὐ βάρβαρος, Diog. Laert. 1.33).

In fifth-century Athens, following the Persian Wars, these structural polarities sharpened.²⁹⁵ It was not merely free Greek men who constituted the ‘self’ – there were plenty of adult male metics living in Athens too, after all – but an even narrower group: citizens. Normative or idealised expressions of what it meant to be an Athenian citizen might be found in places such as funeral orations,²⁹⁶ lawcourt speeches,²⁹⁷ or the Parthenon frieze.²⁹⁸ More complex or ambivalent expressions might be found in drama, whose questioning and transgressive force also sat in tension with the civic discourse propagated by the pre-play ceremonies of the Great Dionysia.²⁹⁹ The bottom line is that, when it comes to the study of democracy as well as drama, many roads have typically led to the citizen and civic ideology.

²⁹³ Attack 2019: 25. Cf. duBois 1991: ‘The historical democracy of Athens was a bounded oligarchy, not the ideal of democracy, its logical extrapolation as an inevitable, progressive, gradual extension of rights to all residents of an expanding community’ (126). For minority citizen versus total population figures in the fifth- and fourth-centuries, see Roselli 2011: 12-15, with further references.

²⁹⁴ Lloyd 1966; Vernant 1980; duBois 1982a, 1982b; Vidal-Naquet 1986.

²⁹⁵ Hall 1989; Loraux 1993; Cartledge 2002.

²⁹⁶ Loraux 1986.

²⁹⁷ Ober 1989.

²⁹⁸ Osborne 1987.

²⁹⁹ Goldhill 1987, 2000.

As Goldhill programmatically writes of Old comedy, it is ‘the product of and for the citizens of a radical democracy and takes place in a festival of citizens.’³⁰⁰

What if that view is too narrow and two-dimensional? What if democracy were not reducible to participation in the assembly and lawcourts, nor restricted to one ‘autochthonous’ group of free, adult, male, Athenians (made up of many different sub-groups, of course)? What if drama – Aristophanic comedy in particular – could be viewed from a non-civic perspective? There is, I suggest, more to democracy and the theatre than citizens. It is a central contention of my thesis that Aristophanes’ plays project a more expansive sense of Being than Athenian writers are typically seen as projecting.³⁰¹

In fact, scholars are already aware that hard-line structuralist binaries distinguishing citizen ‘self’ from non-citizen ‘other’ do not uniformly and rigidly hold.³⁰² Historians of Athenian democracy have shifted the focus away from civic institutions and the citizens who alone could participate in them, and to explore the contingency of the category of the citizen in the first place. As some scholars have shown, the boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’ were highly malleable and contestable, and there were plenty of ways in which conventional ‘others’ could express agency at Athens, particularly in ‘free spaces’ such as the *agora*.³⁰³ As other scholars have demonstrated, citizenship, itself never a formally identifiable feature on the bodies represented in Athenian art, was not a straightforwardly or consistently essentialist category.³⁰⁴ At heart, it was both a matter of birth, which meant being born from two Athenian parents after Pericles’ Citizenship Law of 451/0 (thus including women), and a matter of acting or performing in a certain way in public, which meant participating not just in the formal political life of the *polis* (thus excluding women), but also in its religious and ritual life (thus, once more, including women).³⁰⁵ Aristophanes’ own experience attests to an elastic conception of civic identity, if we believe that he was prosecuted by Cleon for the offence of falsely

³⁰⁰ Goldhill 1991: 184, noted by Kaimio 1999: 45 and Roselli 2011: 7-8. For extensive readings of comedy that foreground citizens and the civic, see e.g. Henderson 1990, 1993, 1997; McGlew 2002; Loscalzo 2010; Zumbrennen 2012.

³⁰¹ Cf. duBois 2020.

³⁰² See e.g. Hall 2006: 184-224, reappraising her original view (Hall 1989), admittedly influenced by the antagonistic climate of the Cold War.

³⁰³ Vlassopoulos 2007; Gottesman 2014; Sobak 2015.

³⁰⁴ Osborne 2011: 85-123; Blok 2017; Kasimis 2018.

³⁰⁵ Osborne 2011 observes that even Aristotle, despite giving the impression in his *Politics* of an authoritative definition of the citizen as someone who ‘has a share in giving judgement and exercising office’ (τῷ μετέχειν κρίσεως καὶ ἀρχῆς, *Pol.* 1275a23), betrays a more complex view: ‘there is no hiding the fact that Aristotle finds himself torn between different ways of conceptualising the citizen ... between citizenship as an exclusionary category, for which one either *qualifies* or one does not, and citizenship as an activity which may be well done or less well done, and without which the human good cannot be achieved’ (90).

pretending to be a citizen (Σ *ad Ach.* 378; *Ar. test.* 1.19).³⁰⁶ This may not be so unbelievable if we consider it alongside the legal challenges to citizen status in surviving lawcourt cases, especially those involving Euxitheos (*Dem.* 57), Neaira (*Ps.-Dem.* 59), and Pancleon (*Lys.* 23).

At the same time, some historians of the theatre have argued for a more ubiquitous presence of all manner of non-citizens in the theatre, both sat among the spectators and involved in the actual theatrical productions³⁰⁷; while others have demonstrated that the theatre of Dionysus was not the only theatre in town, since there were plenty of local theatres and Dionysia festivals throughout the demes of Attica and beyond, where plays were (p/re-)performed without the institutional formality of the pre-play ceremonies and so forth.³⁰⁸ Turning to the plays themselves, scholars working on tragedy in particular have begun to move on from the orthodox New Historicist approach epitomised in *Nothing to do with Dionysus?*, exploring issues of form and affect rather than mining the plays for their civic and ideological content.³⁰⁹ It is about time we made a similar move when it comes to the plays of Aristophanes, which, I am going to argue, radically collapse any structuralist binaries held to distinguish citizen ‘self’ from non-citizen ‘other.’

We might say in the first place, however, that this is only possible because the theatre of Dionysus is a ritual space where such binaries could be safely dissolved, a Dionysiac space in which, as Nietzsche claimed, ‘state and society, indeed all divisions between one human being and another, give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity which leads men back to the heart of nature.’³¹⁰ As such, comedy in particular has often been read as a mode of licensed transgression, the delight of which lies in ‘the vicarious liberation it provides from our ordinary roles in life that nature and society join to enforce, firmly distinguishing female from male, human from beast, animate from inanimate nature.’³¹¹ Bakhtin’s work on the inversions and transgressions associated with the medieval carnival has been particularly influential in supporting this view.³¹²

³⁰⁶ On this accusation, see Sommerstein 1980: 2-3. Several ancient sources also sought to find a non-Athenian (Aeginetan, Rhodian, Lindian, Egyptian, Camerian, Naukratian) or even servile origin for him: see *Ar. test.* 1.21-4, 2a/b.1-10, 3.16, 10, 11, 12.

³⁰⁷ On the heterogenous composition of the audience, including those in unofficial viewing areas at the back, see Roselli 2011: *passim*. On the involvement of non-citizens as theatre-makers (that is, as choreuts, actors and poets, not to mention musicians and extras), see Kaimio 1999.

³⁰⁸ Csapo and Wilson 2015, 2020.

³⁰⁹ Wohl 2015 and Telò 2021, responding to Winkler and Zeitlin 1990.

³¹⁰ Nietzsche 1999: 39.

³¹¹ Reckford 1987: 99.

³¹² Bakhtin 1968. Applying a Bakhtinian frame to Aristophanic comedy, see Carrière 1979; Edwards 1993; Möllendorff 1995; Platter 2007.

However, as scholars have contested, comic theatre is not a form of ritual that is strictly separated from or opposed to the normal life of the *polis*.³¹³ The theatre of Dionysus might be less analogous to a ritual space, even if the Great Dionysia shared elements of religious festivals such as the Panathenaea, than to an institutional space.³¹⁴ The plays were one part of a state-sponsored festival involving pre-play ceremonies that inculcated civic ideology, while their transgressive force has been held to have reaffirmed that ideology in the very act of testing it.³¹⁵ In those plays, possibly subject to some form of vetting by an archon in the first place, there did appear to be a quasi-institutional check on what could be represented. This seems to have been the case with tragedy, which tended to avoid directly representing the events of historical reality (or at least did so after Phrynichus' *Capture of Miletus*, a play that led to the poet being fined 1,000 drachmas).³¹⁶ It also seems to have been the case with comedy, which tended to steer clear of topics such as mockery of Athena or Demeter (as opposed to most other gods) or mention of the plague (as opposed to most other contemporary events).³¹⁷ More pertinently, comedy seems to have been regulated by general laws limiting what could be said and specific laws curbing its abuse of named individuals (*onomasti kōmōidein*), though the evidence is fiercely debated.³¹⁸ At any rate, Aristophanes, whose comic plots do not merely engage in norm-reversal but also involve plenty of everyday situations and characters, quite often presents himself as someone who speaks authoritatively or normatively, not transgressively or subversively, 'for *tragedy* too knows what is just' (τὸ γὰρ δίκαιον οἶδε καὶ τραγῳδία, *Ach.* 500).³¹⁹

While the theatre can be considered a key institutional space in some important respects, it is one that is quantitatively and qualitatively different from the assembly and lawcourts, the prime institutional spaces of Athens. Even if we restrict our focus to the main theatrical festivals of the Great Dionysia and Lenaea for which the surviving plays were written, the theatre of Dionysus is not equivalent to the assembly and lawcourts. This is partly because of its larger capacity and the greater diversity of its participants (even a restricted

³¹³ Henderson 1990: 274-5; Goldhill 1991: 176-88; Pelling 2000: 125-6.

³¹⁴ See Revermann 2017: 17-29, on the 'strong' institutional frames of the theatre of Dionysus.

³¹⁵ Goldhill 1987.

³¹⁶ Hdt 6.21.2. See Rosenbloom 1993 for discussion.

³¹⁷ Parker 2006: 149-52; Akrigg 2013: 115-6.

³¹⁸ For opposing views for and against the evidence for comic regulation, see respectively Sommerstein 1986, 2004a, 2004b *contra* Halliwell 1984b, 1991a, 2004 (the latter nevertheless accepting an exceptional decree of 440/39 attested at *Σ Ach.* 67). Most recently, see Rigby 2020 (sceptical even of that 440/39 decree, said to have been inferred by an 'ignorant and incurious' scholiast), with further references.

³¹⁹ On the force of this claim that appropriates tragedy's didactic authority, hence the coinage τραγῳδία, see Taplin 1983.

model of audience composition admits *some* non-citizens at the Great Dionysia, for instance ambassadors from the league: see e.g. *Ach.* 500-5). It is also partly because of its inefficacy by comparison with decrees of the *dēmos* or sentencings of the lawcourt, since the action that happens during the plays never straightforwardly translates into action outside the theatre (though the pre- and post-play ceremonies, such as the awarding of crowns and awarding of prizes, do have more straightforward real-world implications). More importantly for the present purposes, the theatre differs because, even if we accept a strict model of institutional regulation, there is still a relative absence of practical constraints on the approved plays' imagining radically different worlds. Indeed, Aristophanes could (claim to) be accused of 'making fun of the city and insulting the demos' (κωμῳδεῖ τὴν πόλιν ἡμῶν καὶ τὸν δῆμον καθυβρίζει, *Ach.* 631; cf. 503).³²⁰

If we were looking to view the theatre as analogous to another Athenian public space, perhaps we would do just as well to compare it to the *agora*, the extra-institutional 'street' space par excellence.³²¹ The *agora* is a melting pot of the civic and the religious (and the commercial), similar to the theatre's own blend (which also included some form of state allowance or private payment for tickets); it is disorderly and unpaved, just as the theatre had no fixed seats but only temporary wooden benches until the 320s; it is close to the Pnyx, the primary sphere of institutional power, located on the opposite slope of the Acropolis to the theatre (though it also incorporated the institutional spaces of the Bouleuterion and various lawcourts); it is a 'free space' open to all (at least all who are unpolluted), something which may be said of the theatre if we take into account the unofficial viewing areas at the back.³²² Above all, perhaps, it is extremely difficult to control the effect of the information passing in and out of the *agora* through rumour and gossip, in the same way as it is extremely difficult to pin down the effect plays have on the audience (not helped by the comic poets themselves generating rumour and gossip). As such, both the *agora* and the theatre are potentially dangerous and explosive spaces that threaten to disrupt stable institutions, which, in turn,

³²⁰ On the infamously overdetermined issue of Aristophanes' dispute with Cleon in this passage and elsewhere, see n.125 above.

³²¹ Gottesman 2014 applies the Arabic political metaphor of the 'street' to the informal public spaces of Athens: 'Participants here were not just the institutionally active, elite orators but also the passive citizens who never attended assemblies or courts, as well as non-citizens such as foreigners, women, and even slaves. Athenians did not have hookah bars or coffee shops but they did socialize in symposia and gymnasia and shops, and above all in the *agora*. These (especially the shops) were seen as informal, politically marginal spaces that were qualitatively different from the institutional spaces of the Assembly, the Council, and the courts where the orators held an uneasy sway' (x). Note that Gottesman himself includes the theatre as a strictly institutional space (10-11).

³²² For an account of the archaeology and sociology of the *agora*, I follow Vlassopoulos 2007: 39-46 and Gottesman 2014: 26-43; and of the theatre, I follow Roselli 2011: *passim*.

attempt to impose controls on those spaces.³²³ Comedy, which often caricatures Athenians as inveterate frequenters of the *agora* and the workshops located above,³²⁴ may even provide some of the best evidence for the disruptive influence of the *agora* precisely because it often mocks those associated with it, as Robert Sobak argues of politicians like Cleon and Hyperbolos: ‘In short, their familiarity with and integration into especially democratic social networks was the base upon which their power rested.’³²⁵

Bearing this in mind, it is perhaps time to make a new argument by analogy when it comes to the conceptualising the theatre as a political space. If we do see the theatre as a space that is primarily analogous (though of course not equivalent) to the *agora* rather than the assembly and lawcourts or a religious festival – and there is plenty of theatricality in the *agora* itself, a space that politicians could use for publicity stunts³²⁶ – then the notion of the theatre as a space where the *polis* ‘represents itself to itself’ takes on a whole new meaning (the phrase being characteristic of the work of Goldhill). It will allow us to understand better how Aristophanes’ plays imagine a new conception of democracy and those (to be) included in it.

It is the task of the following episodes to recalibrate how we might read the politics of Aristophanes’ plays that feature starring roles for the marginalised and excluded. There, I will consider how Aristophanes exposes the hypocrisy of a so-called democracy that cannot fully or convincingly justify its exclusions of women (*Lysistrata*, *Assemblywomen*) and slaves (*Frogs*) from formal political participation, as long as political participation is founded upon identities shown to be utterly contingent. In this episode, however, I will examine only the citizen perspective, arguing that Aristophanes shows how Athenian democracy was not strictly democratic even by its very own standards. For it sometimes failed to include members of the group which were said to constitute the power-holding *dēmos*, namely adult male Athenian citizens. This group, though not monolithic, is the most represented among all Aristophanic protagonists, particularly in the early plays. It includes those who are nominally included in but actually excluded from the political realm, the best example being Dicaeopolis in *Acharnians*.³²⁷ That is a play which stages a move from (an idiosyncratic version of) the institutional space of the Pnyx to the extra-institutional space of (an idiosyncratic version of)

³²³ This would include, for example, the ‘vermillion rope’ mentioned by Dicaeopolis in *Acharnians* (22, with Sommerstein 1980: *ad loc*), designed to herd people out of the *agora* and towards the Pnyx when an assembly meeting was called, those smeared with the red dye being liable to pay a fine (cf. Plat. Com. fr. 82).

³²⁴ Sobak 2015: 695–7.

³²⁵ Sobak 2015: 696.

³²⁶ Gottesman 2014: 114–54.

³²⁷ This sub-group would also include the Sausage Seller of *Knights*, a political nobody (esp. *Eq.* 158) who rises to political prominence and rejuvenates Demos; and Philocleon of *Wasps*, a jurophile imprisoned within his own home and thus forbidden from participating in judicial office.

the *agora* – a move that is also analogous to my own attempt to reconceptualize the theatre as a political space in Athens.

Acharnians

Aristophanes' earliest extant play and the first he had produced himself might be regarded as exemplary among Aristophanic comedies. Its plot contains formal and functional features that are common (though not uniform) across Aristophanes' oeuvre, while it is the most regularly and tantalisingly infiltrated by the poet's 'voice.' Its comic hero, Dicaeopolis, the only comic character besides the chorus who speaks as 'Aristophanes' and who is sometimes said to have been played by Aristophanes himself (*Ach.* 377-82, 497-508),³²⁸ is a central figure for coming to terms with Aristophanes' politics. Whilst *Acharnians* may well be read as a play that ultimately frustrates any effort to extract a 'straight' political message from its comic hero-cum-satirist in disguise,³²⁹ that reading is predicated upon a rather narrow conception of Aristophanes' political agenda. By contrast, on my reading, Dicaeopolis can still embody Aristophanes' political agenda, if we read it through the act of a citizen speaking *out* at all, and not speaking *for* any particular position. What Aristophanes provides in *Acharnians* is a blueprint for a civic body that includes excluded citizens.

That is only true of the first half of the play, however. Dicaeopolis' emancipatory project is all too quickly abandoned in the second half when he retreats to a paradoxically private *agora*, an exclusionary and solely economic space that is the opposite of the *agora* as the quintessential 'street' space of democracy. Although the extent of Dicaeopolis' selfishness in the episodic scenes of the second half is often regarded as the interpretive crux of the play,³³⁰ much more is at stake, regardless of whether Dicaeopolis is right or wrong to act as he does (part of the joke Aristophanes is playing is surely the difficulty of ascertaining the justice or injustice of 'Mr Just City's' actions). What is chiefly at stake in *Acharnians* is the kind of political world imagined in each half of the play, as Dicaeopolis ends up stifling the kind of democratic activity that he had initially emblematised. In other words, Rancièrian politics becomes 'police' and Arendtian 'action' is subsumed by 'labour.'

³²⁸ Bailey 1936; Sutton 1988; Slater 2002: 50-8.

³²⁹ Esp. Goldhill 1991: 188-96; Rosen 2012: 6-17.

³³⁰ Dicaeopolis as selfish: Whitman 1964: 59-80; Newiger 1980; Bowie 1982; Foley 1988; Bowie 1988; Fisher 1993; Bowie 1993: 18-44; Wilson 2007: 271-8. Dicaeopolis as unselfish: Edmunds 1980; MacDowell 1983; Olson 1991; Moorton 1999; McGlew 2002: 57-85. For a balanced view, see Olson 2002: xlii-xlv.

I

Acharnians begins in the heart of Athens' prime political institution, the assembly, but shows it in disarray. The Pnyx is empty (20), admittedly at the crack of dawn, but other citizens show up late (23, 40); while the eager citizen who does show up first to the seat of democracy has nothing to do except waste his time (30-31):

στένω, κέχνηνα, σκορδινῶμαι, πέρδομαι,
ἀπορῶ, γράφω, παρατίλλομαι, λογίζομαι,

In this space of 'political life' (*bios*), Dicaeopolis is reduced to 'bare life' (*zoē*), exercising the speechless bodily processes of groaning, yawning, stretching, and farting.³³¹ There are no *logoi* for him to make or hear in the presence of others; instead, there are only internalised calculations, captured by the middle verb λογίζομαι, for him to stay occupied.

Dicaeopolis, however, makes a claim to the political in the first instance by merely showing up. That in itself offers a sharp rebuttal to the anti-democratic argument that farmers such as Dicaeopolis have no leisure and thus no time or inclination to attend the assembly (Arist. *Pol.* 1318b10-18, [*Ath. Pol.*] 16.3).³³² Indeed, as Rancière contends (2010b: 139):

'[P]olitics begins when those who were destined to remain in the domestic and invisible territory of work and reproduction, and prevented from doing "anything else," take the time that they "have not" in order to affirm that they belong to a common world. It begins when they make the invisible visible, and make what was deemed to be the mere noise of suffering bodies heard as a discourse concerning the 'common' of the community.'

This is precisely what is going on with Dicaeopolis, who explains that his personal pains related from the opening line (ὅσα δὴ δέδηγμαί τὴν ἑμαυτοῦ καρδίαν, 1) are nothing compared to the current situation prompting his anguish on behalf of the community (ὦ πόλις πόλις, 27). It is

³³¹ These political terms here are discussed extensively in Agamben 1998.

³³² This is an ideological position rather than a historical reality, however, since the seasonal nature of agricultural work did allow farmers to have time for civic participation: see Osborne 2010a: 100. Cf. Wolin 2018a, describing democracy as a form 'where power was visible, audible, countable, accountable, and above all, accessible to those without leisure' (69).

not just that Dicaeopolis is a farmer whose lands have been devastated by the enemies' armies and so now has free time, since he is clear to state that he is 'always the firstest to the assembly' (ἐγὼ δ' ἀεὶ πρώτιστος εἰς ἐκκλησίαν, 28). Nevertheless, he is at breaking point and 'so now' (νῦν οὖν) commits to taking an extreme stand in the name of democratic agency (37-9):

νῦν οὖν ἀτεχνῶς ἤκω παρεσκευασμένος
 βοᾶν, ὑποκρούειν, λοιδορεῖν τοὺς ῥήτορας,
 ἐάν τις ἄλλο πλὴν περὶ εἰρήνης λέγη.

Shouting, interrupting, and abusing the speakers do not, as S. Douglas Olson notes, in fact represent 'particularly outrageous' assembly etiquette.³³³ Dicaeopolis is legitimately, if vigorously and boisterously, attempting to make himself heard in the face of those who refuse to take his plea for peace into consideration (26-7). Yet it is to no avail, since, as it will turn out, nobody will even hear him out. What is worse than the fact that nobody is initially taking part in this *faux* assembly is that, when it eventually does begin, few are even allowed to take part in it. The herald does proclaim that democratic touchstone of *isēgoria* (τίς ἀγορεύειν βούλεται; 45) as in a typical assembly,³³⁴ but this proves to be mere sham, since the right for everyone to speak equally is quickly squashed. The first speaker, the quasi-divine Amphitheus, hardly gets a word in before he is forced out of the assembly itself.³³⁵ Amphitheus' treatment smacks of Rancière's description of the workings of the 'police' order, which conceptualizes ideological policing as a form of banishing ("Move along! There's nothing to see here!") rather than what Althusser labelled 'interpellating' ("Hey, you there!").³³⁶ Amphitheus is almost immediately banished by the herald, who instantly calls the archers to get rid of the peace-dealing dissenter (54-60):

Κη. οἱ τοξόται.
 Αμ. ὦ Τριπτόλεμε καὶ Κελεέ, περιόψεσθέ με; [55]
 Δι. ὦνδρες πρυτάνεις, ἀδικεῖτε τὴν ἐκκλησίαν
 τὸν ἄνδρ' ἀπάγοντες, ὅστις ἡμῖν ἤθελε

³³³ Olson 2002: *ad loc.*

³³⁴ Sommerstein 1980: *ad loc.*; Olson 2002: *ad loc.*

³³⁵ See also Olson 2002: *ad* 46 for extensive discussion of his identity and possible allusions to a contemporary Athenian individual. Olson also notes that the fact that the herald asks who exactly Amphitheos is (τίς ὤν; 46) subverts normal procedure, according to which, in theory at least, the identity of the speaker – as long as he is a citizen – is irrelevant to the enactment of free debate.

³³⁶ Rancière 2010a: 37, responding to Althusser 1971.

ἥν μὴ περὶ εἰρήνης γε πρυτανεύσητέ μοι. [60]

Dicaeopolis' drastic action entails not simply obtaining a personal and private peace abroad (that happens miraculously easily), but, more extensively, defending his decision to the chorus. The hostile Acharnians enter with the aim of policing Dicaeopolis, even employing violence as they repeatedly pelt him with stones (234-6, 281-5, 295, 352-3). As their initial confrontation makes abundantly clear, the chorus refuse to hear Dicaeopolis out, despite his persistent requests to be heard, the verb ἀκούω being repeated no less than ten times in the space of twenty-two lines of dialogue (292-324). The chorus, who assert that they would rather die than hear Dicaeopolis out (ἐξολοίμην, ἢν ἀκούσω, 324), repeatedly attempt to silence Dicaeopolis, while they also try to make him invisible by burying him under a mound of stones (κατά σε χώσομεν τοῖς λίθοις, 295). They relent only after Dicaeopolis threatens a lump of Acharnian coal in a parody of Euripides' *Telephus* (335-8) and then plays the role of Telephus himself. It is in this guise that Dicaeopolis makes his case for peace (497-556), a case which has received a lot of attention among scholars, many of whom argue against taking it at face value as a 'definite plea for peace.'³⁴⁰ Dicaeopolis himself seems to be undermining his own case by demarcating the chorus from the audience in terms of their respective responses (442-4):

τοὺς μὲν θεατὰς εἰδέναι μ' ὅς εἰμ' ἐγώ,
τοὺς δ' αὖ χορευτὰς ἡλιθίους παρεστάναι,
ὅπως ἂν αὐτοὺς ῥηματίοις σκιμαλίσω.

Dicaeopolis is self-consciously speaking in such a way as to make the chorus look like 'fools' (ἡλιθίους, 443), while at the same time keeping the spectators in the know (εἰδέναι, 442). Would the theatre audience not be fools too, then, for believing everything he goes on to say? Indeed, as many have pointed out, the speech itself is not exactly, or at least not consistently, serious in tone: for example, it evokes intertextually the quasi-parodic opening of Herodotus' *Histories* and contradicts claims made elsewhere in this supposedly anti-war play, such as the claim in the *parabasis* that the reward for accepting Aristophanes' wise counsel is the winning of the war (646-54). To be sure, the point of Dicaeopolis' speech is surely not to convince the entire audience to vote for peace in the assembly; the division of the chorus immediately after Dicaeopolis has spoken, with both halves taking extreme positions (one chorus leader claiming

³⁴⁰ Murray 1933: 27. Arguing against that extreme position, see Forrest 1963: 6-9; Heath 1987: 16-18; Reckford 1987: 179-86; Goldhill 1991: 192-6; Fisher 1993: 35-9; Carey 1993: 251-8; Foley 1988. For a balanced appraisal, see Pelling 2000: 158-63.

that the speech contains *no* lies, the other simply resorting to violence), seems to be sufficient evidence that whatever this play gives us it is not a coherent anti-war stance (557-65).³⁴¹ Even so, there is surely a political point to all this, which comes less from the content of Dicaeopolis' speech than from the emancipatory form of a citizen speaking up and refusing to remain unseen and unheard.

While much has been written about Dicaeopolis' choice of Euripides' Telephus with its paratragic or parodic implications,³⁴² it may be Telephus' status as a beggar that is particularly telling when it comes to the issue of democratic empowerment. Indeed, it is this that really riles his opponents, for Lamachus and the belligerent half of the chorus are at least as outraged that a beggar should dare to speak up as they are by his pacifism, if not even more so (ταυτὶ σὺ τολμᾷς πτωχὸς ὦν ἡμᾶς λέγειν, 558; οὗτος, σὺ τολμᾷς πτωχὸς ὦν λέγειν τάδε; 577a; ταυτὶ λέγεις σὺ τὸν στρατηγὸν πτωχὸς ὦν, 593). Even if Dicaeopolis' speech was 'just,' as the belligerent half of the chorus ask, 'was it necessary for *this man* to say it?' (εἴτ' εἰ δίκαια, τοῦτον εἰπεῖν αὐτ' ἐχρῆν; 562). Dicaeopolis, however, protests against the assumption that 'Telephus' has nothing to say simply because he is a beggar (496-7, 578-9):

μή μοι φθονήσῃτ', ἄνδρες οἱ θεώμενοι,
εἰ πτωχὸς ὦν...

ὦ Λάμαχ' ἥρωες, ἀλλὰ συγγνώμην ἔχε,
εἰ πτωχὸς ὦν εἶπόν τι κάστωμυλάμην.

For why should beggars not have a say in a democracy in which wealth does not determine political participation?³⁴³ In a crucial passage of self-definition, Dicaeopolis collapses the distinction between 'beggar' (πτωχός) and vaguely defined 'good citizen' (πολίτης χρηστός), a point that would be reinforced if he does not in fact disrobe here (593-7)³⁴⁴:

³⁴¹ MacDowell 1983: 154-5 reads the splitting of the chorus as support for his argument about the seriousness of Dicaeopolis' speech, on the grounds that nobody directly contradicts what Dicaeopolis says. Yet this is hardly enough to prove that Dicaeopolis has made a wholly convincing argument; the lack of an opposing view for consideration proves, if anything, Aristophanes' lack of interest in debating the question of peace per se. In fact, it is only after trouncing Lamachus that Dicaeopolis ends up persuading the entire chorus to take his side (626-7) – he does not do it by his words alone.

³⁴² See e.g. Foley 1988: esp. 37-8; Pucci 2007: 118-25.

³⁴³ Cf. Reinke 2019: 'it is not clear that the categories of beggar and citizen should, by any necessity, exclude each other, and a beggar thus be barred from public speech' (41).

³⁴⁴ Both Sommerstein 1980: *ad* 594 and Olson 2002: *ad* 594 are dubious about any suggestions that he does.

Λα. ταυτὶ λέγεις σὺ τὸν στρατηγὸν πτωχὸς ὢν;
 Δι. ἐγὼ γάρ εἰμι πτωχός;
 Λα. ἀλλὰ τίς γὰρ εἶ;
 Δι. ὅστις; πολίτης χρηστός, οὐ σπουδαρχίδης, [595]
 ἀλλ' ἐξ ὅτου περ ὁ πόλεμος, στρατωνίδης,
 σὺ δ' ἐξ ὅτου περ ὁ πόλεμος, μισθαρχίδης.

On one level, Dicaeopolis the poor farmer-cum-beggar defines himself against the greedy Lamachus, 'Mr. Placehunter' (σπουδαρχίδης, trans. Sommerstein) and 'Mr. Wellpaid-post' (μισθαρχίδης, trans. Sommerstein), someone who along with his cronies dodges his duties and uses public funds to get rich off far-flung embassies (601-17). It is ironic that Lamachus, himself said to be undemocratically elected by virtue of a low turnout at the assembly (598), invokes the name of democracy in order to put Dicaeopolis back in his place (618):

ὦ δημοκρατία, ταῦτα δῆτ' ἀνασχετά;

All this proves is that the appellation 'democracy' can be 'quite easily treated as a strategic discursive term.'³⁴⁵ The invocation, which recasts Dicaeopolis' own expressions of legitimate angst in the Assembly (ὦ πόλις πόλις, 27; ὦ Κραναὰ πόλις, 75), is designed to induce outrage, making it appear as if democracy cannot 'endure' (ἀνασχετά) Dicaeopolis' dissent.³⁴⁶ The truth, of course, is quite the opposite, since it is Lamachus who has been the one to defy democracy, a form which necessarily allows for and incorporates dissent (see further below).³⁴⁷

On a more general level, Dicaeopolis explicitly does not define himself as a member of any particular social group, such as beggars. Rather, his primary self-definition is abstractly as a 'citizen' (πολίτης), that is a member of the *polis*, which includes more than just the narrow group of those who could participate in public decision-making.³⁴⁸ Dicaeopolis' more specific,

³⁴⁵ Butler 2015: 3. Cf. Rancière 1999: 102; Derrida 2005: 27, 74. On the ironic overtones of Lamachus' claim here, see also Lauriola 2017: 349-50.

³⁴⁶ Cf. Telò 2020a, regarding Poseidon's expression of outrage about the election of the Triballian in *Birds* (ὦ δημοκρατία, Av. 1570) as a strategy that 'builds on moral indignation to reinforce the logic of *consensus*' (239). Something similar could be said of the male chorus of *Lysistrata* claiming that the women seizing the Acropolis is an 'unbearable' act of tyranny (ἀνεκτά, *Lys.* 478), when it is *they* who are acting tyrannically: see below n.450.

³⁴⁷ Esp. Ober 2002. Cf. Derrida 2005: 'Democracy is the only system, the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name' (87).

³⁴⁸ See Osborne 2011: 92-102 on the meaning of the word *politēs* in contradistinction to *astos*. While the latter is used narrowly and more rarely to 'indicate a particular legal and political status,' the former, which 'admits of

secondary claim to be a ‘son of the army’ (στρατωνίδης) (and thus not quite the pacifist!) is similarly inclusivist, the army being a group composed of male citizens as well as many non-citizens.³⁴⁹ The adjective χρηστός qualifying πολίτης is particularly charged as well. For Dicaeopolis does not merely self-define as the opposite of the person who takes no part in public life, the bane of democratic society according to Thucydides’ Pericles (οὐκ ἀπράγμονα, ἀλλ’ ἀχρεῖον, 2.40.2). He also, more polemically, appropriates and transvalues one of the main evaluative terms that elites such as the ‘Old Oligarch’ had reserved exclusively for themselves.³⁵⁰

To be sure, Dicaeopolis is a named individual distinguishable from others (the significance of his name is discussed below) and said to a member of the specific deme of Cholleidae (406) (not Aristophanes’ deme!). Crucially, however, he is one of the sociologically unidentifiable ‘part without a part’ who has been ‘wronged’ by not being counted.³⁵¹ Dicaeopolis’ self-definition, in this regard, seems to encapsulate what Rancière terms ‘subjectification’³⁵²: less an identification than a ‘disidentification,’ since he denies that he is nothing but a beggar as others see him, and more a ‘demonstration of equality,’ since he claims that Lamachus and people like him are no more qualified for government than he and people like him are (in fact, they might be positively less qualified, given that Lamachus proves to be a poor general at the end of the play). This model of ‘subjectification,’ it is worth adding, is extended in Aristophanes’ next play in the figure of the Sausage Seller of *Knights*, someone who is able to challenge Cleon precisely because he is a ‘nobody’ (οὐδεὶς, 158) and protests against his own qualification to govern (150-240).³⁵³ At any rate, in *Acharnians*, our disempowered farmer-turned-beggar claiming to be a ‘good citizen’ makes a claim that is ultimately so unspecific as to be an ‘impossible identification.’³⁵⁴ That is to say, Dicaeopolis is not so much a poor peasant farmer as he is an ‘everyman,’ someone ‘constructed to fit no one precisely and everyone in general.’³⁵⁵

being performed well or badly,’ is used broadly and more frequently to ‘cover a whole range of ways of belonging to the community, of which having political capacities is only one’ (102).

³⁴⁹ Osborne 2011 notes that *astoi* (the group of citizens with formal political capacities) ‘alone could never provide the men required for the navy or even for the infantry army, let alone for Athens’ commercial involvement with the wider Mediterranean world’ (122).

³⁵⁰ Ober 1989: 289-92; Osborne 2017: 13-14. On the (re-)branding of the term here, see McGlew 2002: 71-2.

³⁵¹ Esp. Rancière 1999: 1-19.

³⁵² Rancière 1992, 1999: 35-42.

³⁵³ On the Sausage Seller’s ordinariness and paradoxical unfitness to rule, see McGlew 2002: 97-11.

³⁵⁴ Rancière 1999: 36.

³⁵⁵ McGlew 2002: 63 n.18, channelling Rancière we might say.

The idea of Dicaeopolis' status as an 'everyman' can be reinforced when we consider the significance of his name itself, 'Mr Just City.'³⁵⁶ This is particularly in view of Aristotle's political framework, which, in a crucial passage of his *Politics*, explicitly links the capacity for justice with the formation of political society (*Pol.* 1253a7-18, trans. Rackham)³⁵⁷:

'And why man is a political animal (πολιτικὸν ὁ ἄνθρωπος ζῷον) in a greater measure than any bee or any gregarious animal is clear. For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech (λόγον δὲ μόνον ἄνθρωπος ἔχει τῶν ζώων). The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure (ἡ μὲν οὖν φωνὴ τοῦ λυπηροῦ καὶ ἡδέος ἐστὶ σημεῖον), and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to signify those sensations to one another), but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong (ὁ δὲ λόγος ἐπὶ τῷ δηλοῦν ἐστὶ τὸ συμφέρον καὶ τὸ βλαβερὸν, ὥστε καὶ τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὸ ἄδικον); for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state.'

For Aristotle, it is the possession of 'speech' (λόγος) which explains why the human being is uniquely a 'political animal,' since speech can indicate what is advantageous and harmful and thus what is just and unjust. It is the human being's perception of these moral qualities which distinguishes him or her from the animal and makes possible the formation of the *oikos* and thus the *polis*. Whereas at the start Dicaeopolis had expressed himself primarily in terms of pleasures (ἡσθην, 2, 4, 13) and pains (ὠδυνήθην, 3, 9), the only mode of perception and expression said by Aristotle to be available for non-human animals that can merely make a 'sound' (φωνή) to indicate these things, by the end of the first half Dicaeopolis speaks explicitly of justice. Hence this beggar-cum-poet, professing that 'comedy too knows what is just' and that he will 'speak of terrible but just things' (τὸ γὰρ δίκαιον οἶδε καὶ τρυγωδία. / ἐγὼ δὲ λέξω δεινὰ μὲν δίκαια δέ, 500-1; cf. 645, 655, 661), confounds those who earlier in the play had

³⁵⁶ Previous scholarship on his name often regards it as a covert reference to Eupolis or to Aristophanes himself: see Biles 2011: 56-96, with further discussion.

³⁵⁷ See Agamben 1998: 7-8 on the paradigmatic, metaphysical status of this passage, viz. the 'fundamental categorical pair... of bare life / political existence, *zoē* / *bios*, exclusion / inclusion.'

determined by Aristotelian logic *avant-la-lettre* that he had no capacity to speak and thus to indicate what is just – as well as confounding those who might maintain that the genre of poetry he represents has no capacity to do so either. Paradoxically, Dicaeopolis does not actualise his claim to the political in the assembly, where he is silenced, but only afterwards, when he announces his name at Euripides’ house several hundred lines into the play: ‘Dicaeopolis of Cholleidae calls you, it is I’ (Δικαιοπόλις καλεῖ σε Χολλήδης, ἐγώ, 406).

Rancière’s summary of the ‘forms of democracy’ can help us articulate what we have seen so far (1999: 100):

‘There is democracy if there is a specific sphere where the people appear. There is democracy if there are specific political performers who are neither agents of the state apparatus nor parts of society, if there are groups that displace identities as far as parts of the state or of society go. Lastly, there is democracy if there is a dispute conducted by a nonidentary subject on the stage where the people emerge. The forms of democracy are taken by the emergence of this appearance, of such nonidentary subjectification and conducting of dispute.’

Dicaeopolis emerges by dressing up as a beggar and speaking out in public, makes himself into an active subject by self-defining primarily as nothing more specific than a πολίτης χρηστός, and provokes dispute not only by proposing to end the war with Sparta but, more fundamentally, by claiming the right to be seen and heard where before he was consigned to mute invisibility.

It is the stifling of dispute, above anything else, that marks the antagonists in the first half of this play (as well as Dicaeopolis in the second half, as it will turn out). This includes not just Lamachus as we saw above, but also the belligerent semi-chorus, who are unwilling to stomach the comic hero’s allegedly persistent abuse of the city (ὦ Λάμαχ’, οὐ γὰρ οὗτος ἄνθρωπος πάλαι / ἄπασαν ἡμῶν τὴν πόλιν κακορροθεῖ; 576-7), as well as of Cleon, who had allegedly prosecuted Aristophanes himself in the past for the same reason (502-3, 630-1):

οὐ γάρ με νῦν γε διαβαλεῖ Κλέων ὅτι
ξένων παρόντων τὴν πόλιν κακῶς λέγω.

διαβαλλόμενος δ’ ὑπὸ τῶν ἐχθρῶν ἐν Ἀθηναίοις ταχυβούλοις,
ὥς κωμωδεῖ τὴν πόλιν ἡμῶν καὶ τὸν δῆμον καθυβρίζει,

Conversely, the chorus in the *parabasis* boast that Aristophanes has earned himself an international reputation, cast in terms of epic-style κλέος, precisely because he performs acts of daring (παρεκινδύνευσ', τόλμης) by speaking out among the Athenians and saying what is just (τὰ δίκαια) (643-6):

τοιγάρτοι νῦν ἐκ τῶν πόλεων τὸν φόρον ὑμῖν ἀπάγοντες
 ἤξουσιν ἰδεῖν ἐπιθυμοῦντες τὸν ποιητὴν τὸν ἄριστον,
 ὅστις παρεκινδύνευσ' εἰπεῖν ἐν Ἀθηναίοις τὰ δίκαια.
 ὄντως δ' αὐτοῦ περὶ τῆς τόλμης ἤδη πόρρω κλέος ἤκει...

The risk of facing criticism or even prosecution apparently does not perturb Aristophanes, as for instance it would those Athenians who kept quiet rather than vote against the majority in favour of the disastrous Sicilian expedition, even though they were themselves opposed to it (Thuc. 6.24.4). The risk of being silenced by the ‘cowardly’ (δειλός, 664) Cleon, who in *Knights* is said to ‘scare away speakers’ (ἀποσοβεῖ τοὺς ῥήτορας, *Eq.* 60) and makes the city ‘silent and tongue-gagged’ (κατεγλωττισμένην σιωπᾶν, 352; cf. *Ach.* 380), likewise proves no obstacle to this courageous, righteous, and outspoken poet, also described as such in the *parabasis* of that play (τολμᾷ τε λέγειν τὰ δίκαια, *Eq.* 510). This puts Aristophanes in the exact position of Dicaeopolis, who too performed an act of daring (311-2, 315-6, 488, 558, 563, 577a) by speaking out in the face of those trying to keep him silent, speech which also included saying what is just (500-1).³⁵⁸

As such, both figures embody a central democratic value of *parrhēsia*, which, in Foucault’s discursive analysis, ‘demands the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger’ and which ‘in its extreme form... takes place in the “game” of life or death.’³⁵⁹ Dicaeopolis’ speech, of course, takes this ‘extreme form’ as he puts his head on a chopping block (318, 355),

³⁵⁸ Cf. Bowie 1982: 29-32.

³⁵⁹ Foucault 1983: 4. For Foucault, *parrhēsia* (in the positive sense) is a strictly civic quality: ‘In “democratic *parrhesia*” – where one speaks to the assembly, the *ekklēsia* – one must be a citizen; in fact, one must be one of the best among the citizens, possessing those specific personal, moral, and social qualities which grant one the privilege to speak’ (5). This may not be the case according to Aristophanes’ plays, however, where parrhesiastic qualities are displayed by non-citizens as well. For example, the women of *Assemblywomen* ‘dare such a deed of daring’ (τόλμημα τολμῶμεν τοσοῦτον, 106; cf. 288) by infiltrating the assembly, while the women of *Women at the Thesmophoria* explicitly assert their own ‘free speech’ (παρρησία, 540) in a quasi-assembly (295-310, 372-9). Aristophanes, in fact, is ignored in Foucault’s account, even though the very word παρρησία is used once in Aristophanes in the aforementioned example.

literalizing what Foucault terms ‘the parrhesiastic game in which your own life is exposed.’³⁶⁰ If Dicaeopolis can be said to stand for Aristophanes at all, it is perhaps above all because the character emblemizes a form of democratic empowerment that is at the heart of what comedy is about. It entails the willingness of anyone – farmer, beggar, comic poet, or anyone else for that matter – to dare to speak in public even, or especially, in the face of those who refuse to listen, and thus to assert *bios* in the face of the reduction to *zoē*.

II

Courage is described as the ‘political virtue par excellence’ by Arendt, who writes that it is the virtue required for the public realm of politics to exist at all, the space where the political actor ‘had first to be ready to risk his life,’ not in the sense of being prepared to face life-threatening dangers, but rather being prepared to leave the private realm where ‘one was primarily concerned with one’s own life and survival.’³⁶¹ Arendt’s distinction between the public and the private, the political and the anti-political, is pertinent to the plot of *Acharnians*. While the first half of the play had staged Dicaeopolis’ courageous advance on the public realm, the second half stages his retreat to the private realm, with no suggestion that he is planning ever to leave it. He thus ends up suppressing the very democratic energies he had come to embody.

It is telling that, even as Dicaeopolis is frequently named in the second half of the play (748-9, 823, 959, 1048, 1085, 1196), a feature typically associated with empowerment in comedy,³⁶² he is never described nor does he describe himself as a *πολίτης* again, let alone a *πολίτης χρηστός*. That adjective, though it is not used again in the play, does in fact resurface twice in the cognate forms of *πάγχρηστος* and *χρήσιμος*. The former adjective describes the ‘all-purpose (*πάγχρηστον*) vessel’ (936) that the sycophant Nicarchus becomes as he is packed for trade; the latter describes Dicaeopolis’ ‘commercial merchandise (*χρήματα*) for sale’ (973-4), ‘some of which is useful (*χρήσιμα*) around the house and some that should be eaten hot’ (975). This shift in signification is programmatic, for what had earlier been a political marker of the ‘good’ citizen ends up being an economic marker to describe ‘useful’ products. The trajectory of *Acharnians* is encapsulated by this reduction of the political to the economic, or, in Arendt’s more apt terms laid out in *The Human Condition*, ‘action’ (the sphere of public

³⁶⁰ Foucault 1983: 4.

³⁶¹ Arendt 2018: 36. Cf. 180, 186, 197-8, 206. For a historical perspective on the virtue of courage in democratic Athens, see Balot 2014.

³⁶² Olson 1992.

speech) to ‘labour’ (the sphere of biological necessity and endless consumption in private).³⁶³ While much ink has been spent trying to determine whether Dicaeopolis is right or wrong in his actions in the second half of *Acharnians* – scholars typically follow either the chorus’ admiration of his happiness (836) and ingenuity (971-2), or their objection to his selfishness (1037-9) – the bottom line is that Dicaeopolis retreats from the political world of ‘action’ altogether.

This is marked first and foremost by the change in setting.³⁶⁴ Dicaeopolis had begun the play in the assembly in the *polis*, but ends up retreating into a paradoxically private *agora* that seems to merge with his own *oikos*. The nature of Dicaeopolis’ *volte-face* is made clear from the very first word after the *parabasis*, in which Dicaeopolis marks out the boundaries (ὄροι) of his (τῆς ἐμῆς) *agora* (719-28):

ὄροι μὲν ἀγορᾶς εἰσιν οἶδε τῆς ἐμῆς.
 ἔνταῦθ’ ἀγοράζειν πᾶσι Πελοποννησίοις [720]
 ἔξεστι καὶ Μεγαρεῦσι καὶ Βοιωτίοις,
 ἐφ’ ὅτε πωλεῖν πρὸς ἐμέ, Λαμάχῳ δὲ μή.
 ἀγορανόμους δὲ τῆς ἀγορᾶς καθίσταμαι
 τρεῖς τοὺς λαχόντας τούσδ’ ἱμάντας ἐκ Λεπρῶν.
 ἔνταῦθα μήτε συκοφάντης εἰσίτω [725]
 μήτ’ ἄλλος ὅστις Φασιανός ἐστ’ ἀνὴρ.
 ἐγὼ δὲ τὴν στήλην καθ’ ἣν ἐσπείσάμην
 μέτειμι, ἵνα στήσω φανεράν ἐν τᾷ ἀγορᾷ.

Dicaeopolis’ *agora* is immediately designated as a bounded space.³⁶⁵ It is designedly restrictive, its rules being determined by one man (and to one man’s advantage) and inscribed permanently on a stele. It is owned by Dicaeopolis himself, the emphatically positioned personal pronoun ἐμῆς (719) representing a profoundly idiosyncratic and solipsistic twist on the conventional formula employed on boundary markers, which were positioned legitimately to exclude polluted persons from the *agora*: ‘I am the boundary marker of this *agora*’ (ῥόπος εἰμὶ τῆς ἀγορᾶς, IG I³ 1087-90) has become ‘these are the boundary markers of *my agora*’ (ὄροι

³⁶³ Arendt 2018: esp. 7-8.

³⁶⁴ See Compton-Engle 1999: 367 n.25, with reference to scholarship on the ambiguous settings of the play.

³⁶⁵ Cf. Telò 2020a: 219, reflecting on the boundedness of Cloud-cuckoo-land as an instance of Rancièrian ‘police.’

μὲν ἀγορᾶς εἰσιν οἷδε τῆς ἐμῆς, 719).³⁶⁶ It is open to trade with Peloponnesians, Megarians, and Boeotians on the condition they do not sell to Lamachus, though all Dicaeopolis seems to have done is to reverse the exclusionary Megarian decree, the alleged *casus belli* (532-4), so that Megarians are now included but (some) Athenians are excluded from trading in the *agora*. Those excluded Athenians include sycophants or Phasians (punning on *phasis*, ‘denunciation’), as well as certain individuals with litigious tendencies, as the chorus later assert (836-59), specifying Ctesias or any other sycophant as well as Hyperbolos threatening lawsuits. Tellingly, Dicaeopolis’ *agora* in *Acharnians* comes to be a markedly different space from other depictions of the *agora* in Aristophanes’ plays, where it is typically associated with democratic inclusion: it is the place from which Lysistrata draws her demotic bunch of allies (*Lys.* 456-8), which gives its name to the democratizing heroes of *Assemblywomen* (‘Ms Active in the Agora’) and (eventually) *Knights* (‘Mr Agora-Disputant’), and which is detested and avoided by the Better Argument precisely for its democratic associations (*Nu.* 991, 1003, 1055).³⁶⁷ Those later Aristophanic depictions, it is worth stressing, are much closer to the actual Athenian *agora* as an inclusive space crucial for the production of ‘democratic knowledge’ outside formal political institutions.³⁶⁸

Dicaeopolis’ *agora* is more than just exclusive. It is a space which accommodates neither the formal debate characteristic of the assembly (there will be no *agōn* after the *parabasis*, after all), nor the informal chatter and gossip characteristic of the *agora* proper (this is exactly what was bothering Dicaeopolis in the assembly at the start of the play, in fact: οἱ δ’ ἐν ἀγορᾷ λαλοῦσι, 21). Instead, it is a strictly economic space with the sole function of facilitating trade (πωλεῖν).³⁶⁹ The reprogramming of public space from the political to the economic is, Arendt writes, characteristic of tyrants, who attempt to turn the *agora* from a ‘meeting place of citizens’ into a ‘market-place,’ their aim being to ‘discourage the citizens from worrying about public affairs, from idling their time away in unproductive *agoreuein* and *politeuesthai*, and to transform the *agora* into an assemblage of shops like the bazaars of

³⁶⁶ Olson 2002: *ad* 719, 725-6.

³⁶⁷ On the *agora* as a space for public speech – hence the democratic slogan τίς ἀγορεύειν βούλεται – and its connection to the heroine of *Assemblywomen*, see Rothwell 1990: 83. This is a point made sophistically by the Worse Argument, who also associates it with the Homeric assembly (*Nu.* 1055-7).

³⁶⁸ Esp. Sobak 2015.

³⁶⁹ That the facilitation of trade is not the main function of the Athenian *agora* may be symbolised by the fact that Socrates, the barefoot philosopher, is often said to hang out and converse with none other than the shoemakers whose material products he publicly rejects: see Sobak 2015: esp. 707. This validates the view of Socrates in the *agora* as expressed by Arendt 1990: ‘Socrates, who refused public office and honour, never retired into this private life, but on the contrary moved in the marketplace, in the very midst of these *doxai*, these opinions’ (81).

oriental despotism.³⁷⁰ Dicaeopolis, who has in fact been labelled a ‘perfect tyrant,’³⁷¹ depoliticizes his *agora* in a similar manner. In doing so, he becomes invested in the very thing which he had protested against at the start of the play, namely trade (32-6):

ἀποβλέπων εἰς τὸν ἀγρὸν εἰρήνης ἐρῶν,
στυγῶν μὲν ἄστν τὸν δ’ ἐμὸν δῆμον ποθῶν,
ὃς οὐδεπώποτ’ εἶπεν “ἄνθρακας πρίω”,
οὐκ “ὄξος”, οὐκ “ἔλαιον”, οὐδ’ ἦδει “πρίω”, [35]
ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς ἔφερε πάντα χῶ πρίων ἀπῆν.

Dicaeopolis’ initial complaint about the war is that it has introduced trade into his hitherto uncorrupted rural life, in which the word ‘buy’ (πρίω) did not even exist and there was complete self-sufficiency. However, as has been noticed, ‘the buying which Dicaeopolis had longed to escape is now his primary occupation.’³⁷² Dicaeopolis in fact becomes ‘a buyer’ (ὁ πρίων) the moment he purchases a private peace-treaty for eight drachmas (130) and ‘gulps down’ (ἐκπίομαι, 199) the wine representing it. That is an act of trade and consumption that foreshadows much of his activity in the second half of the play, culminating in an extravagant banquet during which he likewise ‘gulps down’ (ἐκπέπωκα, 1202) the wine in his pitcher. Ironically, Dicaeopolis’ consumptive behaviour likens him to many of his enemies in the opening scene: the overfull Cleon vomiting five talents (6); the phony ambassadors enjoying extravagant feasts among barbarians who consider men those who ‘can eat and drink the most’ (77-8; cf. 73-5, 85-6, 88-9, 141); the fraudulent ‘King’s Eye’ entitled to free meals at the Prytaneum (126-7); and the sham Thracians, described as a ‘horde of locusts’ (150), who plunder Dicaeopolis’ prandial garlic (163-5, 174).

More hypocritically, the language of trade repeatedly crops up during the scenes set in the *agora*.³⁷³ This is perhaps most conspicuous when Dicaeopolis ends up buying two ‘urbane pigs’ (ἀστείω βοσκήματε, 811) – the adjective ἀστεῖος relating to the noun ἄστν that Dicaeopolis so hated (στυγῶν μὲν ἄστν, 33) – from the Megarian salesman. As the chorus at

³⁷⁰ Arendt 2018: 160.

³⁷¹ McGlew 2002: 78 – though Dicaeopolis hardly demonstrates ‘extraordinary inclusiveness,’ as McGlew somewhat contradictorily argues. Cf. Fisher 1993: 44.

³⁷² Compton-Engle 1999: 368-9. Olson 1991: 202-3 rather sees in the second half a simple return to a ‘pre-monetary’ existence, involving bartering rather than buying and selling, though it has been retorted that such a dichotomy is something of a ‘red herring’: see Compton-Engle 1999: 369 n.34.

³⁷³ πρίομαι, 737, 749, 812, 870, 901; ἀγοράζω, 750; πιπράσκω, 734, 735; ἄπρατος, 743; ἀποδίδωμι, 817; πωλέω, 897; ἐμπολή, 930; φορτίον, 957; ἐμπορικὰ χρήματα διεμπολᾶν, 973-4.

one point proclaim, using a verb with both agricultural and financial meanings, Dicaeopolis will ‘reap a bumper crop’ (καρπώσεται, 837, trans. Henderson), proving that produce is now bound up with profit – and, as we will see below, exploitative violence. Dicaeopolis’ one-man society is what Arendt labels a ‘consumer’s society,’ one which epitomizes the ‘victory of *animal laborans*.’³⁷⁴

Dicaeopolis may be praised by the chorus for his bounteous self-sufficiency, which seems to have revived the *status ante quem* (αὐτόματα πάντ’ ἀγαθὰ τῷδὲ γε πορίζεται, 976). Yet there is good reason for thinking that this exclusionary Golden Age is not a revival but rather a ‘corrupt and perverted version of the original.’³⁷⁵ Perhaps the grossest corruption and perversion is that the earlier state of self-sufficiency had served as the means to enable Dicaeopolis’ allegedly regular attendance of the assembly. It had provided an idealised equivalent to jury or (later) assembly pay, that crucial feature of Athenian democracy which allowed the poor to participate in formal public decision-making without having to worry about providing for the necessities of life. Now, however, Dicaeopolis’ self-sufficiency is merely an end, not a means, a frequent Aristophanic criticism when it comes to public pay as a matter of fact (cf. e.g. *Vesp.* 605-12, 684-95).

Dicaeopolis therefore ends up inverting the Aristotelian dogma (*Pol.* 1252b29-31), endorsed by Arendt throughout her work, which states that ‘self-sufficiency’ (αὐτάρκεια) is a necessary precondition for the *polis*, which ‘comes into being for the sake of living’ (γινομένη μὲν τοῦ ζῆν ἕνεκεν), but not the goal of the *polis*, which ‘exists for the sake of the living well’ (οὗσα δὲ τοῦ εὖ ζῆν). We saw how Dicaeopolis began the play merely ‘living’ (ζῆν), as a being capable of no more than indicating pleasure and pain, and had ended the first half of the play ‘living well’ (εὖ ζῆν), as a being capable of speaking and pursuing justice. What happens in the second half, however, is a return to the anti-political, as Dicaeopolis ends up once more merely ‘living’ (*zēn*), by seeking little more than to satisfy the desires of his belly (and other parts). The only thing that appears to have changed from start to finish is the balance of pleasures and pains, a point highlighted by the fact that the very same verb that is used in the prologue to describe Dicaeopolis’ complaints about being ‘bitten’ (δέδηγμαί, 1; ἐδήχθην, 18) by the state of affairs at Athens ends up relating Dicaeopolis’ pleasure at being ‘nibbled’ by one of the dancing girls (τί με σὺ δάκνεις; 1209). To be content with the natural pleasures, Arendt writes of those who forsake the public realm of ‘action,’ is ‘to live and die like

³⁷⁴ Arendt 2018: 125-35, 320-5.

³⁷⁵ Foley 1988: 46 with n.52, detailing how Dicaeopolis’ actions in his private market resurrect many of the vices that he had earlier protested. See also Bowie 1993: 19-20.

animals.³⁷⁶ But it is not just animals Dicaeopolis seems to resemble. Insatiable, isolated, self-sufficient – and sometimes unjust – Dicaeopolis ends up resembling the Cyclopes of Homer (*Od.* 9.106-141, esp. 109, 131), those beings paradigmatically described by Aristotle as having no need for a *polis* at all (*Pol.* 1253a26-9).

While things work out well for Dicaeopolis, they hardly work out so well for everyone who tries to trade with him, as scholars who assert Dicaeopolis' selfishness point out.³⁷⁷ The Athenian war victim Dercetes is left to suffer the loss of his oxen because he offers nothing in exchange for Dicaeopolis' peace (1018-36); the bridegroom's offer of meat from his wedding is initially said to be well below Dicaeopolis' price for peace at more than one-thousand drachmas (1055), quite the mark-up on Dicaeopolis' purchase price of eight drachmas (130) (though Dicaeopolis does then give a splash of peace away freely to the bridesmaid); Lamachus is banned from the *agora* in the first place and not allowed to join in Dicaeopolis' feast; while the Megarian and Theban are swindled, the former trading his own children for a small amount of the Megarian delicacies of garlic and salt (813-4), the latter having to give up his eels as market tax (896). The chorus, who had initially envied Dicaeopolis' feast (1008-10), look like the fools Dicaeopolis said they were (443), when they realise that it is a feast to which they too are not invited (1037-9), since it is being prepared by a man who only 'dines for himself' (αὐτῷ διακονεῖται, 1017), after all.³⁷⁸ However, what is more troubling than Dicaeopolis' treatment of these individuals, which has been justified on a different reading which sees the excluded as being deserving of their exclusion,³⁷⁹ is how everyone in this play is reduced to being a mere consumer. In the scenes with the Megarian and the Theban, the consequences of consumerization are particularly dire, as it results in their complete dehumanization. The Megarian's daughters are animalized as pigs (and objectified as vaginas through the pun on χοῖρος), while the sycophant Nicarchus is objectified as pottery in profitable exchange with the Theban (at the same time, the Megarian wishes to 'sell' (ἀποδόσθαι) his mother and wife in the former scene (816-7), and in the latter the Theban is described as being like a 'storm of birds' (ὥσπερ εἰ χειμῶν ἄρα / ὀρνιθίας, 876-7) and Nicarchus like a 'monkey' (ἄπερ πίθακον, 907)).

³⁷⁶ Arendt 2018: 19. Similarly, Aristotle describes that kind of life as a 'life of cattle' (βοσκημάτων βίον, *NE* 1095b16-20), while the sycophant in *Wealth* likens the newly quiet life of the Just Man to a 'sheep's life' (προβατίον βίον, *Pl.* 921).

³⁷⁷ See e.g. Whitman 1964: 79; Fisher 1993: 39; Compton-Engle 1999: 369.

³⁷⁸ Cf. Arendt's description of the *animal laborans* as someone who 'does not flee the world but is ejected from it in so far as he is imprisoned in the privacy of his own body, caught in the fulfilment of needs in which nobody can share and which nobody can fully communicate' (118-9).

³⁷⁹ See above n.330 for scholarship on the (in)justice of Dicaeopolis' actions.

If Dicaeopolis is a successful consumer who achieves an ideal of abundance, the Megarian is a struggling consumer who faces the opposite condition of starvation. The Megarian salesman gives his daughters the grim choice of being sold or starving miserably (πότερα πεπρᾶσθαι χρήδδεται ἢ πεινῆν κακῶς; 734) – receiving an uncomfortably enthusiastic response (πεπρᾶσθαι πεπρᾶσθαι, 735) – and relates the dire need to sell them to avoid experiencing grim famine (αἴπερ ἰξεῖτ' οἴκαδ' / ἄπρατα, πειρασεῖσθε τὰς λιμοῦ κακῶς, 742-3). The picture of the starving Megarians, already aired by Dicaeopolis during his speech to the chorus ('πείνων, 535), is reinforced in a potentially discomfoting manner when Dicaeopolis jests – a bad joke? – that the Megarians, famishing (διαπεινᾶμεν, 751) as opposed to feasting (διαπίνομεν), are only an aulos short of a pleasant campfire (ἀλλ' ἡδύ τοι νῆ τὸν Δί', ἦν αὐλὸς παρῆ, 752). These Megarians feel what Arendt would call the 'burden of biological life,'³⁸⁰ the condition of animals in their unending quest for food.³⁸¹ This condition is, of course, literalized, since the Megarian's two daughters are dressed up as piglets. While this is often regarded as a playful comic routine, in which Dicaeopolis plays along with the disguise that he can see through and make innuendos about,³⁸² and in which the butt of the joke are Athens' enemies,³⁸³ the scene is surely more disturbing and the Megarians' plight more sympathetic, as they are reduced to a condition of animality.

The two girls, in fact, are already pig-like in their voracious appetites, which is what actually convinces Dicaeopolis to purchase them. They are so hungry that they are willing to eat 'everything' (πάνθ', 799) they are given, while they 'munch' τρώζονται (806) the figs that are tossed their way to provide the material for a pun – a bad one? – on the pigs being from 'Munchester' (ὥς Τραγασαῖα φαίνεται, 808). When their father opportunistically picks up the scraps that have not been 'wolfed down' (κατέτρωγον, 809-10), he too behaves like an animal. More systematically, the daughters forfeit the capacity for human speech, reduced to oinking (κοῖ κοῖ, 780, 800-3), 'squealing' (κεκράγατον, 804) and 'making a guzzling noise' (ροθιάζουσ', 807). The Megarian's daughters are relegated to the condition of the non-human animal with only the capacity for *phōnē*, the animal's distinguishing feature according to Aristotle (*Pol.* 1253a7-18); though their assimilation is already signalled at the start of the scene

³⁸⁰ Arendt 2018: 119.

³⁸¹ On insatiability and the bestial in Greek culture, see e.g. Athen. 363a; Xen. *Inst. Cyr.* 5.2.17; Eur. *Cyc.* 335-8; Aeschin. 1.96.

³⁸² Henderson 1991: 9, 60, 131-2; Olson 2002: *ad* 738-9.

³⁸³ Pelling 2000: 'Athenian sympathy for a Megarian is as unlikely as a Liverpool supporter feeling sympathy for a relegated Evertonian, or – for most of our past – British sympathy for a suffering Frenchman' (159).

when their father advertises them to Dicaeopolis by asking them to ‘make a sound’ (φώνει, 777).

Even if the Megarian’s plight is more comic than sympathetic, what may be more troubling is that Dicaeopolis himself is not all that far off this position of quasi-animality. Indeed, the only use of the noun *phōnē* in this play describes Dicaeopolis’ own ‘voice’ (φωνή, 1046), as he orders servants around to prepare his food and makes his own animalistic ‘high-pitched noises’ (ὀρθιασμάτων, 1042). The difference between the starving Megarians and the feasting Dicaeopolis is, ultimately, only a matter of quantity.³⁸⁴ This point is made during the choral interlude after the chorus discover that Dicaeopolis does not share with Dercetes: the chorus’ expostulation that they being threatened with starvation and death (1044-5) is immediately juxtaposed with Dicaeopolis’ preparations for a plentiful feast that involves a panoply of delicacies (1040-1, 1043, 1047). Although there is no direct indication that this feast involves the Megarian ‘piglets’ he has just purchased, there may still be a whiff of cannibalism – another Cyclopic trait – in the air, since Dicaeopolis does consume the eels he has purchased after ‘addressing’ them (προσειπεῖν, 882; προσείπατ’ αὐτήν, 891) and treating one of them as his ‘guest’ (ξένης, 892).

The whiff of cannibalism is to return all the more pungently in *Birds*, of course, in which that play’s bird-tyrant (τύραννος, Av. 1708) has no qualms roasting birds for his own celebratory feast (Av. 1583-5, 1688-9).³⁸⁵ Dicaeopolis, increasingly bossy as the play goes on (1003-7, 1040-7, 1067-8, 1095-1142, 1216-25) and at one point described as a chef (μαγειρικῶς, δειπνητικῶς, 1015-6), distinctly seems to prefigure the imperious Peisetairos, most tellingly when the former is described in avian imagery, ‘upon wings of thrushes and blackbirds’ (ὕπαι πτερύγων κιχλᾶν καὶ κοφίχων, 970) and ‘in flight to dinner with grand thoughts on his mind’ (ἐπτέρωταί τ’ ἐπὶ τὸ δεῖπνον ἅμα καὶ μέγала δὴ φρονεῖ, 986). *Birds* might thus be regarded as extending and exaggerating the anti-political trajectory of the second half of *Acharnians*, since the latter play’s protagonists set off to forsake the messy, litigious world of Athenian democracy from the very start and end up establishing their own ‘police’ order.³⁸⁶ If litigiousness is the main issue for Peisetairos and Euelpides (Av. 40-1), it is also a

³⁸⁴ Cf. Arendt 2006: ‘affluence and wretchedness are only two sides of the same coin; the bonds of necessity need not be of iron, they can be made of silk’ (130; cf. 54).

³⁸⁵ The view that Peisetairos, whose name recalls the tyrant Peisistratus, sets up a tyranny is well-established: see e.g. Bowie 1993: 177; Konstan 1997: 15-16; Romer 1997: 59-64; Anderson and Dix 2007; Ambler 2012; Hall 2020a.

³⁸⁶ Telò 2020a. Cf. Hall 2020a: ‘It is important that what the Athenian emigrants dislike about Athens is its *polupragmosunē* (44); they want a “quiet” life, by which they mean one in which they are unaccountable to democratic laws and procedures’ (205).

major issue for Dicaeopolis in the scene where he violently expels the sycophants who enter his *agora*.

Athenian litigiousness, in fact, is often caricatured in the form of sycophancy in comedy. Sycophants were, however, as Osborne has shown, central to the functioning of Athenian democracy, since they served to foster participation among the wealthy by the constant threat of litigation.³⁸⁷ This is arguably the case in Aristophanes' plays as well, where sycophants, despite being regularly portrayed as selfish nuisances who obstruct the comic hero's plan, are still hardly without legal justification for their obstructiveness.³⁸⁸ Thus, in *Acharnians*, while neither the first sycophant nor Nicarchus' denunciations of Dicaeopolis' business transactions exactly convince as serious lawsuits in the public interest, the legal procedure of *phasis* (φαίνω, 818-29; 908-24) is still invoked. When Dicaeopolis – now wealthy himself – forcefully rejects sycophants with acts of violence and objectification, it is yet another symbol of his rejection of the democratic values for which he had once stood.³⁸⁹

This is particularly the case in the scene involving Nicarchus, who intrudes to expose the Theban goods as 'contraband' (πολέμια, 912) and to accuse the Theban of threatening to set the dockyard on fire with a wick (914-24). This presents the perfect trading opportunity for Dicaeopolis and the Theban, who have found a gap in the Theban market insofar as sycophants are plentiful in Athens but missing from Thebes (900), and thus could be sold for a large profit (κέρδος πολύ, 906; κερδάνης, 957). In order to be exported and sold, Nicarchus must be packed up 'like a pot' (ὥσπερ κέραμον, 905, 928), which means being packed into a box filled with sawdust (927-8) and being loaded onto the Theban's slave's back with care (εὐλαβούμενος, 955). As with the animalization of the Megarian 'piglets,' the sycophant is objectified, treated as 'merchandise' (ἐμπολήν, 929; φορτίον, 957) and said to *be* a pot by the end of the scene (αἴρου λαβὼν τὸν κέραμον ὃ Βοιώτιε, 953).³⁹⁰ As an object, he is determined solely by his instrumental 'use' (χρήσεται, πάγχρηστον, χρώμενος) (935-42):

Χο. τί χρήσεται ποτ' αὐτῷ;
Δι. πάγχρηστον ἄγος ἔσται,

³⁸⁷ Osborne 1990.

³⁸⁸ Osborne 1990: 87. Cf. Christ 2008: 170-4. For a different perspective, which accepts how rowdy protagonists treat sycophants, see Pellegrino 2017.

³⁸⁹ Cf. Telò 2020a: 235, discussing the whipping of the sycophant in *Birds* as an example of the 'suppression of litigiousness' constitutive of Rancièrian *consensus*.

³⁹⁰ In Arendt's terms, this may strictly speaking be an act of 'work' rather than 'labour,' since the sycophant becomes an object meant to last rather than being consumed on the spot (943-4) and meant to facilitate its user's happiness (958). In any case, it represents the negation of 'action.'

κρατῆρ κακῶν, τριπτῆρ δικῶν, φαίνειν ὑπευθύνους λυχνοῦ-
 χος καὶ κύλιξ τὰ πράγματ' ἐγκυκᾶσθαι. [938]
 Χο. πῶς δ' ἂν πεποιθοίη τις ἀγγεῖω τοιούτῳ χρώμενος
 κατ' οἰκίαν τοσόνδ' ἀεὶ ψοφοῦντι;

The sycophant, Dicaeopolis explains, is ‘for every purpose’ (πάγχρηστον), the adjective having been rebranded as an economic term here as I suggested above. Unlike the ‘useful’ citizen with intrinsic value, a ‘useful’ object has only instrumental value – though this noisy sycophantic pot here seems to be rather useless even as a pot, as the chorus acknowledge despite Dicaeopolis’ effort to swindle them. It is worth adding that this is not the first point in the play where an object’s instrumental uselessness is flagged, since the noun χρέος had earlier been used to describe a Euripidean prop for which Dicaeopolis has no ‘use’ beyond merely desiring it (χρέος μὲν οὐδέν, βούλομαι δ’ ὅμως λαβεῖν, 455).³⁹¹ Aristophanes’ rebranding of the notion of the ‘useful’ is particularly pointed as well, since it is the sycophant’s characteristically public activities – particularly lawsuits (δικῶν) and audits (φαίνειν ὑπευθύνους) – that are being converted into household objects (κατ' οἰκίαν). This is a form of domestication and economization that is exaggerated in *Assemblywomen* (see episode four).

Dehumanized like the Megarian ‘piglets,’ Nicarchus too is said to have no capacity for *logos* as an object of pottery which still ‘makes noise’ (ψοφοῦντι), that noise earlier described as having a ‘babbling ring, a cracked-in-the-firing ring’ (ψοφεῖ λάλον τι καὶ / πυρορραγὲς, 932-3, trans. Sommerstein).³⁹² When Nicarchus does try to speak before he is beaten up, Dicaeopolis literally bids someone ‘shut his mouth’ (ξυλλάμβαν' αὐτοῦ τὸ στόμα, 926), a more aggressive form of silencing – gagging – than Dicaeopolis was subjected to at the start. Nicarchus, unlike Dicaeopolis, will not say another word. The violent exploitation of the sycophant, an act characterised by the verb θερίζειν (Boeotian θερίδδεν), meaning both to ‘reap a good harvest’ and to ‘mow down’ or ‘plunder’ (947, 948),³⁹³ ultimately seems to confirm what Arendt describes as the ‘grave danger’ of the anti-political life, in which ‘eventually no object of the world will be safe from consumption and annihilation through consumption.’³⁹⁴

³⁹¹ Cf. Pucci 2007: 122 on the parodic implications of this line when it comes to comedy’s claim to having didactic value.

³⁹² On these sounds, see Sommerstein 1980: *ad* 932-4. The former is ‘apolitical’ speech, the kind of which Dicaeopolis complains of others about when he is ready to speak in the assembly (οἱ δ’ ἐν ἀγορᾷ λαλοῦσι, 21), while the latter refers to broken pottery.

³⁹³ Cf. Pellegrino 2017: 419

³⁹⁴ Arendt 2018: 133.

It may be easy to regard this scene as slapstick, through which we are meant to laugh ‘with’ Dicaeopolis and ‘at’ Nicarchus. Yet the comic violence employed against the objectified and dehumanized sycophant, even if he is a comedic nuisance, is surely excessive. This is particularly apparent when Nicarchus ‘calls witnesses’ (μαρτύρομαι, 926), employing a privileged form of redress for Athenian citizens, to testify that he is being illegally attacked.³⁹⁵ This is not to say that comic violence and exploitation cannot be funny, even in this scene (I will discuss in further detail the discomfort associated with staging comic violence in episode five). But if we compare the mistreatment of the sycophant with that of Lamachus, the play’s main unsympathetic villain, then we can perhaps see how Aristophanes calibrates different laughing responses for each character. One way of measuring this is to note that there is plenty of uncontested gelastic vocabulary in the scenes involving Lamachus that is absent from the scene involving Nicarchus (οἱμοι κακοδαίμων καταγελαῖς ἤδη σύ μου, 1081; ὦνθρωπε παῦσαι καταγελαῶν μου τῶν ὅπλων, 1107; ταῦτ’ οὐ κατάγελάς ἐστιν ἄνθρωποις πλατύς; 1126). Aristophanes seems to be making it much easier to laugh ‘at’ Lamachus than ‘at’ Nicarchus, the former representing the perversion of democratic principles that the latter actually upholds.

In the end, Aristophanes sets up a great deal of resistance to Dicaeopolis’ one-man society. I have been arguing that the source of resistance lies much deeper than the comic hero’s apparent selfishness, which, in any case, does not explain some of Dicaeopolis’ selfless acts, such as the free giveaway of a drop of peace to the bridesmaid (1061). In fact, his decision to make a *private* peace is not initially questioned by anyone – the trouble starts because he simply makes peace with Athens’s enemies – as if to indicate that Dicaeopolis’ selfishness is not the main issue at stake.³⁹⁶ Rather, the trouble with Dicaeopolis’ actions in the second half of the play stems from his negation of a political world altogether: the excluded becomes excluder, the agent of *dissensus* an enforcer of *consensus*, the citizen defined by ‘action’ a consumer consigned to ‘labour.’ Even if the assembly was not functioning as a space for public speech, it has the capacity to become one if enough people showed up and debate was allowed; in this private, exclusive, economic *agora* there is no hope for even that.

Acharnians thus dramatizes the fulfilment of two ‘goods’: the good of democratic agency embodied by Dicaeopolis the citizen, versus the good of economic consumption embodied by Dicaeopolis the trader – though, as we have seen, the latter good is actually quite

³⁹⁵ Sommerstein 1980 *ad loc.* See also below n.675.

³⁹⁶ Noted by Foley 1988: ‘Urging the city to make peace and making a separate peace are not the same thing’ (45).

bad from the perspective of the excluded (almost everyone who is not Dicaeopolis), and especially from the perspective of the dehumanized (the Megarian's daughters as piglets and Nicarchus as a pot – and even, ultimately, Dicaeopolis himself as a cannibalistic consumer). These may not be necessarily mutually exclusive (political actors can enjoy feasting too!); the problem in *Acharnians* is that the world of political 'action' ends up being completely subsumed by the world of apolitical 'labour.' In Arendt's analysis, Dicaeopolis has found 'a substitute for action,' which invariably amounts to 'seeking shelter from action's calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end.'³⁹⁷

The ease with which this happens may be instructive: the point is that one act of democratic empowerment does not make a democracy – any more than one protest against racism eliminates racism in society – let alone one act performed by one man alone. The liberating forces of *dissensus* must continually disrupt; emancipatory 'action' must constantly resist being substituted. Indeed, as we will see further in the next episodes, hyper-democracy according to Aristophanes' conception is less a homeostatic community of the already enfranchised than a dynamic and open-ended process of enfranchisement; it is 'not a sphere but a process.'³⁹⁸ It is a system whose beating heart lies in the open *agora* – and, by analogy, the theatre – which means the opposite of the closed *agora* created by Dicaeopolis. Otherwise, even a 'good citizen' like Dicaeopolis can be seduced into living for the sake of nothing but a self-sufficient life, a life 'without speech and action' that is 'literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.'³⁹⁹ That is a life which must be taken with more than a pinch of Megarian salt.

³⁹⁷ Arendt 2018: 220.

³⁹⁸ Rancière 2004: 305. Cf. esp. Derrida 2005; Rancière 2010a; Wolin 2018c.

³⁹⁹ Arendt 2018: 176.

EPISODE FOUR

Women

Women in classical Athens, it is well-known, had no formal political rights. Whilst nobody now accepts the truth of extreme female silence and seclusion in Athenian society, the kind of ideological claim paraded by Thucydides' Pericles in his funeral oration (Thuc. 2.45.2) for example, it is a fact that women were entirely excluded from public decision-making in the assembly and lawcourts. Of course, women could be considered one paradigmatic 'other' throughout Greek culture,⁴⁰⁰ but it is in the developed democracy of Athens that the women's political exclusion was formalised, policed, and central to civic ideology.⁴⁰¹

Nevertheless, women's (non-)position was, it is also well-known, demonstrably ambivalent in the Athenian *polis*.⁴⁰² This was especially because they did play a crucial role in guaranteeing Athenian citizenship after Pericles' citizenship law of 451/0 and in performing ritual duties for the *polis*, a role which may even have legitimated their status as citizens in their own right.⁴⁰³ Scholars since the 1980s have shown how it is in drama above anything else – though it is in tragedy in particular – that the otherness of Athenian women could be challenged, questioned, and made to appear much less natural than some Athenian men may have liked to admit; yet they have also maintained that, for all that the representation of women may be questioning or destabilising, it is hardly ever said to be revolutionary or emancipatory, and often quite the opposite.⁴⁰⁴ There is an entrenched reluctance to 'go there,' as much as scholars are keen to show that, if there was anything that could resist the misogynistic flavour of Athenian ideology, it would have been drama, with its radical imaginative possibilities and its repeated – and varied – staging of women expressing agency or being denied it.⁴⁰⁵

The basis for this ultimately conservative position was most influentially formulated by Froma Zeitlin, who rests her case on the fact that women were only ever played by men before

⁴⁰⁰ DuBois 1982a: esp. 110-28; Zeitlin 1996: 53-86; Cartledge 2002: 78-104.

⁴⁰¹ Zeitlin 1978; Loraux 1993; Atack 2021.

⁴⁰² Gould 1980; Pelling 2000: 189-245.

⁴⁰³ Blok 2017: esp. 100-46, 147-86. Blok also disproves the previously held notion that terminology for female citizens did not exist (35 with nn.101-2).

⁴⁰⁴ There is a heap of scholarship on the subject of women in tragedy, helpfully detailed by Wohl 2005. For a heterodox revolutionary-emancipatory reading of one tragedy, namely Euripides' *Bacchae*, see Honig 2021: esp. 1-14.

⁴⁰⁵ Griffith 2001 puts an emphasis on the irreducibility of female representation to a single model in tragedy, in which 'no neatly defined portrait of "woman" emerges... no comfortable confirmation of preexisting distinctions of gender, of predictable mannerisms of speech, or of the natural divisions between male and female' (136).

men, with the important corollary that their function as characters only ever served to reflect and refract men's concerns.⁴⁰⁶ It is not in spite of but precisely because of tragedy's capacity to transgress gendered norms – though it is an involuted form of transgression, since men are only ever '*playing the other*' in Zeitlin's phrase (my emphasis) – that is said to make those norms all the more robust for being tested. Thus, as Zeitlin famously writes, '*functionally* women are never an end in themselves, and nothing changes for them once they have lived out their drama on stage.'⁴⁰⁷ Even so, while Zeitlin concludes that 'tragedy arrives at closures that generally reassert male, often paternal (or civic), structures of authority,' she acknowledges that 'before that the work of the drama is to open up the masculine view of the universe.'⁴⁰⁸ And so even if women's subordinate position is reasserted by the end of the tragic productions – or, if not, then in the masculine-coded satyr play, whose function has been said to 'protect against the painful "feminine" emotions which tragedy has unleashed'⁴⁰⁹ – this hardly means that the audience forgets about the parts of the tragedies where gender means trouble.

While much of the scholarly attention has been on how tragedy draws out ideological tensions concerning issues of gender, similar arguments have been transferred to comedy. Adapting the structuralist-informed model that is predicated on seeing the female as 'other' in contradistinction to the male 'self,' Helene Foley in particular has shown in her combined reading of *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen* that the structural opposition between male and female, hence public and private or *polis* and *oikos*, encodes not a strict antithesis but a mutual interdependence.⁴¹⁰ The fact that the plays deconstruct such a binary, however, it is maintained, ultimately reinforces the power of the original construction. As Nicole Loraux puts it, 'after the comic production, a kind of institutional parenthesis that drew [men] to laugh at the city, the gods, and themselves, it meant turning back towards life – political, religious, everyday life – the stronger for having understood it all without endangering the order of things.'⁴¹¹ Indeed, the empowerment of women that is expressly staged in *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen* is typically explained away. At best, it is seen as limiting women's role to the domestic or religious sphere, essential as those are in contributing to the healthy running of the *polis*⁴¹²; at worst, it is said to be nothing more than a joke that is funny precisely because the actual political

⁴⁰⁶ Zeitlin 1996: 341-74.

⁴⁰⁷ Zeitlin 1996: 347.

⁴⁰⁸ Zeitlin 1996: 364.

⁴⁰⁹ Hall 1998: 37.

⁴¹⁰ Foley 1982. For other structuralist readings of comedy along gender lines, see Vidal-Naquet *et al.* 1979; Loraux 1991, 1993: 147-83; Konstan 1993; Zeitlin 1996: 375-416, 1999.

⁴¹¹ Loraux 1993: 183.

⁴¹² Vaio 1973; Rossellini 1979: 15-19; Foley 1982; Konstan 1993: 434 n.5; Loraux 1993: 157-8; Faraone 1997: 58-9; McGlew 2002: 161; Morwood 2010: 25; Bierl 2011: 287; McClure 2015: 71-4.

empowerment of women would have been so inconceivable and ridiculous to the Athenian audience (only ever assuming an all-male audience, of course).⁴¹³ It has even become conventional to apologise that, though Aristophanes may not be quite the misogynist, he has no genuine interest in empowering women – let alone, it is often added for the sake of it, any right to be hailed a (proto-)feminist.⁴¹⁴ Feminist or proto-feminist sentiments, to the extent that they can be said to have existed at all, are rather sniffed in places like Euripides' *Medea* (esp. 230-51, 410-45) or Plato's *Republic* (esp. 540c).⁴¹⁵

Some subsequent scholarship has begun to push back against the 'playing the other' model as a suitable one for comedy, as distinct from tragedy. The most sophisticated case has been made with reference to the cross-dressing scenes in Aristophanes' *Women at the Thesmophoria*, scenes in which, as Eva Stehle has argued, the transvestism exposes the radical non-essentialism of gender categories and gender is shown to be a matter of performance in and of itself.⁴¹⁶ This is an argument I will develop extensively in my reading of *Assemblywomen*, a play which shows not just men playing women but men playing women playing men, and which has also received attention for its capacity to challenge conventions of gender.⁴¹⁷ Amidst the crises of (masculine) political power in the late fifth and early fourth centuries, especially with the two oligarchic revolutions of 411 and 404, it is surely no coincidence that Aristophanes starts writing plays that empower women in 411 and thereafter.⁴¹⁸ I will return to that specific political context later in my own readings of *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen*, but for now I will stick with a more general perspective on the representation of women in the comic theatre. This involves moving away from the 'playing the other' model, which, as Henderson has tersely suggested already, may be 'too narrowly

⁴¹³ Wilson 1982: 157-61; Zimmerman 1983: 74; Saxonhouse 1992: 1, 5; Taaffe 1993: *passim*; Finnegan 1995: *passim*; Sommerstein 2009g: 237-46; Revermann 2010: 72-5; Compton-Engle 2015: 48-58.

⁴¹⁴ Henderson 1980: 186; Assael 1985: 93; Casement 1986: 75; Dillon 1987: 101; Cartledge 1990: 40-2; Bowie 1993: 204; Taaffe 1993: 73; Finnegan 1995: 165-6; MacDowell 1995: 248; Bierl 2011: 258; Moodie 2012: 278; Morales 2013: *passim*; Dué 2016: 44; Beard 2017: 68; Tsoumpa 2019: 529.

⁴¹⁵ See Flacelière 1962, reviewing Vogt 1960. It is also revealing to note that there is no chapter on 'women' in Ehrenberg's 1951 sociological study, *The People of Aristophanes*; and that Aristophanic comedy has not been mined as a source of 'feminist' sentiment in antiquity in the same way as (Euripidean) tragedy has, as outlined in Morales' 2019 *OCD* entry, 'Feminism and Ancient Literature.'

⁴¹⁶ Stehle 2002.

⁴¹⁷ Ober 2002: 122-55, writing that if 'Aristophanes fails to budge his audience from the conviction that a "political woman" is a natural impossibility, the rest of the play indeed becomes mere absurdity; and absurdism of this sort was ... not the stuff of Athenian comedy' (135).

⁴¹⁸ For a related argument which sees comedy as reflecting and staging crises of masculinity, especially in the late fifth century, see Ruffell 2013.

drawn’ and which restricts the possibility that the comic plays about women may be precisely ‘plays about women.’⁴¹⁹ It is worth elaborating on this.

For one matter, the fact that it is always male actors playing female characters should not in itself limit us to one particular understanding of gender dynamics on stage. Even if female actors were available and Aristophanes used them, they would still in a sense be ‘playing others,’ since the condition of acting – not to mention acting by masked actors – is precisely to play someone other than yourself (including gods, ghosts, foreigners, slaves, and animals – as well as other men). At any rate, enough emotional turbulence came from men impersonating women for Plato to be so troubled by it (*Rep.* 395d5-e2); acting can be subversive in itself, no matter the identity of the actor.

For another, the fact is that a default position on women in the audience has often been to view (or rather not view) them as being absent,⁴²⁰ or, for those who do accept their presence, as being unimportant compared to the ‘notional’ citizen audience of the plays.⁴²¹ Even if there may be nothing which tilts the evidence definitively either way, the case for women’s attendance in some capacity is I think strong.⁴²² This is especially in the absence of any formal prohibition against it in contradistinction to other ritual spaces, and in the certain presence of other marginalised groups in the theatre, though not necessarily within the *theatron* itself if we accept the existence of unofficial viewing areas at the back. More importantly, a main argument against women’s presence, notwithstanding the particular interpretation of contested evidence (e.g. *Av.* 793-6), comes from seeing the ancient theatre as a quasi-institutional, strictly civic, and therefore exclusionary space analogous to the assembly. Yet, as we saw in the previous episode, we may just as well adopt a different analogy for the theatre, namely the *agora*, an extra-institutional ‘free space’ that did include women. If the ‘force of drama is determined by its audience,’⁴²³ as Goldhill writes, then the assembly at the end of the dramatic festival after the *Assemblywomen*, for example, takes on a whole new meaning with women in the audience – of an assembly.⁴²⁴ As I am going to argue – and my argument does not hang on women’s

⁴¹⁹ Henderson 1996: 29. For some cursory attempts to move away from this dominant model in relation to tragedy, see Pelling 2000: 203-8; Allen 2002: 47-8

⁴²⁰ Goldhill 1994.

⁴²¹ Henderson 1991a.

⁴²² Roselli 2011: 158-94.

⁴²³ Goldhill 1994: 367. Goldhill does admit that if we did have a different understanding of the gender politics of democracy, then that force would change (368-9).

⁴²⁴ On the unique assembly in the theatre, see Pickard-Cambridge 1988: 68-70. The opening of the *Acharnians* in particular is sometimes discussed as a meta-commentary on the interrelation between the theatre and the assembly: see Goldhill 1991: 186-8; Slater 2002: 42-6. The rehearsed assembly in *Assemblywomen* is also discussed in this way: see Slater 2002: 212-3.

presence in the theatre in any case – in Aristophanes’ plays women are not merely an ‘other’ to the male ‘self.’

My argument will be more palatable if we go further, so as to untether comic from tragic representations of women (as well as untethering tragic from comic politics more generally). The act of staging women in both genres (and across different authors and plays) is not necessarily equivalent.⁴²⁵ Indeed, it is Euripidean tragedy’s (alleged) *misrepresentation* of women that causes the women of *Women at the Thesmophoria* to speak out in protest (esp. *Thes.* 383-94) – even as they may themselves be misreading Euripides as a total misogynist, in a play which stages creative misreadings of Euripidean tragedy (have they not seen *Medea*?).⁴²⁶ Comic and tragic women differ in terms of their actions in the respective plots. To take one example, whereas it is a fact that in tragedy every single transgressive woman is ‘temporarily or permanently husbandless,’ as Edith Hall has observed,⁴²⁷ in comedy the transgressive women are married or aim to restore their marriages. Comic heroines are thus not unruly in the same way as tragic heroines; the behaviour of Lysistrata and Praxagora does not justify the need for a *kurios*, as the behaviour of some tragic women possibly might be taken to. To take another example, whereas female desire in tragedy is invariably destructive of the *oikos*, in comedy it can be constructive, as in *Lysistrata*, where it leads to the restoration of the *oikos*.

Comic and tragic women also differ in terms of their manner of representation. Zeitlin has aptly demonstrated how tragedy configures women in terms of mimesis, a point particularly drawn out in Aristophanes’ *Women at the Thesmophoria* with its parodies of Euripidean tragedy.⁴²⁸ Yet comedy, a form which constantly plays with and disrupts mimesis, seems to put more emphasis on women as embodied beings in the here and now of the stage action – something which marks them as no different to men qua the condition of embodiment, as we will see in detail below. The crucial point is that the representation of women in Aristophanes’ plays must be considered part of comedy’s unique form.⁴²⁹ This also means taking into account

⁴²⁵ Cf. Taaffe 1993, noting that it is ‘absolutely necessary to distinguish between the representation of women in comedy and the representation of women in tragedy’ (11), though her point is about the standards of mimesis (or lack thereof) rather than about fundamentally different gender dynamics.

⁴²⁶ Assael 1985 argues that *Aristophanes* is thereby the misogynist – ‘Aristophane ne peut guère espérer apparaître lui-même comme un champion de la cause féministe’ (93) – who is polemically reacting to Euripides’ plays with their ‘certain forme de féminisme’ (92). See also March 2003 for a similar argument about Euripidean tragedy.

⁴²⁷ Hall 1997: 107.

⁴²⁸ Zeitlin 1996: 375-416. Cf. 1996: 361-4.

⁴²⁹ Comedy may not exactly be tragedy’s opposite, as Silk 2000: 42-97 above all has shown, but it is also evidently not its equivalent. Highlighting some of the formal differences between the genres, see Taplin 1986, 1996. It is worth also bearing in mind Old comedy’s distinction from New comedy, whose naturalistic mode has been said to “perform the function of hegemonic discourse” by making “the world around us seem to be one

the humour and fantasy bound up with radical acts of female empowerment, strategies which, if anything, enable comedy to ‘get past the censor’ – perhaps like tragedy’s typical choice of setting in the mythic past – as if female empowerment could never be anything more than a joke...

At the same time, my argument will be more plausible if we had a less constrained understanding of the gender politics of Athenian democracy (without needing to admit any feminist movement in antiquity, of course). This means accepting that women may have had more of a claim to ‘participate in the *polis*’ (μετέχειν τῆς πόλεως, Arist. [*Ath. Pol.*] 26.3) than a more narrowly limited political definition of citizenship as expressed through active participation in government allows. Josine Blok in particular has argued as much, by focusing on the importance of descent and women’s contributions to civic religion.⁴³⁰ This also means recognising that the institutional spheres of the assembly and the lawcourts may not have been the be-all and end-all of Athenians politics. There is also a more open, less policed, extra-institutional sphere which ran alongside, or against, those institutions – what Gottesman has called ‘the street’, whose paradigmatic space is the *agora*.⁴³¹

Lysistrata, in fact, supports both claims. The women of that play, at one point said to be drawn from the *agora* (*Lys.* 457-9), express their own importance in terms of both bearing children (*Lys.* 588-90) and performing religious duties (*Lys.* 638-51); the former being a particularly pertinent issue after the disaster of the Sicilian expedition had severely reduced the male population (as the Magistrate realises with some discomfort), and becoming an even more pertinent issue after Athens’ eventual defeat by Sparta had left Athens with an even greater surplus of women.⁴³² Equally, the women of *Lysistrata* demonstrate the possibility of extra-institutional collective action by their sex strike and occupation of the Acropolis, as well as by their alleged laments at a past Adonia aiming to prevent the Sicilian Expedition whilst it was being debated in the assembly (*Lys.* 387-98).⁴³³ And so even if women were perennially excluded from formal public decision-making bodies, there were already other possibilities to express properly political agency in Athens outside those bodies.

that is destined” (Foley 2014: 260 n.2, citing McCarthy 2000: 14). Aristophanes’ plays, in contrast, are marked by their anti-naturalistic mode which strongly resists determinism.

⁴³⁰ Blok 2017. Cf. Osborne 2019. The importance of women’s participation in the *polis* in these terms has long been recognised within drama, of course (see e.g. Foley 1981: 131-2).

⁴³¹ See above n.321.

⁴³² Henderson 1987b: 128, 1996: 25, 144; Ober 2002: 150; McClure 2015: 80.

⁴³³ Noted only in brief by Gottesman 2014: 145 n.54. The evidence is also crucial to the far-fetched argument, proposed by Keuls 1993: 381-403, that it was actually the women of Athens who mutilated the Hermes in 415 in an act of anti-phallic aggression.

If this is the case, then on what grounds could women be excluded from full political participation? It would be no massive leap for a comic poet as daring as Aristophanes – we will remember his boast to be so in *Acharnians* (*Ach.* 643-6) as well as *Knights* (*Eq.* 510) – to extend the fact of procreative or religious equality, as well as freedom in extra-institutional spaces, to the possibility of genuine political equality and freedom. Aristophanes does exactly that in *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen*, the plays under consideration here. *Women at the Thesmophoria* need not be grouped together with them simply because it has lots of female characters (as it sometimes is), since its protagonists, Euripides and his Kinsman, are men acting in opposition to women. The two other plays, by contrast, have persuasive and authoritative female protagonists who act in concert with other women (and it is worth noting that Aristophanes could easily have presented *Lysistrata* and *Praxagora*, as well as women in general, as wholly mischievous, incompetent, or silly). What we will see in these plays is that Aristophanes stages a claim for women as fully-fledged political agents in democracy *in their own right*, whose claim to the political is not solely predicated on their domestic role, nor strictly dependent on access to the spheres of institutional power in the lawcourts and assembly. It is ultimately based on the mere capacity to speak and the brute fact of embodiment. As such, Aristophanes' women rehearse – quite literally in *Assemblywomen* – their claims to the political, asserting for themselves what Judith Butler labels the 'right to appear' and Bonnie Honig the 'right to the city' in reformulating and expanding Arendt's notion of the *polis* as a 'space of appearance.'⁴³⁴

If anti-democratic writers such as Plato used the principle of egalitarianism as argument against democracy, on the grounds that democracy renders women and other 'inferior' categories of person (as well as animals!) freer and more equal than they 'ought' to be,⁴³⁵ Aristophanes flips that logic. He uses the principle of democracy as an argument for egalitarianism. For what Aristophanes shows is that there is nothing 'in' democracy as such that requires or even suggests the exclusion of women. Crucially, the earliest use of the adjective 'democratic' (δημοκρατικός) in all Greek literature comes in a passage from Aristophanes' *Frogs* (952), used only once in the entire corpus of Aristophanes, where it refers to the inclusion of women alongside men in Euripidean tragedy (and slave alongside free,

⁴³⁴ Butler 2015: 24-65, 75-8; Honig 2021: 72-100. For a sustained reading of *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen* through Butler's *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, see Atack 2017, forthcoming.

⁴³⁵ Plat. *Rep.* 562b-63c. Cf. Ps. Xen. *Ath. Pol.* 1.10-12; Arist. *Pol.* 1313b35-8, 1319b28-30. These authors must have some basis for associating democracy with women's freedom, even if they are grossly exaggerating. Indeed, Thucydides reports that women, along with slaves, sided with the democrats during the civil war on Corcyra (3.73-4). On the association of slaves with democracy, see next episode.

though that is another story). This is a key passage which I will discuss in more detail in the next episode. Suffice it to say here that it points towards a conception of democracy that is embodied – that is, given tangible and perceptible form through bodies on stage in front of bodies in the audience⁴³⁶ – in the plays we are about to encounter.

Lysistrata

In *Lysistrata*, it is often noticed, there are two plots which are internally inconsistent and separate from each other: the sex strike and the occupation.⁴³⁷ They are typically seen as being reconciled through the elevated importance of the domestic sphere throughout the play, as the Acropolis becomes an ersatz *oikos* for example (esp. 706-979).⁴³⁸ Yet there is still a distinction, already drawn in the original articulation of the problem of the double plot, that deserves further attention: ‘Plan A [sex strike] is negative: women are no longer to be the mere tools and playthings of men; Plan B [occupation] is positive: they are to participate in the life of the state. There is here an obverse and a reverse, a real connection in thought, if not in the mechanics of the action.’⁴³⁹ It is the dynamics of this ‘obverse and reverse’ that can be elaborated, on the grounds that the two plans undermine different but linked misogynistic tropes: women’s incapacity for *logos* and their association with the body.⁴⁴⁰

We will see first that the occupation shows women to be just as capable of speaking and acting in public and thus governing as men (or even more so), and second that the sex strike shows men to be just as constrained by their bodies as women (or even more so). As a result, women’s claim to the political in *Lysistrata* is predicated on the undeniable facts of being able to speak and of having a body, facts which transcend gender division. Third, I will address the fact that the women return to their homes in the end, so often seen as proof that the play is irredeemably sexist, but which might better be taken as a deliberately pantomimic, arbitrary,

⁴³⁶ Cf. Rancière 2009a: ‘Theatre is the place where an action is taken to its conclusion by bodies in motion in front of living bodies that are to be mobilized’ (3).

⁴³⁷ Hulton 1972: 34; Henderson 1980: 185-7.

⁴³⁸ Vaio 1973; Rosellini 1979; Henderson 1980: 179-80, 185-7; Foley 1982: 6-13; Konstan 1993; McGlew 2002: 148-56.

⁴³⁹ Hulton 1972: 36.

⁴⁴⁰ As Aristotle, for instance, puts it, ‘the male provides the form and the principle of the movement; the female provides the body, in other words, the material... Thus, the physical part, the body, comes from the female and the soul from the male since the soul is the essence of a particular body’ (Arist. *Gen. an.* 1.20.729a9-11, 738b25-7). The example is cited and translated by Zeitlin 1978: 169, in discussing the misogynistic discourse crystallised in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*.

and artificial gesture of order restored. The fact that Aristophanes would write such a radically empowering play makes perfect sense in 411 in the context of a democracy in crisis, a point that will become clear in the final section.

I

The play begins with women of their own accord moving out of the house, a space in which they are conventionally – and only conventionally the play’s ending will make clear – bounded. This marked movement outside (ἐξέρχεται, 5; ἔξοδος, 16) might be considered a democratic act in itself; Aristotle, for one, regarded the enforced boundedness of women through *gunaikonomoi* as a feature of aristocracies and their unboundedness as a feature of democracies (*Pol.* 1300a4-9; 1322b37-23a6). Merely appearing in public, however, does not guarantee anything. Indeed, any burgeoning sense of female empowerment in this opening gambit might be said to be halted in its tracks when stereotypes of women as sexually voracious and bibulous creatures, are, funnily enough, validated by the women themselves including Lysistrata (καὶ γὰρ ἐσμεν νῆ Δία, 12; ὃ παγκατάπυγον θῆμέτερον ἅπαν γένος, / οὐκ ἐτὸς ἀφ’ ἡμῶν εἰσιν αἱ τραγωδίαί, 137-8).⁴⁴¹

Yet we should not take this as any sort of proof of what women are ‘really’ like, since that casting of women is an emphatically male stereotype. This is something about which Lysistrata is particularly aware when she acknowledges at the start the way in which the women are ‘considered *by men* to be scoundrels’ (παρὰ μὲν τοῖς ἀνδράσιν νενομίσμεθα / εἶναι πανοῦργοι, 11-12). There is nothing natural about this arrangement, which, in fact, is not always validated by the stage action itself, since the wives (not least Lysistrata) are hardly quite as bad as they are made out to be.⁴⁴² Nor is going out the house in the first place quite as ‘difficult’ (χαλεπή, 16) as Calonice makes out, much to the vexation of Lysistrata, since the men are not at home to stop them (the men’s absence, after all, is precisely the problem). Above all, we should not be too quick to accept that sexist jokes merely confirm rather than subvert stereotypes: might the representation of women here be so outrageously stereotypical that what makes it funny is that it is patently *not* true? This is a point both exaggerated and exploded in *Women at the Thesmophoria*, since the women of that play validate female stereotypes as well

⁴⁴¹ On the comic *topos* of women’s voracious bibulous and sexual appetite, see Henderson 1987b: 119-20 with n.104; Gardner 1989: 51 with nn.3-4; Finnegan 1995: 101-32; Worman 2008: 72-83.

⁴⁴² Henderson 1996, overstating the point slightly, writes that ‘though we *hear* a lot about wives’ misbehaviour, we never actually *see* them misbehaving’ (27).

as contesting them (e.g. *Thes.* 383-428, 531-71). Indeed, as will become clear, sexual voraciousness and bibulousness are at least equally, if not even more appropriately, a characteristic of this play's men, a point already foreshadowed by *Lysistrata*'s description of women as 'butt-fucked race' (παγκατάπυγον γένος, 137), the adjective usually being used to deride anally penetrated *men*.⁴⁴³

The women of Greece – themselves versed in such formal political procedures as embassy (86), assembly (93), voting (142), lottery (208) and decree-passing (525-6) – eventually assemble in public and agree to go forward with *Lysistrata*'s proposal for a sex strike. *Lysistrata* and a group of older Athenian women then march to occupy the Acropolis as a contingency plan (175-9), which then becomes the main focus of the action. In doing so, they enter a space wrongly claimed by the men's chorus as their own (ἀκρόπολιν ἐμὴν, 263; τὴν πόλιν ἡμῶν, 487), since it was a space in which women could legitimately fulfil their religious duties; that, after all, is the only pretence the women need for occupying it (176-9).⁴⁴⁴ The men's chorus, who along with the Proboules might be considered the most intransigent of any Aristophanic opponent to any comic project, hurl every sort of abuse at the women for their alleged transgression.⁴⁴⁵ Yet their attempts to condemn and rebrand the women's actions as illegitimate, whilst maintaining their conventional superiority, completely backfire: the more antagonistic the men are, the worse they come across and the more the women's expression of political agency becomes justified.⁴⁴⁶

For one matter, the men wrongly accuse the women of being at fault for the dire situation in Athens in the first place, since they are the ones who are clearly in the wrong.⁴⁴⁷ We might even say that *Lysistrata* extends Aristophanes' exemption of women from blame for the war in *Acharnians*, in which the bride is the only Athenian allowed to share in Dicaeopolis'

⁴⁴³ Henderson 1987a: *ad* 137.

⁴⁴⁴ On the 'spatial politics' associated with the women's occupation of the Acropolis, see Attack forthcoming: 9-15.

⁴⁴⁵ The women are variously described as daring (284, 318, 379), awful (529, 587, 608, 626), hubristic (399, 400, 425, 658), impious (283, 371, 622, 635), shameless (369, 1015), and licentious (387, 398, 405), to pick out a few recurring insults. The men's attitude towards the women throughout is more hostile than the women's attitude towards them, a point made clear in the men's grudging reconciliation (1037-9) and in the juxtaposition between the men's choral ode about Melanion's total misogyny (781-96) and the women's choral ode about Timon's hatred of only wicked men (806-20).

⁴⁴⁶ For a parallel male attempt to condemn and rebrand the women's actions as illegitimate in Euripides' *Bacchae*, namely in the *agōn* between Cadmus and Agave where the death of Pentheus is reinscribed as an act of filicide and not regicide (esp. *Bac.* 1271-84), see Honig 2021: 77-84.

⁴⁴⁷ Their failings include selfishness (173-4, 488-92, 624-5, 652-5), foolishness (432, 511, 518, 522, 700-5, 1115-18, 1231-5, 1276-8), and undue belligerence (555-64): see Henderson 1980: 190-206; Dillon 1987: 101-4; Bowie 1993: 199-201. Something similar could be said of the *Assemblywomen*, in which men are once again 'responsible' (αἴτιοι, *Eccl.* 205) for Athens' problems, due to their selfishness (*Eccl.* 186-8, 207, 301-10, 376-93, 547-8) and bad choice of leaders (*Eccl.* 176-7): see Foley 1982: 14; Rothwell 1990: 10-14; Henderson 1996: 147; Sommerstein 1998: 18-22.

peace, on the grounds that women have nothing to do with the war (*Ach.* 1062). For the misogynistic Proboulos in this play, however, Athens' troubles come down to the fact that husbands had allowed their wives to live in 'intemperance' (ἀκολαστάσματα, 398) had 'taught them luxuriance' (διδάσκωμεν τρυφᾶν, 405); a similar point is made by Aristotle almost a century later regarding the dissolution of the Spartan constitution because of the Spartan women, 'who live in every sort of intemperance (ἀκολασίαν) and luxury (τρυφερῶς)' (*Pol.* 1269b22-3). Yet this is surely the least convincing – hence funniest – explanation for Athens' failure, which could not be anything but the fault of the men alone who advocated and voted for that expedition in the first place. In actual fact, the women's forebodings at the Adonia that was contemporaneous with the initial debate about the Sicilian expedition turned out to be correct (387-98), since they accurately forewarned the expedition's outcome by bewailing the death of young Adonis. The men should have listened to their wives all along, a point Lysistrata will reiterate.

For another matter, the men are completely mistaken about the women's intentions. They drum up the false charge that the occupation of the Acropolis is a tyrannical coup in the mould of Hippias (616-9, 630-1) and Cleomenes (273).⁴⁴⁸ Yet tyranny is patently *not* the aim for Lysistrata, the arch goody-two-shoes who cedes power as soon as she achieves her goals. Henderson is surely right to see the men's claim rather as 'ridiculing the kind of divisive smear tactics so often heard in the rhetoric of popular leaders,'⁴⁴⁹ the kind of rhetoric that is expressly ridiculed in Aristophanes' *Wasps* (*Vesp.* 488-91). In fact, as scholars have argued, it is the men in this play who are more inclined to act like usurping tyrants who instigate and perpetrate violence (356-80, 433-61, 503-6, 634-5).⁴⁵⁰ Far from being 'arch-democrats' in this play, as Olson describes them in accepting their self-depiction as enemies of tyranny (631-65) and their

⁴⁴⁸ On the view that Lysistrata's coup covertly prefigured and even justified the oligarchic coup led by Peisander and Antiphon later that year, see Olson 2012: 74-9; Santucci 2015: 94-7. Yet the fact that the former oligarchic conspirator is so unambiguously slammed (490-2), particularly in a play which does not slam too many individuals as the chorus affirm (1043-9), strongly counts against such a view. The fact that Lysistrata needs to take radical corrective action is not an attack on democracy *per se*: rather it is individuals like Peisander who have gotten Athens into the mess it is in; the system is not to blame. On this point, whether or not Peisander was at this stage known to be dealing with oligarchs, see Henderson 1980: 198; Westlake 1980: 47-9. See also Kopp 2020: 167-8 for further arguments against the 'proto-oligarchic' reading.

⁴⁴⁹ Henderson 1987: xxiv, *ad* 616-35.

⁴⁵⁰ See Bowie 1993: 200, comparing the men's chorus to the mythical Amazons who had attempted and failed to seize the Acropolis (even as the men label the women Amazons, 678-9); Faraone 1997: 55, 57-8, suggesting that their behaviour as fire-wielding men who storm the Acropolis recalls the Persians in 480 (even as the men liken the women to the Persian ally Artemisia, 674-5); and Perusino 1998, arguing that the men's self-characterisation as 'wolf-footed' (664, reading λυκόποδες instead of λευκόποδες), in comparing the current siege of the Acropolis with that of Leipsydrium 513, equates them with supporters of the tyrants, given that λυκόποδες was an epithet describing Hippias' guards and that the men are claiming to be in the position of the victorious tyrants of that conquest (while wolves are also often related to tyrants in Greek thought).

connection with glorious moments of Athens' past (e.g. 273-85),⁴⁵¹ their actions only prove how easily claims to act on behalf of democracy can be misappropriated.⁴⁵²

More systematically, the men are blatantly wrong about women's capacity to be 'political animals' in the first place. They attempt to reclassify the women as less than full human beings, evoking the distinction between human *logos* and animal *phōnē* which Aristotle would later use to underpin his account of the formation of political society and women's (non-)place within it (*Pol.* 1253a7-18, encountered in the previous episode). They compare the women to 'wild animals' (κνωδάλοις, 477), creatures 'reared' at home (ἐβόσκομεν, 260), and 'beasts' (θρέμμ', 369; θηρίους, 468) – a standard analogy in the Greek imagination (cf. e.g. Semon. 7). The men's chorus leader's words are allegedly wasted on these quasi-animals (468; cf. 1014-15):

τί τοῖσδε σαυτὸν ἐς λόγους τοῖς θηρίοις συνάπτεις;

'If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being,' writes Rancière, you begin... by not understanding what they say.'⁴⁵³ The men, who only reluctantly agree to hear Lysistrata out after they have been beaten up (469-85), seek to relegate the women's discourse to the level of non-discourse, asserting that all the women do is merely 'blabber' (λαλεῖν,⁴⁵⁴ 356, 442, 627) or 'croak' (κρώξαις, 506), and threaten to shut the women up (360-1, 364, 379, 590). It is the silencing of female speech that Aristotle, citing a line from Sophocles' *Ajax*, regards as proper: 'Silence brings orderliness to a woman' (γυναιξὶ κόσμον ἢ σιγὴν φέρει, *Arist. Pol.* 1260a31 = *Soph. Aj.* 293). It is the silencing of female speech that Kate Manne regards as the paradigmatic form of misogynistic oppression: 'Silence is golden for the men who smother and intimidate women into not talking, or have them change their tune to maintain harmony. Silence isolates his victims; and it enables misogyny.'⁴⁵⁵ It is precisely Lysistrata's condemnation to silence, not the fact of war in and of itself, that triggers her to speak out and take corrective action (507-9):

⁴⁵¹ Olson 2012: 75. Conversely, he sees the women as good old-fashioned aristocrats, for example performing ritual duties associated with high-born girls (641-7), though in a democracy that point is precisely that birth or wealth – or gender – does not determine political status.

⁴⁵² See above n.345.

⁴⁵³ Rancière 2010a: 46.

⁴⁵⁴ On the pejorative depictions of female speech denoted by the verb *λαλεῖν*, see Taaffe 1993: 86, 116; Sommerstein 1998: *ad* 119-20.

⁴⁵⁵ Manne 2017: 18.

ἡμεῖς τὸν μὲν πρότερον σιγῇ χρόνον ἐξηνειχόμεθ' <ὕμῳν>
ὕπὸ σωφροσύνης τῆς ἡμετέρας τῶν ἀνδρῶν ἅττ' ἐποιεῖτε·
οὐ γὰρ γρύζειν εἰᾶθ' ἡμᾶς.

Lysistrata is rejecting what Rancière labels the ‘empty virtue Plato called *sōphrosunē*,’ a virtue designed to testify to ‘the fact of each person’s being in their place.’⁴⁵⁶ By stepping out and speaking out, where previously she had been condemned ‘within’ (ἐνδόν, 510) the household and not even allowed to ‘grunt’ (γρύζειν, 509), she embodies the logic of *dissensus*, that ‘makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise.’⁴⁵⁷)! Like Dicaeopolis before her, she claims to be acting ‘justly’ (δικαίως, 169, 1129) – thus once more prefiguring the Aristotelian framework which draws a straight line from the capacity for speech to the capacity for justice that lays the foundation for living in a *polis* – in the face of the men’s condemnation of her plan to save them to be ‘unjust’ (ἀδικόν, 500). She realises more than her fellow women, who sometimes validate their own consignment to domestic silence (e.g. 473-4),⁴⁵⁸ that *sōphrosunē* has done nothing good – just as it had failed Andromache in the *Iliad* (*Il.* 6.483-92) and, more acerbically, in *Trojan Women* (*Tro.* 643-56), as well as Tecmessa in *Ajax* (*Aj.* 292-4) (both women being anti-models for Lysistrata here). The crux of the matter is that, according to their husbands, women’s position in the *polis* is to have no position and thus no voice (514-5):

“τί δὲ σοὶ ταῦτ’;” ἦ δ’ ὅς ἂν ἀνὴρ.
“οὐ σιγήσει;” καὶ γὰρ ὁ σίγων.

Thus, the ‘logic of misogyny’ unfolds, as the women are silenced, threatened with beatings, told to mind their own business, and forbidden from offering advice in the face of blatantly bad decisions (515-22).⁴⁵⁹ Adopting Manne’s analysis, it may be the very *humanity* of the women,

⁴⁵⁶ Rancière 1999: 106, 136, also cited by Telò 2020a: 239 n.99. On the particularly female form of *sōphrosunē*, associated with chastity, silence, obedience, and housekeeping, see North 1977. On the oligarchic or aristocratic connotations of *sōphrosunē* (cf. e.g. Thuc. 8.53.3), see McGlew 2002: 125-32 and Olson 2012: 75 n.15.

⁴⁵⁷ Rancière 1999: 29-30. Cf. Zumbrennen 2012: 26-7, also discussing the scene in terms of a Rancièrian ‘re-distribution of the sensible.’

⁴⁵⁸ This would be something like ‘internalised misogyny,’ on which see Manne 2017: 146.

⁴⁵⁹ Quoted is the subtitle title of Manne’s *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2017). What we see playing out here, in fact, is Manne’s conception of the difference between sexism and misogyny: the former ‘often works by *naturalizing* sex differences, in order to justify patriarchal arrangements, by making them seem inevitable, or by portraying people trying to resist them as fighting a losing battle,’ while the latter ‘functions to *police* and *enforce* a patriarchal social order’ (2017: 79). Aristotle and the Proboulos might thus be characterised as sexist and misogynistic respectively.

qua rational beings endowed with speech and able to give advice, that is so threatening to the men who attempt to dehumanize them in response.⁴⁶⁰ Yet, as Butler writes, the ‘price of enfranchisement is [for some] living through pathologization.’⁴⁶¹ For this misogynistic strategy is doomed to failure: there is no reason why women should be silent when they can speak, since they are evidently not animals bereft of *logos*; and there is no reason why they should take no interest in affairs that concern them equally, since they evidently do have a stake in the war, at the very least by giving birth to soldiers, even if they are not doing the fighting themselves (588-90) – though, as Medea has told us, fighting is three times the easier option (Eur. *Med.* 250-1)! As a matter of fact, if anything, the women of this play have a capacity for *logos* which exceeds that of the men, who offer neither substantial counterarguments nor any advice at any point.⁴⁶² More than that, the fact that the women could be punished, both within their homes as reported in conversation with the Proboulos and outside their homes as the men’s violence towards them throughout the play demonstrates, perversely vindicates their involvement in the political. For as Olympe de Gouges remarked during the French Revolution, ‘if women are entitled to go to the scaffold, they are entitled to go to the assembly.’⁴⁶³

In the end, in fact, the men themselves vindicate Lysistrata’s status as a political actor by naming her, something typically denied to women in Athenian public settings including law courts as well as other comedies.⁴⁶⁴ It is typically said, however, that Lysistrata merely represents an exception that can be explained by virtue of her nominal association with the contemporary priestess Lysimache and implicit assimilation to the manly goddess Athena, as well as her own alleged ‘uber-manliness’ (ἀνδρειοσύνη, 549, 1108).⁴⁶⁵ Yet her exceptionality rests upon accepting an analogy which may not have been obvious to the spectators or even intended to be fully-fledged by the poet, though not much is at stake in whether we accept the analogy nor for my reading of the play’s gender dynamics overall.⁴⁶⁶ More importantly, it rests

⁴⁶⁰ Manne 2017: 133-76.

⁴⁶¹ Cited in Honig 2021: 77.

⁴⁶² Noted by Henderson 1980: 195; 1987a: 128-9. The men get their own taste of dehumanization too, in fact: the women’s chorus contend that the men’s chorus can do no more than ‘grunt’ (γρυκτόν, 656) in rebuttal and face being ‘sheared’ (πεκτούμενον, 686); while the Proboulos ends up being the one to be silenced and veiled (527-34).

⁴⁶³ Discussed by Rancière 2004: 303-4. As he elucidates: ‘If, under the guillotine, they were as equal, so to speak, “as men,” they had the right to the whole of equality, including equal participation to political life. Of course the deduction could not be endorsed – it could not even be heard – by the lawmakers. Nevertheless, it could be enacted in the process of a wrong, in the construction of a dissensus.’

⁴⁶⁴ Schapps 1977; Sommerstein 2009b.

⁴⁶⁵ See e.g. Sommerstein 2009b: 46-7, 2009g: 244-6.

⁴⁶⁶ Sceptical accounts include Dover 1972: 152 n.3; Heath 1987: 15 n.21; Revermann 2006a: 236-43.

Nevertheless, the Lysistrata/Lysimache analogy is more often than not accepted: most recently see Thonemann 2020.

upon taking the assertions of her manliness at face value, which we need not do: the first time, it is asserted by the women's chorus leader and is immediately followed by Lysistrata's invocation of Eros and Aphrodite to imbue *female* bits with desire (551-4); the second time, it is asserted by the inflexibly sexist men's chorus leader, who seems able to accept Lysistrata only on such terms (while he also subsequently compares her to a feminine love-charm (1110)).

Lysistrata, then, is not necessarily the exception that proves the rule. She may be the exceptional star of the only comic play named after a human protagonist and likely the first comedy with a female protagonist at all.⁴⁶⁷ But her claim to political agency as a human being capable of speaking turns out to be hardly exceptional at all. For Lysistrata makes the case that silence does not befit women and that any assumption of women's inferior rational capacities that might justify female silence is entirely unfounded (cf. 432, 572, 1123-5). The fact that Lysistrata's education is also based on hearing the speeches of her father and other elders (1126-7) does not (as it is sometimes said) invalidate her claim to be an *inherent* (ἐνεσσι) possessor of *logos*; if anything, it only makes her case more persuasive to her male audience (how else might she have learnt to speak so well?). The failure of the men to acknowledge women as rational beings only reflects badly on them. Indeed, for the majority of the play, they model exactly how *not* to respond to women who say sensible things, an attitude emblematised by the repulsive figure of the Proboulos, who might well represent the ancient equivalent to 'toxic masculinity' (e.g. *χρὴ γὰρ τοὺς ἀνδρείους*, 559).⁴⁶⁸

Yet what the women say turns out to be less important than the fact that they come out to speak at all. It is the case that Lysistrata claims that she gives good advice (*χρηστὰ λεγουσῶν*, 527) and offers comedy's most memorable extended metaphor by comparing the running of the *polis* to the untangling of a fleece (568-89). This is a metaphor which envisages politics as detailed, constructive, and collaborative; it has been regarded as a 'clarion call for an inclusive politics... the manifesto of a political visionary.'⁴⁶⁹ It embeds all three of Honig's developed categories of 'refusal' that constitute feminist resistance: 'inoperativity' as the intensification of use in materializing politics as a craft; 'inclination' as the sororal care invested in making

⁴⁶⁷ Henderson 1980: 169-70, 1987a: xxviii, 1987b: 107-08; Foley 1982: 8; Sidwell 2009: 252-3; Hughes 2012: 201.

⁴⁶⁸ Cf. Henderson 1987, describing the Proboulos as 'the most unsympathetic possible male character – old, unreasonable, boastful' (195).

⁴⁶⁹ Morales 2020: 26-7. For the opposite perspective, see Olson 2012: 72-3 with n.9, who notes the metaphor's often positive reception, but instead sees an 'aggressive, systematic "cleansing" of the citizens' – surely an overstatement of Lysistrata's sole targeting of self-serving politicians such as Peisander (576-8; cf. 490). On the Panathenaic openness associated with weaving, in contradistinction to the closedness characteristic of Athenian democracy, as well as the male appropriation of a characteristically female activity in Plato's *Statesman*, see also Blondell 2005: 57-8, 64-5, 67-8.

clothes along with the absence of the erect male phallus; and ‘fabulation’ as the telling of a new, agonistic, counter-narrative about how the *polis* should be run.⁴⁷⁰ Lysistrata’s paraenetic claim and explanatory metaphor is shortly followed by the women’s chorus in their parabolic address (λόγων / κατάρχομεν τῇ πόλει χρησίμων, 638-9; ἄρα προὔφειλω τι χρηστὸν τῇ πόλει παραινέσαι; 648), and then once again reasserted at the end of the play when Lysistrata has the ears of the Athenian and Spartan delegates (καὶ λόγων ἀκούσατε. / ἐγὼ γυνὴ μὲν εἰμι, νοῦς δ’ ἔνεστί μοι, 1123-4).

Yet it is also the case that not much is made of any of the advice given in this play. Lysistrata’s metaphor is entirely ignored by the male chorus and the Proboulos (though this may equally reflect on the men and their unwillingness to listen), while nothing like her metaphorical society comes into being at the end of the play. At the same time, the female chorus in the *parabasis* actually offer no concrete advice; and, although Lysistrata does so at the end of the play herself in telling off the delegates (1128-61), she is hardly listened to. What actually brings about peace there is not the force of her arguments, which have themselves been shown to be historically inaccurate and whimsical in any case,⁴⁷¹ but the distraction of the nude figure of Reconciliation (more on the significance of which below).

Consequently, it might well be argued that to extract a political ‘message’ from this play is a red herring, since any serious ‘advice’ given, to the extent that there is any, is deflated, unattainable, or ignored. Yet I would argue that the political punch of *Lysistrata* – or, indeed, any Aristophanic play – lies not in any supposed paraenetic content but rather in moments of *dissensus*. For Aristophanes is strongly committing to a politics of inclusion by dramatizing an enlarged vision of the body politic, in which men have no more capacity or right to speak than women – the body politic being an apt metaphor for Aristophanes’ reduction of men and women to mutual conditions of embodiment, as we will shortly see. After all, it was by allowing women as much as anyone to *speak*, thereby manifesting ‘the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being,’⁴⁷² that was a central criterion by which Aristophanes’ Euripides defined his ‘democratic’ tragedies in *Frogs* (ἀλλ’ ἔλεγεν ἡ γυνὴ τέ μοι χῶ δοῦλος οὐδὲν ἦττον, / τοῦ δεσπότου χῆ παρθένος χῆ γραῦς ἄν, 949-50). In the end, to adopt Arendt in her discussion

⁴⁷⁰ Honig 2021: *passim*. Overall, in fact, the play seems apt for analysis in terms of refusal, though that is not my main focus here, since the women acting in solidarity refuse sex and refuse to back down even in the face of violent opposition from the men.

⁴⁷¹ Westlake 1980; Wilson 1982: 160-1; Henderson 1987: *ad* 1137-48, 1149-58; Heath 1987: 14; MacDowell 1995: 245; Sommerstein 2010. For an alternative view, seeing Lysistrata as adopting the serious rhetorical technique of *modulation du paradigme* that somehow transcends the comic frame, see Sonnino 2017: 372-9.

⁴⁷² Rancière 1992: 59, 1999: 30. Note also that Rancière 1999: 60 associates the ‘capacity to argue and to make metaphors’ as forms of *dissensus* in themselves.

of the inextricability of speech and action, ‘what’ the women are, qua wives and mothers conceptualising government as a form of ‘useful’ domestic management, is supplanted by ‘who’ they are, qua fully-fledged political agents speaking in public.

II

So far, we have seen how *Lysistrata* and the women challenge their consignment to hidden silence by entering the public sphere, encompassing more than just the lawcourts and assembly, where they can be seen and heard. These women are not presented as being out of place outside their homes, for why should they be? Though it is often pointed out that the occupation of the Acropolis, which was only a contingency plan from the start, is not strictly necessary for achieving Panhellenic peace (though it does reconcile the semi-choruses), I have argued that it is crucial to the discourse of female empowerment as an end in itself.⁴⁷³ It is the case, however, that the more effective plan, involving women from across Greece, is the sex strike. At first glimpse, however, this may seem troubling. Not only is it entirely fantastical, since the ‘plausibility’ of that plot line depends on a massive suspension of disbelief (buying into the idea that Athenian and other citizen men could get good sex, or at any rate some sexual relief, solely and exclusively from their lawfully wedded wives at home). It is also potentially disturbing to a modern feminist sensibility, since the sex strike trivializes female agency, reduces women to sexualised objects of male desire, and buys into the ‘male gaze.’⁴⁷⁴

But there is another way of looking at the marital sex strike (and at the ‘male gaze’).⁴⁷⁵ Let us be clear: it is not a real event and so to hold the plot to Aristotelian standards of ‘probability and necessity’ would be entirely unfair (what Aristophanes play does *not* require a massive suspension of disbelief?).⁴⁷⁶ More importantly, it is precisely because of its narrow focus on husbands and wives that the sex strike is directly able to contest patriarchal sexual ethics, which held that citizen-men are governed by disembodied reason and possess self-control, while women are governed by embodied emotion and lack self-control.⁴⁷⁷ For in this

⁴⁷³ See also Morales 2020: 27-8, regarding the occupation as a form of ‘economic activism’ that constitutes a more effective ‘blueprint for political action’ from a modern feminist viewpoint.

⁴⁷⁴ On the ethics of the comic sex strike, see Morales 2013, 2020: 22-4. On the ‘male gaze’ as applied to Aristophanic comedy, see Taaffe 1993: esp. 17.

⁴⁷⁵ For an argument that comedy is equally out to critique the ‘male gaze,’ see Ruffell 2013.

⁴⁷⁶ On Aristophanes’ anti-Aristotelian model of causality, see Silk 2000: 256-300.

⁴⁷⁷ Foucault 1984: esp. 22-3, 46-7, 82-6. Tellingly, Foucault does not mention Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* in his ‘normative’ model of the discourse of sexuality. When he does talk about Aristophanes, he acknowledges that it his speech in Plato’s *Symposium* (189d-90b), in which mutual desire and sexual symmetry are presented as the

play both women and men are overcome by bodily desire; and men even more so than women, who do eventually agree to abstain.⁴⁷⁸

This is a point expressed paradigmatically by the Myrrhine-Cinesias scene, as the wife ('Mrs Bush') is hilariously able to resist the desperate advances of the husband ('Mr Screw') (828-979). McGlew has argued of the scene that Kinesias becomes an 'everyman through his sexual desire' and that the play in general shows an 'equality of passion,' though it is a strictly masculine equality predicated upon the claim that 'citizens are men who desire women.'⁴⁷⁹ Related to this, David Halperin has argued that Solon's building of subsidised brothels and a temple of Aphrodite Pandemos was an important democratizing reform because it ensured that 'sexual pleasure belongs to all the citizens' and thereby engendered the strictly 'masculine egalitarianism' of Athenian democracy.⁴⁸⁰ Aristophanes, however, allows for a more expansive conception of sexual pleasure and, if McGlew and Halperin's analyses are correct, participation in democracy: both belong to women as well. Why, then, should citizens not equally be women who desire men?

The women of *Lysistrata* may be stereotypically unable to think and act beyond the constraints of sexual desire at the start of the play (1-167; 215-16). Yet this marks them as no different from the men at the end of the play, who show up fully erect and are unable to hide their erections nor talk without using innuendos or obscenities (985-1006, 1076-96, 1162-81). Likewise, the women's relapse in the middle of the play (715-61), including their desire to return to their homes (οἶκαδε, 726, 728, 746; οἶκοι, 729, 736), is immediately mirrored by Cinesias' intrusion into the Acropolis, which involves his desire to leave the house for an outrageous shag in public (910-11). It is worth adding that the men turn out to be just as bibulous a bunch at the end as the women stereotypically were at the start (194-206), not least when the Athenian delegate goes so far as to suggest sending only drunken embassies to Sparta in the future (1228-38).⁴⁸¹ Lysistrata was right to forecast the success of her sex strike on the grounds that men simply cannot resist, helpfully recollecting how the Spartan king Menelaus

primordial state of things, that constitutes the great challenge to the dominant androcentric, aristocratic, asymmetrical model (232-3).

⁴⁷⁸ Cf. Pelling 2000: 'Even that reduction of the comic woman's preoccupations to the bodily, the sexual, and the vinous can be looked at in more than one way. The comic male's preoccupations are pretty bodily, sexual, and vinous too, and comedy celebrates them. Here, once again, the Other is not so Other as all that' (218).

⁴⁷⁹ McGlew 2002: 160.

⁴⁸⁰ Halperin 1990: 100, 104. There is a view of *Lysistrata* that regards the women as prostitutes (Stroup 2003; Faraone 2006), even though no word for it is ever used in this play. That view has been sufficiently challenged: see McClure 2015.

⁴⁸¹ This kind of behaviour likewise extends to the Athenian men of *Assemblywomen*, who are said to pass laws so outrageous they must be inebriated (*Eccl.* 137-39) and to quarrel with such drunken violence in the assembly that they must be removed (*Eccl.* 142-43).

succumbed to Helen's breasts (148-56). While the women find a way to abstain with as much comic difficulty as possible, the men are overcome by lust.

It is because of this that the Athenian and Spartan delegates do not even listen to Lysistrata's *spiel* telling them off in the presence of the nude female figure of Reconciliation, who titillates and controls the men (1136, 1147-8, 1157-8).⁴⁸² It is certainly the case, however, that the 'mapping' of her body is a misogynistic gesture of objectification and sexploitation, marking the restoration of masculine power, as many scholars have suggested that it cannot fail to be (and not the only one of its kind in comedy: cf. e.g. *Lys.* 78-92; *Pax* 879-80, 887-93).⁴⁸³ It provides the kind of 'welcome relief' that pornography offers men according to Manne, who writes that it 'may soothe by imaginatively defusing the psychic threat women's humanity can pose, inasmuch as she has the capacity to reduce men to shame or humiliate them sexually.'⁴⁸⁴ The reduction of men to shame and their sexual humiliation are exactly what we have seen throughout the play, after all.

Yet in the context of the play's ending, in which male lust is shown going out of control, the 'mapping' of Reconciliation might simultaneously be a joke at the men's expense. For the men's reaction does not only show that all they really care about is satisfying their own desires rather than genuinely addressing the perilous political situation they have put themselves in. It also involves them making comments which constitute exactly the kind of lowbrow stuff Aristophanes time and again lambasts, as we saw earlier: this is all in bad taste. The whole thing might be best described, in Matthew Dillon's words, as 'a gimmick, a symbolic trick, a convenient but superficial means of uniting men (who are throughout driven by self-gratification and indifference to the feelings of others) with the higher interests of peace, whose representatives are exclusively women.'⁴⁸⁵ It prepares us for the equally gimmicky ending gesture of the wives' return home, as we shall shortly encounter.

The bottom line (as it were) is that this play could not work at all without the sexual element, on which much of the humour rests. This is the case even if there is a double motivation behind the women's decision to hold a sex strike in the first place, since they are shown to be driven by a desire for sex that they are being denied while their husbands are at war (e.g. 107-10, 124-39), as well as by a concern for the integrity of the household (e.g. 99-

⁴⁸² Revermann 2006a: 254; Sommerstein 2009g: 242; Ruffell 2013: 267-70. More specifically, the men are dragged by their phalluses (1119) and unable to get what they want unless they come up with a settlement (1175), the same conditions given to Cinesias (900-3, 950-1), a man who was even more 'cruelly' teased (853-61, 884-8, 928, 936, 952-79).

⁴⁸³ Zweig 1992; Konstan 1993: 431-4; Stehle 2002: 376; Stroup 2004: 66; Compton-Engle 2015: 56-8.

⁴⁸⁴ Manne 2017.

⁴⁸⁵ Dillon 1987: 103.

100, 591-4)⁴⁸⁶; and even if there are two differently portrayed groups of women in this play, young sexually active women who carry out the sex strike and old sexually inactive women who occupy the Acropolis (although the former group is also seen participating in the occupation).⁴⁸⁷ From the perspective of the men of Greece, it is the sex strike which wins them over, not their concern for the *oikos* (nor their debarment from the Acropolis): ‘Sex conquers all,’ is the message Dillon duly draws from this play,⁴⁸⁸ while Henderson points out how all the men in *Lysistrata* are from start to finish ‘characterised by their phalluses,’⁴⁸⁹ absently present at the start and presently present at the end. We might go further to say that men are not just characterised but also at times objectified and pathologized by their phalluses, a point made in a particularly amusing way when Lysistrata reassures Calonice that their husbands could simply be replaced by dildoes (158; cf. fr. 592) – a strikingly modern acknowledgement of female pleasure right there. Put simply, both the women and the men in *Lysistrata*, or at least the young women and men – though everyone was young once, as the oldsters are keen to remember (e.g. 665-7), and even they retain sexual impulses despite their age (594-8, 959-66) – are shown to be embodied creatures who only want one thing... (βινεῖν, 934, 1179; cf. βινητιῶμεν, 715).

Lysistrata’s job of reconciling the men thus turns out to be pretty easy in the end (1112-3). Arlene Saxonhouse argues that it would be a source of tension if the men ‘lose the capacity to rise above those shared physical longings’ and fail to transcend their ‘base desires.’⁴⁹⁰ Yet this stripping down of the male ‘political actor’ to nothing more than a ‘simple physical being longing for sexual satisfaction,’ as Saxonhouse goes on to say, may be precisely the point here. The reduction of men and women to corporeal states is, in fact, explicitly and uniquely staged when both the male and the female semi-choruses strip down to their ‘bare’ bodies (meaning their leotard and tights beneath the outer costumes) (662, 687/8).⁴⁹¹ This gesture, designed to show off the men’s bodily superiority, in this case their smelly manliness (663) – as if smell were gendered – completely backfires, for they end up only looking ‘ridiculous’ (καταγέλαστος, 1020, 1024).⁴⁹² No doubt, they also look just as ridiculous as the women who strip in response in an effort to smell like women (687), though the women’s ridiculousness is,

⁴⁸⁶ Noted by Vaio 1973: 369-70; Konstan 1993: 435-9; McClure 2015.

⁴⁸⁷ Noted by Henderson 1987b: 108; Faraone 1997: 39.

⁴⁸⁸ Dillon 1987: 104.

⁴⁸⁹ Henderson 1991b: 98.

⁴⁹⁰ Saxonhouse 2014: 101-2.

⁴⁹¹ Sommerstein 1990: *ad* 662.

⁴⁹² Cf. Sommerstein 2009g: ‘The act of stripping amounts to saying: these are our bodies; they are male, therefore superior, and we must ensure they remain so. In fact, of course, the bodies look anything but superior, being old, feeble, and doubtless grotesque’ (239).

perhaps pointedly, not marked in the text by gelastic vocabulary. It is patently ironic that the men are said to appear ‘manly’ and no longer ‘ridiculous’ only at the moment when they are wearing their clothes again (1019-24) – clothes made by women, whose clothe-making capacities, we now know, make them fit to govern.⁴⁹³ All of this, moreover, makes for a neat inversion of tragedy’s association of the corporeal with the feminine: ‘Men have bodies too, of course, but in a system defined by gender the role of representing the corporeal side of life in its helplessness and submission to constraints is primarily assigned to women.’⁴⁹⁴ In *Lysistrata*, by contrast, bodies are helpless and constrained qua corporeality itself. There is nothing strictly feminine about that – in fact, when it comes to phalluses, quite the opposite.

At the end of the play, the two semi-choruses join together (κοινῇ συσταλέντες, 1042), as manifested by bodies coming together in the orchestra – a sort of choral intercourse – and thereby becoming a unified bi-gender conglomeration. Just as Plato’s Socrates argues against distinguishing between men’s and women’s virtue by analogy with the universality of health and strength (*Meno* 72d-73b) – corporeal conditions too – Aristophanes here seems to be making a similar argument in dramatic form by showing men and women reduced to their mutually desiring bodies.⁴⁹⁵ This manifests the kind of genuine inclusiveness that Butler has argued is made possible only by embracing the human condition of embodiment: ‘The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together, or rather, when through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being.’⁴⁹⁶

III

Lysistrata makes an argument for female political agency that is not merely reducible to the fact of women (played by men) displaying themselves in public (on the comic stage). Rather, the play simultaneously shows female characters equally articulating themselves in public and male characters equally constrained by their embodied condition. On both fronts the allegedly ‘natural’ (sexist) division of the sexes is undermined: men are granted neither a privileged

⁴⁹³ Compton-Engle 2015: 7-8, 56 sees this re-clothing, marked in the text unlike the assumed re-clothing of the women, as confirmation of the recovery of men’s control. What seems to be going on, rather, is that the marked re-clothing expresses the humiliation of the men and victory of the women, who put the men’s clothes back on for them.

⁴⁹⁴ Zeitlin 1996: 352.

⁴⁹⁵ On the relation between Socrates’ unity of virtue argument and Aristophanes’ ‘feminine’ plays, see Bonnette 2014.

⁴⁹⁶ Butler 2015: 89. Although Butler’s interest is primarily in embodiment expressed through precarity and persistence rather than passion and desire, the latter still comes into it, since she also sees human beings as ‘emotionally and sexually passionate beings, as bound up with others from the start’ (2015: 150; cf. 96-7).

access to language nor a superior state of embodiment. In spite of all this, scholars unanimously maintain that the play cannot be anything like as drastically egalitarian as I am suggesting, primarily because the ending does make a markedly conservative gesture. Namely, the family is re-established and the men reclaim their wives, who willingly return home (1182-7, 1273-8):

Λυ. καλῶς λέγετε. νῦν οὖν ὅπως ἀγνεύσετε,
ὅπως ἂν αἱ γυναῖκες ὑμᾶς ἐν πόλει
ξενίσωμεν ὧν ἐν ταῖσι κίσταις εἴχομεν.
ὄρκους δ' ἐκεῖ καὶ πίστιν ἀλλήλοις δότε. [1185]
κᾶπειτα τὴν αὐτοῦ γυναῖχ' ὑμῶν λαβὼν
ἄπεισ' ἕκαστος.

...

Λυ. ἄγε νυν ἐπειδὴ τᾶλλα πεποίηται καλῶς,
ἀπάγεσθε ταύτας, ὧ Λάκωνες, τασδεδὶ
ὑμεῖς· ἀνὴρ δὲ παρὰ γυναῖκα καὶ γυνή [1275]
στήτω παρ' ἀνδρα, κᾶτ' ἐπ' ἀγαθαῖς ξυμφοραῖς
ὀρχησάμενοι θεοῖσιν εὐλαβώμεθα
τὸ λοιπὸν αὐθις μὴ ῥαμαρτάνειν ἔτι.

The 'natural' order, or 'police' in Rancière's terms, appears to be restored.⁴⁹⁷ Yet the ending may be significantly more open than scholars have allowed. There is, it is worth mentioning, precedent for the kind of subversive reading I am going to propose, albeit from a different scholarly tradition, in the ostensibly conservative ending of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. In that play, Kate ostensibly ends up proving that she has been successfully 'tamed' by displaying her extreme obedience to her husband, first treading on her cap, and then making an outrageously sexist speech that validates women's subordination as creatures 'bound to serve, love and obey' (5.1.131-91). Yet these gestures have provoked a strong 'revisionist' tradition whereby scholars have read against the grain of the ending, which may less endorse the sexist separation of gender roles and their misogynistic enforcement, than expose their artificiality and implicitly condemn misogyny.⁴⁹⁸ That, I believe, is in the spirit of the ending of *Lysistrata*.

⁴⁹⁷ Cf. Attack forthcoming: 15.

⁴⁹⁸ Crocker 2003 with 157 n.30. Konstan 1993: 431-3. has already pointed to the 'mapping' scene in Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors* as a parallel to the 'mapping' of Reconciliation in *Lysistrata*, but *The*

To be sure, the wives' return to the *oikos* in Aristophanes' play provides thematic closure, with Lysistrata's plan successfully achieved and the plot thus rounded up (ἄγε νῦν ἐπειδὴ τᾶλλα πεποίηται καλῶς, 1273); while it also achieves a sense of ritual closure depending on how closely we want to map ritual elements onto this play.⁴⁹⁹ It also satisfies in terms of formal closure, with an exit song accompanied by dancing, along with references to victory – although the final song, which honours Sparta and the Spartan Athena (1296-1321), may leave a sour taste that has prompted speculative attempts to explain it away.⁵⁰⁰

Nevertheless, as ever when it comes to Aristophanes' endings as we have seen, closure is not the whole story. In fact, Aristophanes seems to be deliberately deflating the play's closural force by incorporating several anti-climaxes into the final scenes, in that the chorus repeatedly disinvite guests from their homes (1071, 1201-2, 1213-5), a titillating gesture which recapitulates for the audience the way in which men like Cinesias are teased and left unsatisfied in the play. More discomfortingly, the actual resolution has the quality of a *deus ex machina*, disdained by Aristotle for resolving tragic plots all too artificially and improbably (*Poet.* 1454a33-b9), and lampooned by Antiphanes for being a lazy closural technique reserved for tragic poets (fr. 189).⁵⁰¹ This may be particularly pertinent at the end of this play if Lysistrata, possibly even dressed up as Athena, almost incarnates the goddess, 'through her military leadership, her use of reason and persuasion, and her role as mediator between male and female.'⁵⁰² What this means here, as it often does in Euripidean tragedy,⁵⁰³ is that the main closural gesture of this play is artificial and almost too good to be true. This is the case both for the Athenians, who get the better deal, and for all the men, who agree immediately and leave instantly (ὡς τάχος, 1187; ὡς τάχιστ', 1188). Aristophanes is arguably being conservative and schematic to the point of parody, a gesture that is signalled in the action by the grudging performance of a 'vulgar routine' (φορτικὸν τὸ χωρίον) by the first Athenian delegate, who

Taming of the Shrew might be a more pertinent Shakespearean comparison. As a matter of fact, it was Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* that became the model for Fletcher's revisionist sequel to Shakespeare's play, *The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tamed*, in which female agency is re-inscribed through the 'taming' of Petruchio: see Crocker 2003: 157-8.

⁴⁹⁹ For a range of ritual readings, see Martin 1987 (on the festival of 'new fire' on Lemnos); Faraone 1997 (on Attic mystery cults); Reitzammer 2008 and Markantonatos 2020 (on the Adonia); Bierl 2011 (on premarital initiation rites); Stark 2018 (on various rituals of renewal). For an alternative ritual reading, exploring the 'gap' between ritual order and narrative disorder, see Bowie 1993: 178-204.

⁵⁰⁰ See e.g. Revermann 2006a: 254-60 (positing a reperformed Spartan addition to the original text); Anderson 2012 (suggesting a joke against the Spartans, who end up hymning Athens' patron deity). See Di Bari 2013: 50 n.16 for a survey of views.

⁵⁰¹ Cf. Napolitano 2015b: 96, suggesting that comic endings themselves are a form of *deus ex machina*, something which has long been said of the rejuvenation of Demos at the end of *Knights*: see Kleinknecht 1939.

⁵⁰² Thonemann 2020: 133 with n.32.

⁵⁰³ Dunn 1996: 26-44.

only ends up gratifying the audience's desire out of an alleged compulsion to beat up a slave standing in his way (1216-20):

ἄνοιγε τὴν θύραν σύ· παραχωρεῖν σ' ἔδει.
ὕμεῖς, τί κάθησθε; μῶν ἐγὼ τῇ λαμπάδι
ὕμᾱς κατακαύσω; φορτικὸν τὸ χωρίον.
οὐκ ἂν ποιήσαιμ'. εἰ δὲ πάνυ δεῖ τοῦτο δρᾶν,
ὕμῖν χαρίσασθαι προσταλαιπωρήσομεν. [1220]

There is a pantomime quality to this hackneyed abuse of the slave (discussed in more detail in the next episode). That is something which might equally be said of the return of the wives to their homes, an act which may be driven less by the plot's internal logic than by the putative need to satisfy the (male) spectators' desire for the restoration of order and the closure it implies.⁵⁰⁴ For the return of the women to the household now seems more absurd than their presence in public, especially after *Lysistrata* had come up with such a striking vision for a new kind of egalitarian politics that is never implemented. The wives' return home is, on this reading, a capitulation and a scandal – a Brechtian anti-closural technique too, as it happens.⁵⁰⁵ Scandalous endings are hardly unique in Aristophanes' plays, as we already saw in episode two: they are a gimmick Aristophanes likes to stage, as in Strepsiades' burning down the Thinkery in the revised *Clouds*, Euripides' Kinsman's non-Euripidean escape and the Scythian Archer's running around the stage to catch him at the end of *Women at the Thesmophoria*, or Aeschylus' victory in *Frogs*. The ending of *Lysistrata* may even be the most scandalous of the lot.

Above all, this is because the restoration of male control achieves precisely what caused *Lysistrata* and the women to take action in the first place, which was their condemnation to

⁵⁰⁴ Compare the ending of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (3.16), where MacHeath is about to be hanged as the plot threatens to become a 'down-right deep Tragedy.' This prompts a Player to bring an 'Objection' that is 'easily removed' by the author, who intervenes in his surrogate persona of the Beggar to re-write the ending. Thus, instead of dying, the hero is to be reunited with his wives (an inverse homecoming to that of *Lysistrata*), a gesture designed to satisfy the audience at any narrative expense:

'Beggar: For you must allow, that in this kind of Drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about. – So – you Rabble there – run and cry a Reprieve – let the Prisoner be brought back to his Wives in Triumph.

Player: All this we must do, to comply with the Taste of the Town.'

On this ending as a parallel for the Euripidean *deus ex machina* (also adapted by Brecht in his own version of the play, *The Threepenny Opera*), see Dunn 1996: 26-7.

⁵⁰⁵ Consider, for instance, the endings of *Mother Courage*, where Mother Courage restarts her business despite all the destruction it has wrought upon her family, and of *The Life of Galileo*, where Galileo admits that he recanted not to fool the authorities but merely to seek self-preservation.

domestic silence (esp. 507-9) and not just the ongoing war, a ring composition perhaps symbolically enforced by the circular dancing of the chorus.⁵⁰⁶ It is oddly circular indeed that this strong-willed, revolutionary heroine ‘only speaks out in order to call for a return to silence, the home, and traditional marriage and gender-role behaviour,’ as Lauren Taaffe concludes,⁵⁰⁷ since those were the very things that Lysistrata had explicitly spoken against earlier. Although there is debate about whether Lysistrata actually speaks lines 1273-5, bidding the Athenian and Spartan men to reclaim their wives, in either case the effect is jarring. If, qua Sommerstein,⁵⁰⁸ Lysistrata speaks, then she is being unusually self-contradictory by simply relinquishing agency (Lysistrata sometimes being seen as otherwise Aristophanes’ most consistent character); if she does not speak but remains on stage as a mute character, qua Henderson,⁵⁰⁹ then she becomes an unsettlingly present absence at the end of the play that uniquely bears the name of its female protagonist. The status quo thus ends up being exploded and disrupted in its very re-affirmation: such is *Lysistrata*’s ‘arc of refusal.’⁵¹⁰

Besides, as Lysistrata had warned at the start, ‘No husband can ever have a happy life if his wife doesn’t want him to’ (οὐ γὰρ οὐδέποτε εὐφρανθήσεται / ἄνθρωπος, ἔάν μὴ τῇ γυναικὶ συμφέρῃ, 165-6). We have already seen what women can do: what is to stop them from taking collective action again, should the men continue to shut them away and not listen to them, or from taking other innovative measures? ‘’Tis a wonder,’ to adopt the quizzical final line of Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* (5.1.201), that the women of this play likewise ‘will be tamed so.’ Indeed, as *Assemblywomen* proves, Athenian women have plenty more in their locker – including putting into practice a version of Lysistrata’s unfulfilled gynecocracy...

In any case, even if we accept that the ending does mark an unusually straightforward restoration of order, in which female agency is resoundingly neutralised, the sum of the play is more than its ending. We should not let it overshadow the other scenes, as if it were an all-encompassing feature of the theatrical experience, a hermeneutic practice Gamel refers to as

⁵⁰⁶ Cf. Dillon 1987: 103-4; Bowie 1993: 201-4. This circularity is also parallel to the exile of the women at the end of Euripides’ *Bacchae*, an act read by Honig 2021: 89-90 as a ‘kind of emancipation to waywardness.’ In Euripides’ play, the women return to the city to reclaim it (as the women of *Lysistrata* had also done) but are ultimately exiled from it – although, as Honig argues, that may be precisely what the women (secretly) desired at the start, namely to be outside the city with its patriarchal constraints.

⁵⁰⁷ Taaffe 1993: 132.

⁵⁰⁸ Sommerstein 1990: ad 1273-90.

⁵⁰⁹ Henderson 1987a: ad 1273-8.

⁵¹⁰ The phrase is crucial to the emancipatory reading of Euripides’ *Bacchae* proposed by Honig 2021: *passim*, esp. 103-4. For Honig, some form of returning home is inexorable even for the committed political activist: ‘You have the right to leave, the right to build elsewhere, but you also have an obligation to return because we are all depending on each other’ (104).

“end-gaming.”⁵¹¹ Even so, just as it is the ‘liminal’ phase between the beginning and end of a ritual that bears the most significant anthropological meaning, it is the disruptive moments between the women leaving and returning to their homes in this play that might be said to bear the most significant political meaning. This is especially so on a Rancièrian account of politics, for whom the political community is ‘a community of interruptions, fractures, irregular and local, through which egalitarian logic comes and divides the political community from itself.’⁵¹² That may also explain why *Lysistrata*’s model of a political society is not realised in this play: that would concretize the metaphor and stabilize the order of things, instantiations of Rancièrian *consensus*.

IV

Lysistrata, in the end, does not go the whole hog to imagine a world of lasting egalitarianism, as the play appears to end up conforming to Athenian patriarchy. If, as Butler writes, ‘revolution sometimes happens because everyone refuses to go home,’⁵¹³ the women’s going home in the end means that *Lysistrata* is not a revolution – though the majority of the play *did* stage a series of refusals to go home, even in the face of major temptation to do so (706-80), while the sex strike can be considered a particularly effective form of refusal in the face of patriarchy’s scripting of women’s roles as wives and mothers. Yet, as I have been suggesting, the apparent conservatism – and the conservatism is only apparent – might serve to veil and licence an underlying radicalism. If, as Skinner argues, ideological change sometimes requires concessions to the dominant ideology, then it would make sense for a committed artist like Aristophanes to adopt an approach that could accommodate resistance: ‘Every revolutionary is to this extent obliged to march backwards into battle.’⁵¹⁴ The timing of 411, not long after the disaster of the Sicilian expedition and shortly before the oligarchic coup, may have been an opportune moment for Aristophanes to revolutionize what democracy means.⁵¹⁵ That necessarily includes women’s place in it.

⁵¹¹ Gamel 2002: 324, who also challenges the conventional reading of the end of *Women at the Thesmophoriazousae* as restoring patriarchal authority.

⁵¹² Rancièr 1999: 137.

⁵¹³ Butler 2015, cited in Honig 2021: 72.

⁵¹⁴ Skinner 1988: 112. Cf. Honig 2021, discussing Agave’s return to Thebes at the end of Euripides’ *Bacchae*: ‘Sometimes change requires baby steps’ (79).

⁵¹⁵ Scholars reading this play in relation to contemporary events have focused on the loss of life after Sicily and spirit of female rebelliousness (Keuls 1985: 387-95; Henderson 1987b: 128; Sidwell 2009: 254-6); on the upcoming oligarchic coup, heralded and even justified by the play’s revolutionary action (Sommerstein 1977;

One of the first things the Athenians did after the Sicilian disaster in 413 was to create an additional probouleutic board of ten elders, introduced to ensure a more thorough investigation of proposals made by and through the Council (Thuc. 8.1.3-4). At about the same time, some Athenians had begun to contemplate whether it was time for a new political order altogether, eventually staging an oligarchic coup (Thuc. 8.63.3-71). It is in the context of a democracy reflecting on itself after and in the midst of crisis, one which felt the need to introduce moderating measures such as the institution of *probouloi* (abandoned after the democratic counter-revolution later in 411), that *Lysistrata* can be better understood.⁵¹⁶ For the Proboulos of this play, who has been labelled a ‘proto-oligarchic’ figure,⁵¹⁷ is probably the most repugnant of any Aristophanic character and certainly the most malignantly male. He is also unnamed: *Lysistrata* does not thus vilify an individual through *onomasti kōmōidein*, the practice comedy typically uses against real-life political figures like Cleon (in fact the only politician attacked in this play is the democrat-turned-oligarch Peisander), but rather attacks the institutional position this Proboulos represents (might the octogenarian Sophocles, elected *proboulos* in 411, otherwise have been an easy target?).

As a result, the play may be a push for a kind of extra-, or even anti-, institutional politics which does away with ‘expert’ figures like that. Indeed, the Proboulos will be embarrassingly and hilariously foisted from stage (599-613): good riddance!⁵¹⁸ It may be Aristophanes’ dramatic response to the increasing institutional control, regulation, and exclusion that would soon manifest in the oligarchic coup and counter-revolutionary government of the Four Hundred (and would then quickly be overthrown) – the exact opposite to what Aristophanes sees as the essence of democracy, characterised by its quasi-anarchic and hyper-inclusive energy. May it even be Aristophanes’ dramatic extension of the extra-institutional agency expressed through the women’s mutilation of the Herms on the eve of the Sicilian Expedition, as Keuls once hypothesised, partly using evidence from the Adonia reported in *Lysistrata*?⁵¹⁹

Olson 2012; Canfora 2017: 85-138); and on the recent broaching of the Iron Reserve (Thonemann 2020: esp. 135-8).

⁵¹⁶ Commentators note the ‘oligarchic overtones’ of the language of σωφρονίσαι and εὐτακτεῖν used by Thucydides describing those measures (8.1.3-4), as well as the ‘quasi-oligarchic’ flavour of the office of the *probouloi* (Gomme, Andrewes, and Dover 1981: *ad loc*) – an office explicitly described as ‘oligarchic’ by Aristotle (ὀλιγαρχικὸν δ’ οἱ πρόβουλοι, Arist. *Pol.* 1323a9).

⁵¹⁷ McGlew 2002: 142-8.

⁵¹⁸ His absolute dismissal of women’s voices, a move which many a tragedy has shown to precipitate disaster, here too will lead to his comic ‘death’: see Henderson 1987: *ad* 387-423, 529-38.

⁵¹⁹ Keuls 1985: 387-95. See also O’Higgins 2001: 156-7, discussing women’s potential capacity to express political agency at such festivals.

We do not need to go that far. In the late 390s, however, there was the possibility of a more general post-war re-evaluation of women's rights and roles in society.⁵²⁰ More pertinently, in the wake of two democratic counter-revolutions following the collapse of the oligarchic governments of 411-10 and 404-3, with the latter's subsequent program of lasting constitutional reform, perhaps Aristophanes was ready to take on the institutional sphere and women's place in it head-on. Thus, Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen*: a play which stages a full-scale female revolution, and not just its promise.

Assemblywomen

Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen* is similar to *Lysistrata* insofar as it shows women achieving power in a hypothetically (if not strictly realistically or plausibly) achievable way, unlike other Aristophanic fantasies, which might involve physically impossible travel to heaven or the underworld, for example. It has been suggested that women are only ever granted preternatural powers in comedy, whereas men are granted supernatural powers, 'because Aristophanes did not regard the women of classical Athens as participating in the thrilling project of citizen self-refashioning as agents of sovereignty in the democratic city.'⁵²¹ Yet the converse may be true, because Aristophanes may well be emphasising the fact that women's empowerment is not so crazy an idea after all: no supernatural ascents or descents required for that.

Nevertheless, *Assemblywomen* is different to the older play because it is more radical: the women achieve legitimate, systematic, and lasting change, as is often noticed.⁵²² Accordingly, it is often regarded as more problematic, with much of the play's analysis couched in terms of the degree to which the latter scenes showing Praxagora's plan in action are ironic.⁵²³ The central issue typically comes down to whether the logic of economic and sexual communism is undermined by the selfish man who may (or may not) get away without having to contribute to the communal fund, and then by the young man who is forced to sleep

⁵²⁰ Bruns 1900; Rothwell 1990: 21-3; Jameson 1997. Tsoumpra 2019: 543-4, with further evidence detailing women's increased agency in the fourth century, sees Aristophanes reacting to it by going in the exact opposite direction as I see him going.

⁵²¹ Hall 2020a: 98-9.

⁵²² Henderson 1996: 145; Zeitlin 1999: 74; Ober 2002: 150.

⁵²³ For ironic readings, see Flashar 1967; Foley 1982: 14-21; Saxonhouse 1992; Bowie 1993: 254-67; Saïd 1996; Zeitlin 1999: 78-86; Reinders 2001: 243-79; Tsoumpra 2019; Atack forthcoming: 15-23. For the opposite view, see Konstan and Dillon 1981; Sommerstein 1984, 1998: 11-22; MacDowell 1995: 312-23; Henderson 1996: 150-1; Slater 2002: 228-32; Möllendorff 2002: 117-24; McGlew 2002: 191-211; Sheppard 2016. For a balanced appraisal of the issue of irony in Aristophanes' late plays, see Ruffell 2006.

with old women before his girlfriend (or maybe the disobedient prick gets what he deserves). Each interpretation bears on the representation of women in this play. If these scenes are not ironic, then surely the empowerment of women in the first half of the play is not so much of an issue. If they are, as I believe they must be, Aristophanes not being the type for straightforward utopias,⁵²⁴ then surely any anxieties stem from the fact that women are now in charge.

On the contrary, I will argue that, even on the most ironic reading which sees a utopian fantasy ending up as a dystopian nightmare, the problems that arise in the second half of this play do not stem from the fact of *women* ruling. Whereas *Lysistrata* has two plots, which are separate but end up working together to justify women's claim to the political as we saw above, *Assemblywomen* has two plots, which seem more difficult to reconcile. First, there is the women's takeover of the assembly, and then, unanticipated, the peculiar establishment of a communist regime with its economic and sexual workings (or, rather, failings).⁵²⁵ This apparent disjunction used to be regarded as evidence of the comic poet's failing powers in old age, explained away by MacDowell as a 'fault that is not likely to have troubled the audience much,'⁵²⁶ though there is evidently more to it than unfounded biographical speculation. In response, scholars have taken a more synthetic approach, appreciating that a bipartite plot structure is typical of Aristophanic comedy.⁵²⁷ This reading has seen the economic and sexual communism as the inevitable outcome of a matriarchal state and its ostensible failure as the ultimate justification for the patriarchal exclusion of women from politics, thereby conforming to mythic and ethnographic precedents (Amazons, Athenian women after the contest of Athena and Poseidon, and Lemnian Women; Scythians and Spartans).⁵²⁸ Scholars advocating the view of *Assemblywomen* as an ultimately misogynistic play thus tend to place the interpretive load on the second half, regarding the disturbing scenes with Epigenes and the old women as a nightmare of female domination, and the conventional celebratory ending as the reassertion of male control with the arrival of Blepyrus for the feast alongside younger women.⁵²⁹

Yet, as I will argue, the play's two halves are more jarring and incompatible than that. For Aristophanes conceives of two entirely different political worlds in each half of the play, just as we saw with *Acharnians* and will see again with *Frogs* in the next episode. It is not just

⁵²⁴ Ruffell 2014.

⁵²⁵ Rothwell 1990: 73-4; MacDowell 1995: 320-1. See also McGlew 2002: 199, commenting that the second half of the play sees a shift from gynecocracy to gerontocracy; and Sommerstein 1998: 21, noting that the scene with the old women is self-contained, the only one of its kind in Old comedy.

⁵²⁶ MacDowell 1995: 320. Cf. Murray 1933: 181, 198 (Aristophanes as 'aging or overtired'); Dover 1972: 195 n.7 (Aristophanes had a stroke!).

⁵²⁷ Zeitlin 1999: 81-2 with n.19.

⁵²⁸ Esp. Zeitlin 1999: 78-86.

⁵²⁹ Esp. Foley 1982: 14-21; Saïd 1996; Tsoumpra 2019.

about a world of male rulers versus a world of female rulers. Rather, if the first half dramatizes the replacement of hierarchy by egalitarianism, the second half dramatizes the replacement of egalitarianism by totalitarianism, a different and more pernicious form of hierarchy. The problems in the second half of the play, I will argue, have little to do with gynocratic rule as such, and much more to do with totalitarian rule, envisaged by someone who turns out to be a dictator and whose regime ends up re-instating the rigid division of social roles that was the problem in the first place (a form of circularity, we will remember, that was also the scandal at the end of *Lysistrata*). What the play stages, in other words, is a movement from Rancièrian ‘politics’ to ‘police,’ a reading that is apt in the context of the institutionalization of democracy in the late fifth and early fourth century.⁵³⁰ The fact that the two halves of the play are completely at odds with each other is already hinted at by the fact that Praxagora withholds information about what her gynocracy will look like until the women are already in power, her plans even being described as ‘systematically misleading’ by Sommerstein.⁵³¹ There is nothing inevitable about the system of government the women will impose nor about the consequences of having female rulers. Old comedy, after all, is not a genre that is bound to following conventional plot patterns; that is precisely what makes it so difficult to write by comparison with tragedy, as the speaker in Antiphanes’ *Poesis* polemically complains (fr. 189).

By the end of the first half of the play, conversely, any logic behind the exclusion of the female gender from the central institutional space of democracy is shown to be entirely arbitrary, gender reality being shown to be ‘performative, which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed.’⁵³² The dress rehearsal scenes are perhaps more radical in their implications for the relation between gender and politics than anything else in Greek literature, and thus merit attention in their own right (whatever else one thinks about the relation of the play’s two halves). Above all, this is because they vindicate the women’s capacity to participate politically, and no longer just outside formal institutions as we saw in *Lysistrata*, but even in the assembly itself.

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⁵³⁰ Ostwald 1986; Hansen 1999: esp. 161-77; Wolin 2018b: esp. 85-8. On that political context in relation to *Assemblywomen*, see David 1984; Rothwell 1990: 2-5, 13-19.

⁵³¹ Sommerstein: 1998 *ad* 107. For more on the deviousness of Praxagora, a figure who ends up resembling an extra-constitutional tyrant like Peisetairos in *Birds*, see Sommerstein 2009f: 215-6.

⁵³² Butler 1988: 527.

The women, ostentatiously leaving their houses (34, 325, 336-7), like the women of *Lysistrata*, begin this play on the threshold of the assembly. Unlike the women of *Lysistrata*, who assemble to take extra-institutional collective action, these women are gearing up (literally) to take intra-institutional collective action. Exchanging the light of the torch in the bedroom (1-6) for the broad daylight of the assembly, with dawn beckoning and proceedings on the Pnyx about to begin (20-1, 82-5), it hardly takes anything for the women to cross that threshold. All they have to do is dress up. The convention that allowed men alone to participate in the assembly is exposed as mere convention, if participation is simply a matter of appearing and speaking in a certain way that can be ‘imitated’ (μιμούμεναι, 278; μιμουμένη, 545). While the women’s cross-dressing in this play has typically been read as a display of the transparency and inefficacy of female attempts to play men,⁵³³ as a successful impersonation that only validates masculinity,⁵³⁴ or as a metatheatrical ploy,⁵³⁵ these readings do not allow the possibility that gender itself is here shown to be a performance in the very sense defined by Butler. Developing de Beauvoir’s formulation in *The Second Sex* that ‘one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman,’ Butler writes (1988: 519):

‘In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.’

The display of a gender identity through the ‘stylized repetition of acts’ and the ‘stylization of the body’ is exactly what we see in the first half of *Assemblywomen*, as the women learn to ‘become’ men through a process of rehearsal; that is, a process of speaking, looking, and acting in ways that ‘constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.’

The rehearsal scene begins with Praxagora asking if the women have done everything they agreed when the plan was formulated at the Skira (57-9). Tellingly, this first of all entails growing body hair and getting a tan so that they might no longer be ‘similar to a woman’ (γυναικὶ προσφερέας, 67). Male and female bodies, if different by nature, are not *that* different;

⁵³³ Saxonhouse 1992: 6-7; Taaffe 1993: 104-23, Said 1996: 293-6; Orfanos 2018; Reinke 2019: 23-5.

⁵³⁴ Compton-Engle 2015: 99-100.

⁵³⁵ Slater 2002: 215-6, 232.

the first step in conventionally dressing up as men can even be achieved naturally, as it were, without any need for cosmetics, but just some time without a razor and some sun. The next step involves women bringing along attachable beards (68) and wearing men's clothes (73-5). This strategy is the inverse of that adopted in *Women at the Thesmophoria* by Euripides' Kinsman, who makes himself up as a woman by shaving his beard (*Thes.* 215-35) and putting on women's clothes (*Thes.* 249-67); whilst it closely follows the prescription of Agathon, who declares that to be a woman or a man means nothing more than dressing up or behaving in a certain way, and that whatever is lacking in the body can simply be added by 'imitation' (μίμησις) (*Thes.* 148-56).⁵³⁶ Provided the women of this play do not implausibly show their bodies to the men – in particular their most distinctively female bit, though tellingly referred to by the name of a male politician Phormisios (97) – Praxagora reassures them that they will not fail to convince (93-101). Practice, after all, makes perfect, Praxagora explains (116-21):

Πρ. οὐκοῦν ἐπίτηδες ξυνελέγην ἐνθάδε,
 ὅπως προμελετήσωμεν ἀκεῖ δεῖ λέγειν.
 οὐκ ἂν φθάνοις τὸ γένειον ἂν περιδουμένη
 ἄλλαι θ' ὅσαι λαλεῖν μεμελετήκασί που.
 Γυ. τίς δ' ὦ μέλ', ἡμῶν οὐ λαλεῖν ἐπίσταται; [120]
 Πρ. ἴθι δὴ σὺ περιδοῦ καὶ ταχέως ἀνὴρ γενοῦ.

It will not even take much practice, as Praxagora assures (and as the dress rehearsal will validate): 'Put on [your beard] and quickly become a man' (περιδοῦ καὶ ταχέως ἀνὴρ γενοῦ, 121). A prop, a conjunction, and an adverb are all that separate the two sexes according to Praxagora's logic, in which women are able not just to look like men but even to 'become' them (γενοῦ).

The audience, no doubt, are able to see through the disguise, and the incongruity of male actors playing female characters playing men is a fine source of humour (thus hilariously begins Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*, for instance). This scene is funnier than Praxagora realizes, surprised as she is when one of the women remarks that she looks 'ridiculous' in a beard (πῶς καταγέλαστον; 126) – like a roasted cuttlefish, to be exact (ὥσπερ εἴ τις σηπίαις / πώγωνα περιδήσειεν ἐσταθευμέναις, 126-7). Praxagora's rhetorical question, 'Who seeing us will not think that we are men?' (τίς οὐκ ἂν ἡμᾶς ἄνδρας ἡγήσασθ' ὁρῶν; 101), is not as

⁵³⁶ Cf. Stehle 2002: 378-82.

effective as she believes in front of the theatre audience who have seen the female characters dressing up; but it is also truer than she realises in front of the theatre audience who are watching male actors. It has been suggested that the comical disguise, constantly broken by the women during the dress rehearsal and imperfect even in the actual performance when their ‘effeminate’ complexion fails to go unnoticed (385, 427-8), reveals an underlying female ‘nature’ that cannot be hidden but can be humorously exploited. Had the disguise been more thorough, argues Susanne Saïd, ‘this cross-dressing could have been used to emphasize the very conventional character of the differences between the masculine and the feminine, and to discuss the reasons for the cultural asymmetry between the sexes.’⁵³⁷

Yet we need not invoke a counter-factual to make that exact point. The disguise is flimsy, rather, precisely because the categories of ‘woman’ as well as ‘man’ are flimsy; they are constructed and self-deconstructing right before the audience’s eyes. It is the dress rehearsal and not the actual assembly that Aristophanes arguably chose to stage for this very reason. For it allows him to show that gender itself is a performance based on external ‘appearance’ (σχήμα, 150, 503) that is ‘displayed’ (ἀποδείξαι, 295) and, as such, can be ‘rehearsed’ (προμελετήσωμεν, 117) and ‘perfected’ (ἀκριβοθήσεται, 162). This language anticipates Butler’s own, in particular her description of gender as an ‘act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.’⁵³⁸ In Aristophanes’ play, some just play the roles of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ much more competently than others, like Praxagora as opposed to the other women (170-1).⁵³⁹ Their inability to act – to perform their new gender role – does not prove that they are intrinsically constrained by their femininity. In fact, all the mistakes the women make in impersonating men in the assembly – swearing by the Two Goddesses and Aphrodite (155-9, 189-91), using the wrong grammatical forms (165-8, 299), and adopting incorrect forms of assembly behaviour by asking for a drink as if it were a symposium (132-44) and voting with their legs not their arms (263-7) – are not only humorously excused but also easily corrected. Praxagora, already accustomed to public speech, having learnt the tricks of the trade when she lived on the Pnyx (243-4) and with whom

⁵³⁷ Saïd 1996: 293.

⁵³⁸ Butler 1988: 526.

⁵³⁹ It is worth adding that the men of this play are also shown to be playing gender stereotypes, intentionally or not: Agryrrius is said to be ‘wearing’ (ἔχων, 102) Pronomos’ beard to pass for a man, Epigonos is mistaken for a woman in the audience (167-8), whilst Blepyrus is in Praxagora’s clothing while she is at the assembly (311-75).

Blepyrus apparently readily discusses political affairs (551-2),⁵⁴⁰ scolds mistakes as mistakes of convention: ‘*Don’t be accustomed to saying it now*’ (μηδ’ ἐθίζου νῦν λέγειν, 192).

Moreover, as it turns out, it is not too difficult for even these women, far from the world’s best actors, to ‘memorise’ (μεινήμενας) their new role (285-7): they praise Praxagora appropriately as a ‘man’ (άνήρ, 204) and address themselves as ‘men’ (ῶνδρες, 285, 290) or by common male names (ῶ Χαριτιμίδη / καὶ Σμίκυθε καὶ Δράκης, 293a/b). The success of their performance earns them praise from Praxagora for ‘becoming most manly’ (άνδρειόταται γεγένησθε, 519), not proof that speaking in public is strictly a masculine activity but affirmation that each did exactly what Praxagora had asked (άνήρ γενοῦ, 121). This above all included learning how to speak ‘like a man’ (άνδριστί, 149), though that hardly took much learning at all.⁵⁴¹ The link between public speech and manliness, deeply embedded in Greek (and Western) thought,⁵⁴² is here shown to be a shallow construct in which the theatre audience is complicit, having watched the women dress up as men in order to speak in public. The fact that this is exposed during a dress rehearsal is also important because rehearsals are prefigurative.⁵⁴³ Next assembly – perhaps even the assembly at the end of the festival – why should women not be included on the basis of their gender?

Aristophanes shows that the distinction between men and women is little more than a matter of acting – of becoming, not being, in De Beauvoir’s formulation. There is thus no reason to exclude women from public decision making if social roles attached to gender are not prescribed by nature. The fact that the women do not need to stay disguised once their plans have been accepted, as they make emphatically clear (493-513), only confirms the arbitrariness of the system: why, then, did they need to dress up in the first place?

The answer, of course, is that women are not recognised as political animals – that much the men of *Lysistrata* already tried to make clear – and so these revolutionaries must march backwards into battle by dressing up as men. In doing so, one of the women asks a version of

⁵⁴⁰ In these respects, she is similar to *Lysistrata*, who learnt from men as well (*Lys.* 1126-7), but dissimilar to the wives of *Lysistrata*, whose husbands simply silence them (*Lys.* 508-20). On the reality husbands discussing politics with their wives, see e.g. Dem. 59.110-11, with Gould 1980: 50.

⁵⁴¹ Cf. Willi 2003: ‘The differences between men’s and women’s language may have been too small to be comically contrasted with each other in a male-female dialogue’ (196); Sommerstein 2009a: ‘The impression given is that any woman can learn without too much difficulty to speak like a man, and any man to speak like a woman. The differences are definite but minor’ (18). Note also that there seems to have been no thoroughgoing attempt at falsetto voices, on which see Willi 2003: 171-2 with n.63.

⁵⁴² Beard 2017: 3-45.

⁵⁴³ On the prefigurative power of rehearsal, in reference to the women’s time on the heterotopia of Cithaeron in *Bacchae*, see Honig 2021: 3, 32, 70-1, 92-4. Note that the assembly of *Assemblywomen*, unlike Cithaeron in Euripides’ play, is not a heterotopic space: it is the self-same assembly within the city that the men of Athens attend.

what Beard calls in reference to the old satirical *Punch* cartoon the “Miss Triggs question” (110-11)⁵⁴⁴:

καὶ πῶς γυναικῶν θηλύφρων ξυνουσία
δημηγορήσει;

The justification for women speaking in public before men (δημηγορήσει), Praxagora thus replies, lies in their similarity to effeminate politicians who have been ‘shagged the most’ (πλεῖστα σποδοῦνται, 113). This is evidently not meant to be taken at face value, however. Not only is this a stock derogatory joke in comedy,⁵⁴⁵ but Praxagora also immediately qualifies what she says: ‘This applies to us by some chance’ (ἡμῖν δ’ ὑπάρχει τοῦτο κατὰ τύχην τινά, 114) – nothing ‘natural’ about it. This may explain why nothing more is made of the comparison to ‘buggered’ politicians, a comparison which will not turn out to be the real reason why women should rule, neither according to Praxagora’s argument nor to the men’s acceptance of it. Even so, Praxagora’s argument, like Lysistrata’s before her, is still couched in terms of women’s traditional domestic qualities rather than any sense of genuine equality as speaking and embodied beings. Her suggestion that women should be put in charge, after all, first and foremost rests on their experience managing the household (210-12):

ταῖς γὰρ γυναιξὶ φημὶ χρῆναι τὴν πόλιν
ἡμᾶς παραδοῦναι. καὶ γὰρ ἐν ταῖς οἰκίαις
ταύταις ἐπιτρόποις καὶ ταμίαισι χρώμεθα.

Is Praxagora here undermining any claim she has to being a fully-fledged political actor? She may well be demonstrating the mutual interdependency of the concerns of the *polis* and *oikos*,⁵⁴⁶ but is the performance of traditional domestic roles here the sole reason legitimating female participation in public life? Perhaps not. There is a sense in which Praxagora’s argument here is not quite so exclusively dependent on the values of the *oikos* at all, because her speech, at least at this point in the dress rehearsal presented solely before her female companions (and the audience), is laden with irony. As she goes on to make the argument in greater detail, it

⁵⁴⁴ ‘That’s an excellent suggestion, Miss Triggs. Perhaps one of the men here would like to make it’ (cited in Beard 2017: 6, 34).

⁵⁴⁵ Sommerstein 1998: *ad* 112-3.

⁵⁴⁶ Foley 1982.

becomes hard not to get the impression that this is all rather cliché: these arguments had already been made in *Lysistrata* (and possibly other ‘women plays’), and here we go again, ‘just like before’ (ὥσπερ καὶ πρὸ τοῦ, 221-8). The ‘stylized repetition of acts’ is all gender is, we will recall.

The argument is that women are staunch upholders of tradition (213-17) and opposed to innovation (καίνόν, 220). This is a point made *ad nauseam* with reference to the whole panoply of female stereotypes, good and bad (215-40): women are bibulous (227), horny (225, 228) and mischievous (224, 226, 238), but they are also household managers (221, 223b, 236), child bearers and carers (233-5), and performers of religious duties (223a). Yet this traditionalist argument is evidently ironic in the context of women taking over the assembly and doing what she says women have never done – never had the chance to do – by overthrowing the *dēmos* (οὐδὲ τὸν / δῆμον καταλύειν, 452-3).⁵⁴⁷ Moreover, if women were held to uphold a stereotypical conservatism in language, as evidenced by Plato’s *Cratylus* (418b-d), the women of this play show quite how false that is too, as they invent several new words (ἡ στρατηγός, 491, 500; κηρύκαινα, 713) and not least a new dish (λοπαδοτεμαχοσελαχογαλεοκρανιολεψανοδριμυποτριμματοσιλφιοτυρομελιτοκατακεχυμενοκιχλεπικοσσυφοφαττοπεριστεραλεκτρυνονοπτεκεφαλλιοκιγκλοπελειολαγωοσιραιοβαφητραγανοπερυγών, 1169-75) – a hapax if there ever was one! As it turns out, the women’s decree is ultimately passed into law precisely because it has never been done before (456-7) – nothing to do with women’s domestic qualities – while the novelty of the subsequent communistic setup is then emphasised (578-80, 583-7). The argument for women’s conservatism is not even made in the actual assembly, as far as it is reported.

For Praxagora, women’s delimitation to the domestic sphere is less a natural given than a conventional stereotype that can be manipulated when it suits. This is made just as clear in the aftermath of the assembly, when Praxagora returns home and is asked by her husband to explain her early morning absence. This gives her the chance to prove her worth as an actor once more. Well-aware of men’s stereotypes about female unboundedness (522-26) and infirmity (539), Praxagora convincingly improvises that she had to play the role of midwife (527-34) (including swearing by the Two Goddesses which was forbidden to the other women (532)!), and credibly feigns astonishment about the assembly’s decision (551-67). When

⁵⁴⁷ There is a similar layering of irony in *Wealth*, when the sycophant likewise claims that democracy is being overthrown (καταλύει... τὴν δημοκρατίαν, *Pl.* 948-9). He is evidently wrong because the unblinding of Ploutos is a democratizing move precipitating the redistribution of wealth, but he is also evidently right since he explains that Chremylus’ actions (unlike those of the women in *Assemblywomen*) have shirked democratic procedure (οὔτε τὴν βουλὴν πιθὼν / τὴν τῶν πολιτῶν οὔτε τὴν ἐκκλησίαν, *Pl.* 949-50).

informed that the city has been handed over to women, she knows exactly how to play the domestic card (555-6):

Βλ. ὑμῖν δέ φασι παραδεδόσθαι τὴν πόλιν.

Πρ. τί δρᾶν; ὑφαίνειν;

Βλ. οὐ μὰ Δί', ἀλλ' ἄρχειν.

Women would only ever concern themselves with trivial domestic pursuits such as weaving and not the lofty activity of ruling, of course. The tone is once again dripping with irony. This female heroine, as a matter of fact, does not merely stand for the values of the *oikos* in the *polis*. More generally, as Henderson points out, the women of *Assemblywomen*, unlike the women of *Lysistrata* or *Women at the Thesmophoria*, 'are not portrayed as opposing the male world by operating as a female "bloc" with a religious base or association with particular goddesses, but address issues of universal concern to Athens from the centre of Athenian political life.'⁵⁴⁸ The very start of Praxagora's rehearsal speech addresses the issue of universal equality (173-4):

ἐμοὶ δ' ἴσον μὲν τῇσδε τῆς χώρας μέτα

ὅσονπερ ὑμῖν·

This is, of course, a woman played by a male actor speaking in the persona of a man formulaically justifying his intervention in the assembly.⁵⁴⁹ But it is very easy for Praxagora's identity to slip out from beneath the masculine disguise and to hear her female voice claiming an 'equal part' (ἴσον) in the country, a claim similarly made by *Lysistrata* (*Lys.* 588-9, 651). In fact, it is the being denied τὸ ἴσον, Aristotle suggested, that incentivizes revolution in the first place (ὅλως γὰρ τὸ ἴσον ζητοῦντες στασιάζουσιν, *Pol.* 1301b30).

Ultimately, the women's takeover is legitimated by the men themselves, who by a majority vote for it. In fact, the men are almost unanimously on board with the women's proposals: only a small minority of country folk grumble about it during the assembly (432-3), while neither Blepyrus nor the Neighbour offers much opposition themselves. More importantly, when Praxagora elucidates her specific plan for running the government, she is explicitly licensed to speak by a neighbour cutting off Blepyrus' interruption: 'C'mon, man,

⁵⁴⁸ Henderson 1996: 145.

⁵⁴⁹ Sommerstein 1998 *ad loc.*

let the woman speak’ (ὃ δαιμόνι’ ἀνδρῶν, τὴν γυναῖκα ἕα λέγειν, 564). This is a strikingly different position to be in from that of the wives of *Lysistrata*, who, as we saw, had been compelled to submit to their husbands in silence and whose speech the play’s men had denigrated as mere ‘babbling’ (λαλεῖν).⁵⁵⁰ Praxagora, in stark contrast, will not be interrupted or mansplained to in her home (588-9, 596). If *Assemblywomen* is more radical in its implications than *Lysistrata*, then, it is not only because the women stay in power at the end of the play. It is also because the women face little opposition and no violence – and even receive positive support – from the men regarding their capacity as political animals endowed with *logos*, encompassing informal speech in places like the *agora* (associated with the verb λαλεῖν⁵⁵¹) as well as formal speech in the assembly (δημηγορεῖν, 111, 429; ἀγορεύειν, 130; ἐκκλησιάζειν, 161). *Assemblywomen*, in this regard, is more democratic.

II

Assemblywomen, however, is at the same time more anti-democratic than *Lysistrata*, as Praxagora’s revolution ends up taking a significant turn.⁵⁵² The form of government that is introduced turns out to be positively undemocratic, even as her plan is in principle described by Blepyrus as ‘populist’ (δημοτική, 631), an idea already on the cards after Euaeon’s ‘most populist’ speech (δημοτικωτάτους λόγους) preceding Praxagora’s assembly address (411-26), and even as the initiation banquet is said to be open to everyone (ὃ πάντες ἄστοί, νῦν γὰρ οὕτω ταῦτ’ ἔχει, 834).⁵⁵³ For what Praxagora establishes turns out to be a totalitarian regime.⁵⁵⁴ That is the part of her plan that is tellingly separate from the original plan conceived at the Skira (17-18, 107-8) and is deliberately omitted in her rehearsal speech (229-32, 239-40):

ταῦταισιν οὖν, ὧνδρες, παραδόντες τὴν πόλιν
μὴ περιλαῶμεν, μηδὲ πυνθανώμεθα

⁵⁵⁰ Willi 2003: 191 has suggested that the very same verb seems to be recuperated by the women in *Assemblywomen* as a more neutral verb of speech like ‘talking’ (λαλεῖν, 16, 119, 129).

⁵⁵¹ Gottesman 2014: 60.

⁵⁵² Ober 2002: 147-52 sees the new regime as an extension of democratic principles of equality to their ‘logical extreme’ (150), but even if that is the case in principle, it ends up being so far extended as to be warped and inverted, as we will see.

⁵⁵³ On the ambivalence of the vocabulary in these passages, see Lauriola 2017: 352-3, 359-61. It is revealing that the adjective used here is δημοτικός (‘populist’) rather than δημοκρατικός (‘democratic’), used exclusively at *Ra*. 952: it may be that only the latter word is reserved for ‘democratic’ in the genuine – egalitarian – sense, discussed further in the next episode.

⁵⁵⁴ In the terminology of Sommerstein 2009f, it is an example of an ‘alternative to democracy,’ which means absolute monarchy. Cf. Sonnino 2017: 379-84.

τί ποτ' ἄρα δρᾶν μέλλουσιν, ἀλλ' ἀπλῶ τρόπῳ
 ἐῷμεν ἄρχειν,
 ...
 τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ἐάσω· ταῦτ' ἐὰν πίθησθέ μοι,
 εὐδαιμονοῦντες τὸν βίον διάξετε.

Specific details about it are only given after the *dēmos* have been persuaded to hand over the reins of power. This makes the formal *agōn* in this play between Praxagora and Blepyrus redundant, strictly speaking, since Praxagora does not really need to win her husband over once the change of government has been enshrined in law.⁵⁵⁵ According to the new arrangement, power will no longer reside in the people but in the figure of the sole στρατηγός (246-7; cf. 491, 500, 727, 835, 870), Praxagora herself, who disappears halfway through the play with a whiff of despotic distancing.⁵⁵⁶ She nominally appoints the chorus as ‘advisors’ (ξυμβούλοισιν, 518), though they give no real advice and only submit to her (515), before virtually disappearing from the action in the second half; while she also refers to the women as her ἐταῖραι (23, 528), a word which has been said to carry connotations of oligarchic conspiracy.⁵⁵⁷ For all her persuasive charm, Praxagora cuts a potentially dangerous figure.⁵⁵⁸

Yet much more troubling than the character of Praxagora is the rigidly anti-democratic society she has created. This is clear at first glimpse in the fact that key democratic institutions are immediately abolished: the lawcourts are no longer in use (460, 561-2, 655-7, 676-9) – thus there is no possibility for a *graphē paranomōn* by which an assembly decree, including the decree to establish this gynaecocracy, could be invalidated⁵⁵⁹ – while a central machinery of democratic government, the allotment machine, is repurposed to allocate people to dining halls rather than to public offices or courts (681-6). It is particularly telling that the women will ‘rear’ (βοσκήσομεν, 599) the new state, a verb that refers to the nourishment of animals and tellingly marks this play’s regression from the sphere of ‘political life’ (*bios*) to that of ‘bare life’ (*zoē*). It is, in fact, it is the negation of the other quintessentially democratic activities of testifying (μαρτυρεῖν, 561) and informing (συκοφαντεῖν, 562), even if those are currently being abused

⁵⁵⁵ In its place, as Sommerstein 1998: *ad* 571-709 notes, is ‘an exercise in persuasion by a single speaker’ that corresponds in Aristophanes’ plays only to the future tyrant Peisetarios’ persuasion of the bird chorus in *Birds*.

⁵⁵⁶ Attack forthcoming 20-1, noting the trope of female tyrants in comedy.

⁵⁵⁷ Scholtz 2007: 71-111.

⁵⁵⁸ For contrary views, see e.g. Rothwell 1990: 102 (‘not a deceptive manipulator, but a quick-thinking leader’); Sheppard 2016: 468 (‘a leader skilled in assembly speech and able to rise above self-interest’).

⁵⁵⁹ Cf. Fletcher 2012: ‘the decree has outlawed any mechanism that might overturn it, and in this sense it seems to have become a permanent *nomos*’ (134).

by rogue individuals in contemporary Athens (as they invariably are according to Aristophanes), that prompts Blepyrus initially to protest: ‘Don’t take away my *bios*’ (μηδ’ ἀφέλῃ μου τὸν βίον, 563).

The women’s capacity to engage in politics in the first place, qua embodied beings capable of public speech, has nothing to do with any of this. The women may even be exonerated, not just by the rapport they uniquely earn with the audience by constantly breaking the ‘fourth wall,’⁵⁶⁰ but especially by the men’s responses to the women within the play. We already encountered male validation of female empowerment in the first half of the play, in particular with the neighbour’s interjection to let Praxagora speak (564). We encounter something similar (if less explicit) in the second half of the play, since neither the selfish man nor Epigenes complain about the fact that they are being governed *by women*, even as they stand to lose out the most from the new state of affairs. Their complaints, rather, as we will see, are to do with the nature of the law, not the gender of the lawgivers. In other words, Praxagora’s rule is not problematic because *she* is ruling indefinitely; it is problematic mainly because she is *ruling indefinitely*. And there is no more reason for *only* women to rule than there is for *only* men to rule: both are forms of anti-democratic exclusion.⁵⁶¹

The issue of the nature of the law is particularly germane in the context of the institutionalization of Athenian democracy from 403.⁵⁶² Following the trauma of the Thirty Tyrants and the democratic counter-revolution, the Athenians implemented several reforms. These included the re-codification of the laws, re-inscribed between 403 and 399 and considered permanent (a process that had already been begun in 410 and seems to have been re-started), the introduction of a distinction between laws (*nomoi*) and decrees (*psēphismata*), and the establishment of a board of lawmakers (*nomothetai*).⁵⁶³ Crucially, these reforms diminished the importance of the assembly as a legislative body and rendered decrees passed in the assembly less weighty than laws ratified by lawmakers. Whilst contemporaries such as Plato and Lysias were arguing for obedience to the law and the sovereignty of the law (e.g. *Cri.* 50a-54d; *Lys.* 2.19), and Aristotle would later criticize radical democracy for its settling of everything by decrees and not by laws with their higher validity (*Pol.* 1292a4-7), Aristophanes seems to be aware of the danger of that position to the democratic energies that could be

⁵⁶⁰ Moodie 2012.

⁵⁶¹ A similar observation is made by Casement 1986: 74-6, but his conclusion that the play primarily ridicules the principle of equality itself is untenable, since, as I will discuss, the issue is not (democratic) equality but (totalitarian) homogeneity.

⁵⁶² See above n.530.

⁵⁶³ For various legalistic readings of the play in this context, see Ober 2002: 145-7; Fletcher 2012; Sheppard 2016: 470-5.

expressed through decrees of the assembly – including, for example, decreeing to give power to women. Such a danger is something that seems to be already anticipated by Peisetairos’ anti-democratic expulsion of the decree-seller from Cloud-cuckoo-land (Av. 1035-57), and in the pro-democratic curse of the women in *Women at the Thesmophoria* against those who ‘seek to substitute decrees for laws’ (ἢ ψηφίσματα καὶ νόμον / ζητοῦσ’ ἀντιμεθιστάναι, *Thes.* 361-2), they who also curse tyrants (*Thes.* 338-9, 1143-4).⁵⁶⁴ Exactly such a substitution is what ends up happening in *Assemblywomen*; indeed, the word νόμος occurs more than three times as frequently as the word ψηφισμα in this play (discussed further below).

The main premise of Praxagora’s rule is to replace the complementary democratic principles of equality and freedom with the totalitarian principles of homogeneity and order. In this new regime every single thing is shared and the same for everyone (594):

ἀλλ’ ἓνα ποιῶ κοινὸν πᾶσιν βίον καὶ τοῦτον ὅμοιον.

Life will be ‘shared by everyone’ (κοινὸν πᾶσιν; cf. κοινὸς ἅπασιν, 595; τὴν γῆν πρότιστα ποιήσω / κοινὴν πάντων, 597-8; ἐν τῷ κοινῷ πάντων ὄντων, 661; κοινὴν πᾶσιν, 673), and the women will ‘break down everything into one’ (συρρήξας εἰς ἓν ἅπαντα, 673) and ‘provide ungrudgingly everything for everyone’ (πᾶσι γὰρ ἄφθονα πάντα παρέξομεν, 690).⁵⁶⁵ Even so, as it turns out, some individuals will still be more equal than others, which is in fact what Athenian democracy had already accomplished by granting total political equality to all freeborn adult males with two Athenian parents to the exclusion of everyone else, since this society is arranged as a hierarchy that favours the old (619-34), rests on the institution of slavery (651-2), and creates boundaries delimiting citizens from non-citizens (718-24). More specifically, what Praxagora has constructed corresponds exactly to the sphere of Arendtian ‘labour.’ For this society, comprising a ‘single household’ (μίαν οἶκῃσιν, 673) that undermines the human condition of ‘plurality’ and serving primarily to control its citizens’ needs for food (605-6, 651-2), sex (613-5), and shelter (653-4, 673-4), anticipates Arendt’s own nightmare of ‘gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping.’⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁴ Though the Athenians did not formally distinguish between laws and decrees before 403, as noted by Austin and Olson 2004 *ad loc.* To the extent that they did so, however, on the grounds that the difference in the fifth century came down to whether the emphasis was on the ‘content of the law’ (*nomos*) or on the ‘actual procedure of decision-making’ (*psēphisma*), see Hansen 1999: 161-2.

⁵⁶⁵ Cf. Saxonhouse 1992, reading the women’s takeover as the manifesting the ‘obliteration of difference’ (2); and Ober 2002: 122-55, describing the repeated adjective ἀπαξάπας (‘all together,’ 217, 719, 1148) as one of the play’s ‘comic slogans’ (128 n.14).

⁵⁶⁶ Arendt 2018: 28.

The two halves of *Assemblywomen* jar. The first half depicts citizens acting in the presence of others in the *polis*; the second half shows citizens living in one giant quasi-*oikos* serving solely to satisfy life's necessities. Although the reduction to bodily functions is often a source of celebration in comedy and a leveller (as it was, ultimately, in *Lysistrata*), in *Assemblywomen* it becomes a source of tension and a burden that stifles political activity, insofar as that meant the capacity for speech and action in public.⁵⁶⁷ Even the comic celebration at the end is rather underwhelming, especially in comparison to the wild exuberance we see in earlier comic endings, as Blepyrus arrives late (1132-3) and is hastened on to dinner (μὴ βραδύνετε, 1140; τί δῆτα διατρίβεις ἔχων, 1151; ταχὺ καὶ ταχέως λαβὲ τρύβλιον / εἴτα κόνισαι, 1176-7) – a dinner which, after the remarkable build-up (1169-75), consists merely of some porridge (λέκιθον, 1178), and from which the audience are also characteristically disinclined (1148, 1177-8; cf. *Lys.* 1071, 1201-2, 1213-5).⁵⁶⁸

Politics is annulled and its annulment of politics is enshrined in law, an archetypal form of Arendtian 'work' (see below), as the two episodic scenes demonstrate. In those scenes, the selfish man and Epigenes respectively attempt to disobey the new economic and sexual laws. Whether their motives and actions are right or wrong, the main question discussed at length by scholars without clear-cut resolution, the bottom line is that there is no legal avenue for these men to express their dissent at all. The laws have been duly decreed (νόμους δεδογμένους, 759, 763, 764; cf. 854), to be sure, but blind obedience to them, the selfish man suggests, is foolish behaviour (767-8):

Av. τὸ ταπτόμενον γὰρ δεῖ ποιεῖν τὸν σὺφρονα;

Γε. μάλιστα πάντων.

Av. τὸν μὲν οὖν ἀβέλτερον.

The irony is that the 'moderate' (σὺφρονα) man really should do as he is told (as the neighbour assents), though the selfish man uses σὺφρων to mean something like 'intelligent',⁵⁶⁹ since moderation is precisely the virtue designed for people to stay in their 'naturally' prescribed

⁵⁶⁷ Cf. Foley 1982: 16-18, describing Praxagora's regime as reducing men to leading 'a drone-like life of pleasure'; Saxonhouse 2014: 105-6, writing that 'Athens in a sense disappears, and all that is left is a family to satisfy the pleasures of the body with food, wine, and sex from a common source... Unlike *Lysistrata*, who aimed at expanding the boundaries of the political actor to the whole of Hellas, and unlike *Dikaeopolis* who created the singular political actor, Praxagora makes the political actor disappear.'

⁵⁶⁸ On the anti-closural gestures associated with this ending, which negotiate a tension between utopian abundance and dangerous depoliticization, see Wilson 2007: 280-4.

⁵⁶⁹ Sommerstein 1998: *ad* 767.

places.⁵⁷⁰ The selfish man continues to dispute the new regime with further arguments against democracy, next pointing to the Athenian propensity for fickleness (797-8), with ‘such decrees passed all the time’ (ἀεὶ τοιαῦτα γιγνόμενα ψηφίσματα, 813), to claim that the new state of affairs will never last. This explains why it is equally stupid to contribute personal property to an inevitably temporary order, as previous experience would allegedly dictate (814-29), a point Praxagora and the neighbour had both made earlier (219-20, 586-7). But he is proven wrong, since the new laws, *nomoi* not *psēphismata*, are here to stay.

Praxagora’s orderly regime that is resistant to change is the precise antithesis to democracy conceived as a necessarily disorderly and impermanent form. Arendt argues that the act of legislation itself, a form of ‘work’ (*poēsis*), is at one level anti-political because it bounds and delimits the sphere of ‘action’ (*praxis*): ‘It is as though they had said that if men only renounce their capacity for action, with its futility, boundlessness, and uncertainty of outcome, there could be a remedy for the frailty of human affairs.’⁵⁷¹ This is what we see happening in this play. *Praxis*, the root of the heroine’s name and the good which she had promised to ‘do’ (πρᾶξαι, 108) by taking over ‘the doings of the city’ (τῆς πόλεως τὰ πράγματα, 107), has been quite explicitly replaced by *poiēsis* in the form of Praxagora’s constitution, a concrete thing she ‘will make’ (ποιήσσειν, 594, 597, 614, 624, 673, 674, 676).⁵⁷² Halfway through *Assemblywomen*, Praxagora and the women stop acting, both in the theatrical sense of playing the role of assemblymen and in the Arendtian sense of expressing themselves through word and deed. This coincides exactly with the death of political institutions which, ‘no matter how well or how badly designed, depend for continued existence upon acting [(wo)]men; their conservation is achieved by the same means that brought them into being.’⁵⁷³

It is this hyper-ordering of the new society that above all serves to align Aristophanes’ *Assemblywomen* with Plato’s *Republic* – that document of totalitarianism for more than a few, not least Arendt and Rancière⁵⁷⁴ – quite as much as the communistic organisation of family and society.⁵⁷⁵ Indeed, in Aristophanes’ play, it is as if democracy had degenerated into its next logical phase according to Plato, tyranny; or, better, as if certain women became Platonic

⁵⁷⁰ See above n.456. See also McGlew 2002: 180 with n.24, suggesting that the language of ‘moderation’ in the fourth century became ‘a mantra of the political obedience now expected of Athens’s lower classes.’

⁵⁷¹ Arendt 2018: 195.

⁵⁷² Cf. Wolin 2018b: ‘A political constitution is not the fulfilment of democracy but its transfiguration into a “regime” and hence a stultified and partial reification’ (96).

⁵⁷³ Arendt 1961: 153.

⁵⁷⁴ Arendt 1990: 90-103, 2018: 222-30; Rancière 1999: *passim*.

⁵⁷⁵ For the surface similarities between Plato’s *Republic* and Aristophanes’ *Assemblywomen*, see Rothwell 1990: 10. For a more systematic reading of the interplay between the two works, see Tordoff 2007; Freyberg 2008: 115-57.

philosopher-queens and everyone else stayed in their ‘proper’ places. Yet in contradistinction to Plato’s argument that ‘unrestrained freedom’ (ἀκροτάτης ἐλευθερίας), including freedom given to women, breeds the degeneration of democracy to tyranny (*Rep.* 563d-64a), here it is democracy that degenerates into what looks like a tyranny precisely when freedom is restrained and restricted. Moreover, in contradistinction to Plato’s companion argument that the democratic individual is one who seeks to gratify desires without moderation (*Rep.* 558d-62a), it is precisely the dissolution of democracy that leads the citizens of this new state to live a life which solely consists in immoderate desire-gratification. This is not to say that *Assemblywomen* validates civil disobedience, the kind of which is exemplified by the selfish man. It is left pointedly unclear at the end of the scene (872-6), after all, whether the selfish man succeeds in shirking authority.⁵⁷⁶ Rather, it is to say that the only version of democracy that is properly democratic rests not upon the absolute force of laws (*nomoi*) determined by a narrow body of lawmakers, but upon the transitory nature of decrees (*psēphismata*) voted on – by anyone, irrespective of their gender – in the assembly.⁵⁷⁷

The second episodic scene, where we encounter Epigenes being forced to sleep with comically grotesque old women, shows quite how pernicious total order and obedience can be. On top of the perverted descriptions of the sex in this scene in terms of impotency/sterility (906-10), bestiality (1072, 1101, 1104), incest (1039-42), and necrophilia (1098-111),⁵⁷⁸ the scene is troubling for the way in which Epigenes has no freedom to express any dissent (941-5):

Επ. οὐ γὰρ ἀνασχετὸν τοῦτό γ’ ἐλευθέρῳ.

Γρ. α. οἰμῶζων ἄρα νῆ Δία σποδήσεις.

οὐ γὰρ τὰπὶ Χαριζένης τάδ’ ἐστίν.

κατὰ τὸν νόμον ταῦτα ποιεῖν

ἐστι δίκαιον, εἰ δημοκρατούμεθα.

The name of democracy is surely being invoked ironically here, as it is in Aristophanes’ only other use of the verb (δημοκρατοῦνται, *Ach.* 642).⁵⁷⁹ As Fletcher points out: ‘It was the role of

⁵⁷⁶ For readings which see the ambiguity as carefully calibrated in this scene, see Christ 2008: 178-82; Zumbrennen 2012: 108-13; Halliwell 2020: 128-33.

⁵⁷⁷ Fletcher 2012 arrives at the opposite conclusion, reading the play as showing the need for law which has been abrogated by the women.

⁵⁷⁸ Tsoumpa 2019: 532-3.

⁵⁷⁹ Lauriola 2017: 338, 353-6.

the courts to use the law to obtain justice, but now *to dikaion* consists of obeying the law.⁵⁸⁰ Like the selfish man who realises that he is without legal recourse (862-5), Epigenes is trapped, with no possibility of being ‘bailed’ (ἀφαιρήται, 1023-4), ‘released’ (ἀφίεναι, 1000, 1075, 1083-5), or – like real women – having any choice over whom he can sleep with ‘whether he wants to or not’ (ἤν/ἐάν τε βούλη γ’ ἤν τε μή, 981, 1097). Epigenes may try to get around law by any means possible (982-91, 1006-29) and proclaim that he will ‘never obey’ (κοῦκ ἂν πιθοίμην οὐδέποτε, 1011), but he doth protest too much. He ends up being ‘dragged off’ by competing older women (ἔλκειν, 1020, 1037, 1050, 1054, 1055, 1056, 1066, 1087, 1094), while the violent enforcement of the law materializes exactly Blepyrus’ fear at the start (ἀναγκάζωσι πρὸς βίαν, 467; πρὸς βίαν, 471).⁵⁸¹ The old women force him to ‘do as he ought’ (ποιητέον, 1081), invoking the absolute authority of the law which must be ‘obeyed’ (πειστέον, 1022) and at one point ascribing agency to the law itself (ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐγώ, / ἀλλ’ ὁ νόμος ἔλκει σ’, 1055-6), while the language of necessity, that which Milton called the ‘tyrant’s plea’ (*Paradise Lost* 4.394), resurfaces throughout Praxagora’s hyper-regimented regime (ἀνάγκη, 714, 1029; δεῖ, 700, 721, 762, 939, 1008, 1013, 1026, 1077, 1090, 1098; χρῆναι, 590).⁵⁸²

The most telling aspect of the old women’s behaviour, however, in the light of events after 403, is how they collapse the newly made distinction between a νόμος (944, 988, 1022, 1049, 1056, 1077) and a ψήφισμα (1013; cf. 649). An example of the latter is actually read out by the first old woman (1015-20):

“ἔδοξε ταῖς γυναιξίν, ἣν ἀνὴρ νέος
 νέας ἐπιθυμῇ, μὴ σποδεῖν αὐτήν πρὶν ἂν
 τὴν γραῦν προκρούσῃ πρῶτο. ἣν δὲ μὴ ‘θέλῃ
 πρότερον προκρούειν ἀλλ’ ἐπιθυμῇ τῆς νέας,
 ταῖς πρεσβυτέραις γυναιξίν ἔστω τὸν νέον
 ἔλκειν ἀνατεῖ λαβομένης τοῦ παττάλου.” [1020]

This is a permanent decree that also assigns impunity (ἀνατεῖ) to the old women. The same adverb, in fact, is used by Thucydides to describe the oligarchic revolutionaries, who took over the Kolonos assembly in 411 to establish a new form of government and passed motions to

⁵⁸⁰ Fletcher 2012: 134.

⁵⁸¹ Violence is particularly marked in Epigenes’ comparison to the legendary Procrustes (1021) and his being forced to submit ‘by Diomedes’ necessity’ (1029): see Sommerstein 1998: *ad loc.*

⁵⁸² Cf. Saïd 1996: 312.

deny any challenge to its illegality (Thuc. 8.67.2) – another instance of the *dēmos* democratically voting democracy out of existence. It is strikingly different in nature from the kinds of decrees passed all the time according to democracy’s critics, such as the selfish man of this play. The fact that the new laws are written down in the first place (γραμμάτων ειρηκότων, 1050) undermines the open-ended spirit of assembly decrees, which, as Pelasgus proclaims in Aeschylus’ *Suppliant Women* (946-7), ‘are neither inscribed on tablets, nor sealed in folds of books’ (ταῦτ’ οὐ πίναξίν ἐστιν ἐγγεγραμμένα / οὐδ’ ἐν πτυχαῖς βίβλων κατεσφραγισμένα). They are meant to be unfixed by writing.

In the end, *Assemblywomen* can be read as an enactment of what happens when, in Rancière’s terms, ‘politics’ is replaced by ‘police.’ That is an inevitable consequence of democracy being compromised by what Derrida labels its condition of ‘autoimmunity,’⁵⁸³ and Wolin its ‘fugitive’ status;⁵⁸⁴ that is, its being an open and unstable, hence easily misappropriated and subverted, form. Something like this had happened in Athens in a violent way following the oligarchic revolutions of 411 and 404, and then in an institutional way with the reforms implemented following the democratic counter-revolution of 403. In the 390s, at a time when the Athenian *polis* had reinvented itself by constraining the possibilities for action in the assembly, Aristophanes wrote a play that radically expands those possibilities. For *Assemblywomen* imagines a political world in which the assembly retained its transformative power, including the power to give women power. The central irony – if we want to stick with the ‘ironic’ label often attached to this play – is that the women’s democratic empowerment ends up undermining democracy.

Taaffe writes in the preface to her monograph *Aristophanes and Women* that her aim is not to ‘dismiss these works from the canon of great books because they perpetuate women’s silence and invisibility.’⁵⁸⁵ My contention, by contrast, is that they are even more worthy of a place in the ‘canon’ (whatever that may mean) precisely because they confound the propriety of women’s silence and invisibility. They demonstrate, in Rancière’s words, ‘the lack of foundation, the sheer contingency of any social order.’⁵⁸⁶ Against Aristotle, these works show that men are not ‘by nature more apt to rule’ (φύσει ἡγεμονικώτερον, *Pol.* 1259b1-2); they

⁵⁸³ Derrida 2005: esp. 35-9, 74. Cf. Brown 2009: ‘And what democracies have not committed suicide, often even electing to kill themselves? Athens during the Peloponnesian Wars is the original suicide’ (123).

⁵⁸⁴ Wolin 2018c.

⁵⁸⁵ Taaffe 1993: x. The case for their dismissal has been made by Case 1985, going so far as to assess that ‘feminist practitioners and scholars may decide that such plays do not belong in the canon – that they are not central to the study and practice of theatre’ (327).

⁵⁸⁶ Rancière 1999: 15-16.

even go so far as to challenge the idea that there is such a thing as uniquely male or female ‘nature’ at all. Aristophanes is writing in a context of sophistic relativism, after all, with novel possibilities opened up by the *nomos/physis* debates.⁵⁸⁷ If ‘feminist’ is too anachronistic and value-laden a term to describe Aristophanes – for the poet who makes light of rape (e.g. *Lys.* 160-3) and objectifies the nude female body (e.g. *Lys.* 1162-74) is evidently not advocating for women’s rights in ways familiar to us after and in the midst of waves of feminism – it should not stop us from daring to see Aristophanes as a counter-cultural figure of resistance to patriarchy. That, after all, is how Plato presents Aristophanes in his *Symposium*: the figure whose hiccough, itself a disruption of bodily order, interrupts the order of speeches (185c-d), and whose speech provides a thoroughly heterodox and anti-hierarchical account of Eros that uniquely acknowledges female sexuality (189b-93e).

It is common to see Aristophanes more broadly as a figure of dissent, though, as we saw in my ‘prologue,’ scholars regularly see him as a critic of the *dēmos* and democracy from a broadly conservative perspective, insofar as they do attempt to pin down his political agenda. While those scholars typically adopt that position by focusing on the particularities of comic advice in the *parabasis* or on the abuse of certain individuals, neither angle gives away much in these plays in particular. For one matter, in *Lysistrata* the *parabasis* offers nothing concrete, while in *Assemblywomen* there is no *parabasis* at all; for another, in both plays relatively few historical individuals are the butts of jokes. Aristophanes’ dissent in these plays, I am suggesting, can be better conceptualized by thinking about it in terms of Rancièrian *dissensus*: that is, through the sudden, explosive, and disruptive moments of female emancipatory action. These moments expose the arbitrariness of women’s exclusion from the citizen body and the artificiality of prescribed gender roles in the first place. Aristophanes’ comic women may relinquish their power or wield too much power in the end, since they return to their homes in *Lysistrata* and a ‘police’ order is founded in *Assemblywomen*. Yet those endings are designedly discomfiting and scandalous. For they shut down the egalitarian possibilities that are constitutive of democracy.

⁵⁸⁷ Kerferd 1981: 159-62.

EPISODE FIVE

Slaves

The idea of women being equal to men is one thing, but the idea of slaves being equal to free is another. According to Aristotle at least, some categories of person were more inferior than others (*Pol.* 1253b9-10): women were said to possess qualified deliberative capacity that was completely absent in slaves (*Pol.* 1260a9-14), and to be on equal terms with slaves only among barbarians (*Pol.* 1252b5-6). In fifth-century Athens, the status of the slave in ideological antithesis to the freeborn citizen as well as full human being is well documented.⁵⁸⁸

Nevertheless, it is also well recognised that slaves – male slaves, at least – were potentially much closer to the citizen and human than any ideological construction could ever admit. That slaves were practically not as different from free citizens as the latter may have liked to believe is a point made not just by democracy's fiercest critics, who jibed that slaves in Athens were indistinguishable in terms of appearance and behaviour from the lowly sorts of people who get to be citizens.⁵⁸⁹ It is also made by more than a few accounts that take for granted such indistinguishability.⁵⁹⁰ Even the boundaries set up to demarcate slave from free in Greek law could be fuzzier than they might appear, since slaves were afforded some legal privileges, including protection against *hubris* and being killed with impunity, and the right to own property (and even other slaves)⁵⁹¹; while in the lawcourts themselves it was not uncommon for citizens to be proclaimed slaves and slaves to be proclaimed citizens.⁵⁹² In the face of empirical evidence which denies that slave and free are naturally and irrevocably distinct categories (the former irrational, violable, animal-object, Barbarian; the latter rational, inviolable, human-subject, Greek), including onomastic evidence which shows remarkably less distinction between citizen and slave names than might be assumed,⁵⁹³ the idea(l) of an exclusive and homogenous free citizen body defined in opposition to slaves could hardly be

⁵⁸⁸ DuBois 1991: 35-68; Cartledge 2002: 133-166; Osborne 2010a, 2010b.

⁵⁸⁹ Ps.-Xen. 1.10-12; Pl. *Rep.* 562b-3c.

⁵⁹⁰ Arist. *Pol.* 1254b28-34; Aeschin. 1.10, 1.138-9; Dem. 47.61, 53.16. This is generally backed up by visual evidence, on which see Osborne 2016. Connecting this cultural anxiety surrounding issues of appearance and social mobility to comic 'down-dressing,' see Reinke 2019: 70-4.

⁵⁹¹ Todd 1993: 184-94; Hunter 2000: 5-15.

⁵⁹² Citizens proclaimed slaves: Andoc. fr. 5; Lys. 13.18, 13.59-60, 30.2; Dem. 18.129-31, 25.79; Aeschin. 1.114-5, 2.79, 3.171-3. Slaves proclaimed citizens: Ps.-Dem. 59.9, Isae. 6.19-24.

⁵⁹³ Vlassopoulos 2010 (with the data); Vlassopoulos 2015 (with the implications).

sustained in practical actuality.⁵⁹⁴ It is particularly unsustainable, moreover, in the context of the sophistic relativism of the late fifth-century, which set out to shatter preconceived notions of human ‘nature’: the ‘human being’ (ἄνθρωπος), as Protagoras’ famous maxim declares, is ‘the measure of all things’ (πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον) (Plat. *Theat.* 152a; Sext. *Emp. Adv. Math.* 7.60).⁵⁹⁵ The slave, then, can be said to have embodied the same kind of ‘disquieting in-betweenness’ that has been shown of the metic.⁵⁹⁶

In actual fact, slaves were closer to metics than Athenian women, in the sense that they were omnipresent in many areas of public life open to the former but closed to the latter. That is to say, some slaves were *already* quasi-participants in democracy, even if not as speakers in the assembly and jurors in the lawcourts (though certain slaves known as *dēmosioi* did also run the bureaucracy⁵⁹⁷), but rather as rowers in the same navy, workers in the same professions, and occupiers of the same ‘free spaces’ as the poorer members of the power-holding *dēmos*.⁵⁹⁸ Furthermore, the possibility of manumission and naturalization meant some slaves could, even if only in extraordinary circumstances, become or at least give birth to fully-fledged citizens themselves.⁵⁹⁹ Once more, the structuralist gridding of societies into ‘self’ and ‘other’ may just be too neat, just as the institutionalist focus on politics as the spheres of the lawcourts and assembly may just be too narrow.

Athenians did not need a comic poet, then, to dream up a situation where the distinction between free and slave could immediately be dissolved; that would not necessarily be imaginative (like going to Hades) but rather imaginable (like women speaking in the assembly). Indeed, contrary to the suggestion that the Greeks could never genuinely conceive of a world without chattel slavery,⁶⁰⁰ there is evidence that utopian slaveless societies *could* be imagined, most expressly in the fragments of Crates’ *Wild Animals* (esp. fr. 16; cf. Athenaeus 6.267e-

⁵⁹⁴ Perhaps it is because slavery is so unjustifiable that it is never systematically theorised until Aristotle, whose account, itself hardly systematic, is routinely shown to be inconsistent and indefensible by modern scholars: see e.g. Pellegrin 2013, with further references. Aristotle himself, in fact, does not hesitate at times to recognize slaves as human (e.g. *Pol.* 1254a14-16; *EN* 1161a32-b8).

⁵⁹⁵ On the *homo mensura* as kernel of pro-democratic theory, see Farrar 1988: 44-125. Tracing the overarching concept of ‘the human being’ in antiquity, see Baldry 1965, though there is scant reference to Aristophanes.

⁵⁹⁶ Kasimis 2018, quoted at 60. On the problem of the slave for rigid hierarchical thinking in a Roman context as well, with particular reference to Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, see Bradley 2000.

⁵⁹⁷ Ismard 2017.

⁵⁹⁸ The evidence, also including aspects of Athens’ demography and cosmopolitanism that worked to blur citizen and non-citizen identities, is detailed persuasively in Vlassopoulos 2007, 2009, 2010. Further arguments concerning slave agency are made by Gottesman 2014: 44-76, 155-79.

⁵⁹⁹ On the complex status of manumitted slaves, the majority – but not entirety – of whom were never fully integrated into the citizen body, see Zelnick-Abramovitz 2009; Vlassopoulos 2016. Cf. Roselli 2011: ‘What naturalization did was to problematize not only conceptually but literally the very notion of civic identity and thus to raise some doubt over the very constitution of the civic body’ (148).

⁶⁰⁰ Vlassopoulos 2011.

70a).⁶⁰¹ Closer to reality, the possibility that the Athenians might lose the Peloponnesian War provides the clearest evidence that the Athenians themselves acknowledged the flexibility of their own status distinctions, however anxiously and reluctantly. For the consequences of losing were said to have led the Athenians to fear being treated as they had treated the Melians among others (Xen. *Hell.* 2.2.3; cf. Thuc. 7.75.7); while those consequences did in fact lead the Athenians to grant citizenship to a large number of slaves for serving at Arginousae (Ar. *Ra.* 33-4, 190-2, 693-9; Hellanikos *FGrHist* 32a F25).⁶⁰²

The possibility that free or slave status could be reversed was also an established literary trope.⁶⁰³ This goes back to Homer and the projected enslavement of the Trojan women (*Il.* 6.454-63, 22.731-4) as well as the beggaring of Odysseus (*Od.* 4. 244-8, 13.397-403, 429-37), the latter also likened to a woman about to be led off to slavery (*Od.* 8.521-31). It is a trope that is amplified and embedded in tragic form by the Aristotelian notion of *peripeteia* (Arist. *Poet.* 1452a22-3), dramatized with particular bite in plays like Euripides' *Hecuba*, *Andromache*, and *Trojan Women*. In the mythic tradition, it is perhaps Heracles who best embodies the possibility of status reversal. This is a point amusingly drawn out in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, when Dionysus, (implausibly) ignorant of Heracles' mythic history as a mortal and a slave and a god, wrongly claims that Xanthias is a fool to think a mortal and a slave could be a son of Alcmene (530-1) – a claim that will then humorously be used to Xanthias' advantage (582-3).⁶⁰⁴ It is no coincidence that it is Aristophanes who makes the most of that possibility. In contradistinction to tragedy, where *peripeteia* is so central but where 'characters cannot improve upon the social status into which they were born,'⁶⁰⁵ in comedy there is always the possibility of upward, as well as downward, mobility for anyone. Sausage-sellers can become political leaders (*Knights*) and disgruntled Athenians rulers of the universe (*Birds*), just as women can become men (*Assemblywomen*) and slaves masters (*Frogs*).

My argument will be that Aristophanes exaggerates those existing literary-historical tendencies, which had already served to unsettle otherwise entrenched views about slavery at Athens. He radically flattens any ontological distinction between slave and free, offering perhaps the most sustained ancient criticism of the essentialist categorization of the slave

⁶⁰¹ On the quasi-abolitionist potential of that play, see Konstan 2012. While it is often noted that Aristophanes' seemingly egalitarian utopias in Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen* and *Wealth* do not abolish slavery (*Eccl.* 593-4, 612-29, 717-24; *Pl.* 517-26), one might retort that the continued need for slaves points to those plays' rather dystopian bent.

⁶⁰² For the details of the citizenship grant, see Hunt 2001.

⁶⁰³ For a survey of slaves in Greek literature, see Hunt 2011.

⁶⁰⁴ See Sommerstein 1996a: ad 531.

⁶⁰⁵ Hall 1997: 112, noting the one textually dubious exception at Eur. *Heracl.* 789-90, 888-90. See also Reinke 2019: esp. 15-16.

crystallised in Aristotle's 'natural slave.' As such, he might well be considered one of those whom Aristotle himself opposes – but never names – for viewing the slave-free distinction as an unnatural and unjust convention alone (*Pol.* 1253b20-3).⁶⁰⁶ None of this means that Aristophanes is advocating abolishing slavery as an institution (any more than he is promoting women's rights), but it does mean that he is, I daresay, very interested in undermining the 'fiction of citizen equality' that, as Osborne has shown, relied upon the presence of slaves at Athens.⁶⁰⁷ Through his plays, Aristophanes shows that civic equality in a democracy is mere fiction indeed, as long as the slave exists as a category 'out there.'

Recent scholarship on Aristophanes has begun to point in this direction. Sommerstein's observation that comedy often inverts ideological prejudices against slaves has been developed by several essays from the 2013 volume *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greek Comic Drama*.⁶⁰⁸ This especially concerns the starring roles played by Xanthias in *Frogs* and Karion in *Wealth*,⁶⁰⁹ though the unnamed slave in the second half of *Peace* (819-1126) might plausibly be seen as an earlier precursor to them.⁶¹⁰ It has even been suggested that Aristophanes may have invented the autonomous, dynamic slave as a comic type that distinguished him from his rivals.⁶¹¹ As these readings have variously shown, Aristophanes' slaves are not merely passive instruments, easily distinguishable from their masters, and objects of laughter and abuse – they can be that too, no doubt, though so can anyone in comedy. They are also active agents, who do not look or behave or speak differently from their masters, often build greater comic rapport with the audience than their masters, and typically share in the struggle and success of their master's comic project. The fact that slaves and ex-slaves sat among citizens in the audience and were sometimes publicly manumitted in the theatre only gives this view more weight.⁶¹²

⁶⁰⁶ On the unmentioned proponents of this conventionalist view, hardly given any airtime in a rather un-Aristotelian manner, see Cambiano 1987. Surviving expressions of slavery as a matter of convention include: *Eur. Ion* 854-6, *Hel.* 726-33, fr. 851; *Soph.* fr. 854; Σ *ad Arist. Rhet.* 1373b18; *Ath.* 6.263b-c; *Philemon* fr. 95. 1-2, 8. The fact that these all come from drama suggest that it is drama against which Aristotle may be primarily reacting.

⁶⁰⁷ The quote is from Osborne 2010a: 100. As Osborne continues: 'It was not *democracy* as such which slavery enabled in Athens, but a particular conception of the citizen body as made up of an essentially homogenous body of men, none of whom were subject to constraints imposed by other individuals' (101).

⁶⁰⁸ Sommerstein 2009e; Akrigg and Tordoff 2013.

⁶⁰⁹ As Tordoff 2013 summarises of these two figures: 'Xanthias is a slave who might have been (but was not) freed at the battle of Arginusae and that Karion was once a free man who fell into slavery through inability to pay off a debt: their liminal status is the thin end of a widening wedge that threatens to split the ideological unanimity of citizens in Athens in the late fifth and early fourth centuries' (60-1). Similar remarks are also made by Dover 1993: 43-50.

⁶¹⁰ Walin 2009. Against that view, see Akrigg 2013.

⁶¹¹ Sells 2013.

⁶¹² On slaves in the audience see Roselli 2011: 148-54. On slave manumission in the theatre, see Zelnick-Abramovitz 2009: 304-6, Roselli 2011: 151.

And yet, even in these interpretations, the structuralist-informed model of reading drama in terms of transgression and reaffirmation remains dominant. Slaves are considered an ‘other’ whose ‘natural’ identity is said to be attested by Aristophanes’ use of slavery as an insult against opponents,⁶¹³ and whose agency is said to be compromised as ‘good’ slaves in comedy (like Eumaeus in the *Odyssey*) typically conform to their masters’ wishes or the comic project.⁶¹⁴ More generally, Aristophanes’ experiments with slaves are said to be ‘licensed’ in the name of theatrical and carnivalesque inversion, and can thus be explained away as being funny, temporary, and in the end non-threatening.⁶¹⁵ Comedy is therefore said to end up fulfilling a similar function to the annual festival of the Kronia, which played out the fantasy of a Golden Age where slaves are no longer needed and, in doing so, provided a ‘safe space’ for anxieties about asymmetrical power relations to be vented.⁶¹⁶ And so, even if some of the evidence may point towards something like a common humanity – as I am going to maintain from the perspective of ‘corporeal humanism’⁶¹⁷ – it is typical for scholars to end up concurring with Ben Akrigg’s reading of *Frogs* and *Wealth*, which concludes that we should ‘resist the easy assumption that what we are seeing is an interest in the humanity of slaves and a closer relationship between them and their masters – if only because there is no reason why the Athenians should at this time have been just nicer than other slave-owners.’⁶¹⁸

But what if the free-slave distinction, like the men-women distinction as we saw in the previous episode, is flimsier and less straightforwardly recuperated than scholars have tended to appreciate? I am going to argue that we should embrace, not resist, the possibility that Aristophanes might even dare to take an interest in the humanity of slaves.⁶¹⁹

⁶¹³ Lape 2013: 78-81.

⁶¹⁴ Sommerstein 2009e: 153; Olson 2013.

⁶¹⁵ Hunt 2011: 30-2; Tordoff 2013: 36-52; Agrigg 2013: 121-3; Griffith 2013: 33.

⁶¹⁶ On the Kronia, see Tordoff 2013: 36 with nn.193-4. Versions of that myth are sometimes dramatized in comedy itself, according to Athenaeus (6.267e-68d).

⁶¹⁷ The term comes from Murphy 2011: ‘The new corporeal humanism, grounded in the ontological fact of vulnerability, dispossession, and exposure, offers a more expansive and inclusive paradigm, one that is still attentive to the differences that mark bodies, and respectful of the radically different ways that vulnerability and dispossession are lived’ (589).

⁶¹⁸ Akrigg 2013: 121.

⁶¹⁹ That is not to say that this is true of every slave across the Aristophanic corpus (just as not all comic women are like Lysistrata and Praxagora). Some slaves get a ‘rougher’ treatment than others: mute, nude females and Scythian archers, for instance, on which see Zweig 1992 and Hall 2006: 225-54 respectively. Even so, ‘rough’ treatment of slaves is hardly left unproblematicized by Aristophanes, as we will see.

Frogs

If so, it is in *Frogs* that he most urgently collapses the distinction between free and slave, especially in the context of the recent enfranchisement of the slaves who had fought at Arginousae, though that was only one of a series of issues challenging the integrity of the citizen body in the late fifth-century.⁶²⁰ Susan Lape has already begun to suggest as much in her reading of the first half of the play, exploring the deconstruction of essentialist identities through Xanthias' cross-dressing and role-playing aptitude, such that the slave succeeds in showing distinctions conventionally thought to be natural to be in fact conventional.⁶²¹ Indeed, Xanthias the slave easily 'becomes' the master 'Heracles' (σὺ μὲν γενοῦ 'γῶ, 495), just as we saw how each woman in *Assemblywomen* easily 'becomes a man' (ἀνὴρ γενοῦ, 121), both cases manifesting what Ranci  re calls the 're-distribution of the sensible.'

It is worth mentioning as well that even before we get to Xanthias (and Karion, explicitly not born a slave (*Pl.* 147-8), after him), Aristophanes has already started to chuck the essentialism underpinning the category of slave into the bin. For throughout Aristophanes' plays slaves are often hard to tell apart from citizens in terms of their (ugly) appearance,⁶²² while already in *Knights*, *Wasps*, and *Peace* the slaves who deliver the prologues (not to mention the slave in the second half of *Peace*) prove themselves to be no less Greek in their speech, no less mentally proficient, and no less concerned about the political situation than any citizen.⁶²³ What is it that actually *justifies* the differentiation between slave and free? That precise question may never be near the forefront of the audience's minds, however, until *Frogs*, a play which puts a slave centre stage, and which radically obliterates any supposedly 'natural' differences between slave and free. It does so not just by demonstrating the performative dimension of civic identity (qua Lape), but also, more drastically, as I will suggest, by reducing the play's master-slave duo to an inexorable and status-defying condition of corporeality, vulnerability, and precariousness.

⁶²⁰ See Akrigg 2013 on the rapidly changing demographics, including the ongoing depletion of the male citizen population over the course of the war and the slaves' desertion *en masse* at Decelea, which meant that dynamics between masters and slaves were more generally changing, as slaves were becoming more valuable and harder to replace.

⁶²¹ Lape 2013: 81-6.

⁶²² Wrenhaven 2013.

⁶²³ On this last point, consider the slaves at the start of *Knights*, where they resolve to steal Paphlagon's oracles that will provide the key to their own salvation as well as that of the city (σωτήρ τῇ πόλει καὶ νῶν φανείς, *Eq.* 149), and those at the start of *Wasps*, in which Sosias dreams about the 'whole ship of state' (περὶ τῆς πόλεως γάρ ἐστι τοῦ σκάφους ὅλου, *Vesp.* 29) and Xanthias expresses concern about 'our people' (τὸν δῆμον ἡμῶν, *Vesp.* 41).

‘But not a word about me’ (περὶ ἐμοῦ δ’ οὐδεὶς λόγος, 87, 107, 115).

Although Xanthias plays a starring role in the first half of *Frogs*, he is typically viewed, or rather neglected, by scholars as little more than a foil to the god-cum-citizen Dionysus, the protagonist who is onstage the entire play and has been said to unify the play’s distinct halves.⁶²⁴ Even as it is made to look as if Xanthias’ position as a slave and Dionysus’ as master are the wrong way around, Xanthias being rational and courageous and Dionysus silly and cowardly (285-308, 479-502, 590-604), their roles and costumes repeatedly swapped (494-502, 522-533, 579-89), and ultimately Aeacus’ failing to distinguish between the two in the torture scene (668-9), these drastic inversions of status are often explained away. This is especially the case in influential readings that view the play as an ‘initiation’: the god is seen as a citizen undergoing a ‘rite of passage,’ an experience which necessitates the loss of civic identity in the first half of the play in order to consolidate it in the second half.⁶²⁵ While there are plenty of reasons for not accepting wholesale the ritualist and teleological bent of that approach,⁶²⁶ its main problem for my purposes is its narrow focus on Dionysus qua initiand-subject.⁶²⁷ For that approach comes at the expense of neglecting Xanthias in his own right.

So let us spare him a word, as he implicitly implores by protesting ‘not a word about me’ in the presence of Dionysus and Heracles who are ignoring him. If we do, we will find plenty of scope for viewing him not merely in structuralist vein as an innate ‘other’ who facilitates Dionysus’ initiatory experience, but as a potential ‘self’ who merits attention as an embodied, suffering, precarious human being. Xanthias is, after all, the play’s only living human. Moreover, even though he disappears during the *agōn*, his disappearance does not represent his being put back in his place, nor does it serve as further evidence of the play’s ultimate conservatism, something sometimes said of the second half of the play with particular emphasis on the pro-oligarchic advice in the *parabasis* and the resurrection of the ostensibly aristocratic Aeschylus.⁶²⁸ As I will argue in the second part of this episode, *Frogs* is at pains to

⁶²⁴ Esp. Segal 1961.

⁶²⁵ Moorton 1989; Bowie 1993: 228-53; Konstan 1995: 61-74; Lada-Richards 1999: 45-122.

⁶²⁶ Edmonds 2004; Griffith 2013: 150-99.

⁶²⁷ See e.g. Lada-Richards 1999, writing that ‘our view of the play in its entirety is bound to be conditioned by our interpretation of its protagonist’ (2).

⁶²⁸ Segal 1961; Padilla 1992; Rosenbloom 2012: 431-40; Lape 2013: 86-8.

undercut its own conservatism, including undercutting the exclusion of Xanthias, who may even return to be included in the procession at the very end of the play.

Let me make clear that I am not reading *Frogs* through the figure of Xanthias on a whim. This move might be justified by the play's Eleusinian dimension, which invites a more open perspective, since the egalitarian Mysteries were accessible to (Greek-speaking) slaves and thus offered an 'alternative blueprint for community formation to the stratified Athens of the Panathenaia or the Dionysia.'⁶²⁹ It might also be warranted by the play's Dionysiac dimension, Dionysus himself being an outsider to the traditional pantheon and a figure who incorporates otherness within himself, a view corroborated in *Frogs* (e.g. 156-7, 458-9).⁶³⁰ It might even be in keeping with the play's paraenetic dimension, since the specific advice that the chorus gives to re-enfranchise the oligarchs rests upon the *dēmos* having already accepted and been uniquely praised for the decree to enfranchise the slaves who had fought at Arginousae (686-705), both being acts that include the excluded.⁶³¹ Yet the reason for paying close attention to Xanthias goes beyond the Eleusinian or Dionysiac or paraenetic frames, which come into focus only as the play unfolds. Xanthias, rather, is front and centre from the play's opening line, as we will now turn to see.

The prologue of *Frogs* seems designed precisely to shine a spotlight on Xanthias. We have already seen in episode one how he is the centre of comic attention, the one who has the first word and initiates the dialogue with metatheatrical and comedic self-awareness by proposing to make jokes in the first place (1-2). I suggested that the function of the prologue was to divide and alienate the audience through meta-reflection on laughter. That, however, may not be the prologue's only function, which may also simply serve to draw attention to Xanthias. And Aristophanes is at pains to keep Xanthias in sight beyond the prologue through the following scene where Dionysus and Heracles converse, even when he is no longer the prime focus of the action. For Xanthias repeatedly complains in asides, a strategy designed to generate rapport with the audience in comedy,⁶³² that nobody is taking note of him and the load

⁶²⁹ Willey forthcoming. For various readings of the play which stress ritual openness in post-Arginousae Athens, see also Bowie 1993: 228-53; Edmonds 2004; Sells 2012. For the evidence that slaves could be initiated at Eleusis, see Dem. 59.21; *IG* ii² 1672.207.

⁶³⁰ Lada-Richards 1999: 17-44, 258-60, with references to other Greek sources.

⁶³¹ McGlew 2002: 163-70; Ruffell 2011: 283-4; Griffith 2013: 52. Connecting Aristophanes' praise of the citizenship grant to Lysistrata's advocacy of extending citizenship in her wool-weaving metaphor, see Sommerstein 1996a: *ad* 696.

⁶³² Sommerstein 2009e: 146; Walin 2009: 31-2 n.8; Moodie 2012.

he is being forced to bear (87-8, 107, 115, 159).⁶³³ He thereby articulates his own exclusion from the story of *Frogs*, and in doing so disavows that exclusion. Unlike the silent characters at the start of Aeschylus' tragedies as caricatured later on in this play (911-26),⁶³⁴ Xanthias will not stand idly by. He will, of course, become much more prominent once the scene shifts to Hades itself, eventually earning the full admiration of the chorus (590-7), who admire Dionysus only ironically (534-40). Yet even when being entirely disregarded by Dionysus and Heracles he is making himself known to the spectators, loud and clear.

Why all this focus on Xanthias, even when he is no longer the centre of comic attention? What is there to notice, apart from the fact that he can be extremely amusing? A plausible answer, only briefly noted by Bruce Heiden, is that the focus is not merely on Xanthias as a representative of a certain kind of lowbrow, Old comic humour bearing the load of joke-making (he can be extremely witty too, after all), but also, and more acutely, on his bodily suffering.⁶³⁵ That might be a better explanation for Xanthias' specific choice of jokes at the start of the play, since jokes involving baggage-carrying routines need not be the only ones so repugnant to Dionysus; they are not actually mentioned in the programmatic *parabaseis* of *Clouds* or *Peace* as a 'no-go' (while jokes about causing slaves to suffer *are* said to be so in that of *Peace*: see below). They may have been chosen, rather, to emphasise the suffering of a man being 'squished' (πιέζομαι, 3), 'squashed' (θλίβομαι, 5), 'bearing a load' (ἄχθος ἐπ' ἐμμαντῷ φέρων, 9), and questioning why he needs to carry the stuff in the first place (τί δῆτ' ἔδει με ταῦτα τὰ σκεύη φέρειν, 12). The load is being shouldered 'quite unbearably' (βαρέως πάνυ, 26, trans. Henderson), the adverb always being used in Aristophanes to denote misfortune.⁶³⁶ At least there is the solace that he can joke about his 'damned neck' (ὦ τρισκακοδαίμων ἄρ' ὁ τράχηλος οὐτοσί, 19) as it is being 'squashed' (ὅτι θλίβεται μέν, 20) – but wait (τὸ δὲ γέλοιον οὐκ ἐρεῖ, 20)! The effect, then, is that Xanthias is constantly being reduced to his suffering body all in the space of a few minutes of stage action. There is a sense of urgency to these jokes involving a man in pain, jokes which, as Telò has argued, themselves trigger the desire to feel a masochistic 'pleasure in pain' in the spectator-figure Dionysus.⁶³⁷ If

⁶³³ These are not the only rapport-generating asides delivered by Xanthias, since he also plausibly speaks asides by making inflammatory, and characteristically humorous, remarks that otherwise mysteriously bypass the master at lines 33-4, 41, 308, and possibly at 51 and 311: see Dover 1993: 44-5.

⁶³⁴ Taplin 1972.

⁶³⁵ Heiden 1991: 107.

⁶³⁶ Cf. *Nu.* 716; *Vesp.* 114, 158; *Thes.* 385, 474; *Ra.* 803; *Eccl.* 175.

⁶³⁷ Telò 2020b: 'When Dionysus disingenuously warns Xanthias not to repeat yet again the 'I am hard-pressed' ('πιέζομαι') gag – which the slave's burdened condition is precisely meant to evoke – he treats the hoary scatological joke almost as a trauma, a recursive nightmare, to which he is deeply attached. Casting this specific

we accept this, then Xanthias and Dionysus are already suffering together, albeit in different ways for now (the former suffering from the physical burden of the load he is carrying; the latter from the experience of laughter). It is their shared experience of pain that will be drawn out in the first half of *Frogs*, culminating in the torture scene.

Let us return to the prologue, however, before we get there. Ignoring the plight of his slave, Dionysus condemns Xanthias' 'insolence and great luxuriance' (ὕβρις καὶ πολλή τρυφή, 21) for complaining, and claims that he has done his slave a favour to spare him from 'toiling and carrying a load' (ἵνα μὴ τάλαιπωροῖτο μηδ' ἄχθος φέροι, 24) by walking in front of the donkey carrying the slave carrying the baggage. This smacks of the 'Old Oligarch's' complaint about the τρυφή afforded to slaves at Athens (*Ath. Pol.* 1.11), except here Aristophanes may be showing how ridiculous that idea is in the face of the very real toiling of slaves and of the actual luxuriance of masters.⁶³⁸ Confronted with Dionysus' denial that, in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary, he is carrying anything since he is being carried, Xanthias curses his luck and makes the play's first reference to the events after Arginousae (33-4):

οἶμοι κακοδαίμων· τί γὰρ ἐγὼ οὐκ ἐναυμάχουν;
ἦ τᾶν σε κωκύειν ἂν ἐκέλευον μακρά.

If only Xanthias had served, he might be free; he was that close to shedding his servile status just like that. Indeed, it was only a matter of bad luck that on the day of the naval battle Xanthias 'happened to have an eye problem' (ἔτυχον ὀφθαλμίων, 192; cf. οἶμοι κακοδαίμων, τῷ ξυνέτυχον ἐξιόν; 196) that prevented him from serving. In the *parabasis*, the chorus specifically applaud that specific citizenship grant (695-6), active praise (ἐπαινῶ) for past political action by the *dēmos* that is unique in Aristophanes' plays – this poet being one inclined to criticize and admonish individuals, such that, for example, in *Peace* Nicias does not even get a mention for the peace he has just arranged.⁶³⁹ While the *dēmos* may have had a more self-interested reason for biting the bullet and granting citizenship to certain slaves after Arginousae, namely to save their own skins (and not for the first or only time),⁶⁴⁰ Aristophanes' insistent references to that decision in this play – even as other ancient sources may have

joke and the next one, 'I am crushed' ('θλίβομαι'), as sources of pain – ostensibly abhorred, intimately longed for – Dionysus seems to construe laughter as a kind of pleasure in pain.' (54).

⁶³⁸ On the negative connotations of τρυφή, a term associated with aristocratic luxuriance in democratic Athens, see Kurke 1992: 102-6.

⁶³⁹ Noted by Henderson 1990: 307-8 with n.133.

⁶⁴⁰ See Vlassopoulos 2016 for other rewards of manumission, including at the battle of Marathon for example.

preferred to keep it quiet – may have served to provide further retrospective justification for it. In fact, it has already been argued that what we see during the scene where Dionysus learns to row in ‘competition’ with the frog chorus (197-268) is precisely the legitimization of the enfranchisement decree, which linked participation in a trireme to participation in democracy.⁶⁴¹ There should be no qualms, so the chorus argue in the *epirrhēma*, that the slaves who rowed for democracy earned their right to participate in democracy as fully-fledged citizens. Tellingly, the possibility of full political inclusion for ‘all people’ (πάντας ἀνθρώπους) who rowed at Arginousae means accepting the former slaves as ‘kinsmen’ (συγγενεῖς) as well (701-2):

πάντας ἀνθρώπους ἐκόντες συγγενεῖς κτησώμεθα
κάπιτίμους καὶ πολίτας, ὅστις ἂν ξυνναυμαχῇ.

Civic ideology, which aimed to naturalize exclusion with the idea of a birthright, is thus turned against itself. Even so, it is Xanthias’ *not* serving that is stressed, a fact that is re-emphasised by the unusually narrow-minded Charon shortly after, when he refuses to let the slave onto his boat-cum-trireme for that reason (190-2).⁶⁴² It is precisely because of this, let me suggest, that *Frogs* is able to gesture towards a place where *even* slaves not included in that grant, Greek slaves like Xanthias at least,⁶⁴³ might have a claim to inclusion as well.

It is partly the fact that naval service is merely one example of a load that slaves could, and did, bear for their Athenian masters. If Athenians were willing to let *those* slaves become citizens for putting their bodies on the line, then why should they not let other slaves become citizens for doing the same in other contexts? On this reading, part of the possible ‘shame’ (αἰσχρόν, 693) that might ensue from enfranchising slaves stems not necessarily from the fact that apparently worthy (potential) citizens still remain disenfranchised,⁶⁴⁴ but rather from the

⁶⁴¹ Clay 2002; Edmunds 2004: 126-35. Note also Dover 1993, who writes of that scene that ‘the implications of a contrast between a foolish master who cannot row and a bold slave who could have won his freedom by rowing cannot have escaped Aristophanes and his audience’ (50). For extensive details about slave participation in the navy, see Hunt 1998: 83-101.

⁶⁴² Edmunds 2004 notes that ‘Charon in other myths takes passengers indiscriminately from all ranks’ (128).

⁶⁴³ The Greekness of Xanthias is suggested not only by his command of the Greek language but also by his name, unattested among real slave names but attested among real citizen names: see Vlassopoulos 2010: 123, 139. Slaves in comedy do not need to be Greek, of course: in this play, for example, there is a reference to Scythian archers with foreign sounding names (ὁ Διτύλας καὶ Σκεβλύας καὶ Παρδόκας, 608), and to ‘redheads’ (πυρρίαις, 730), that being a typical characteristic of Thracians and a regular name for slave characters in New comedy (Sommerstein 1996a: *ad* 730). Arguing that Xanthias is exceptional by his capacity to control his own name and thus act like a citizen, see Olson 1992: 309-12.

⁶⁴⁴ Qua Dover 1993: *ad* 693.

fact that those who only ‘served in *one* naval battle’ (ναυμαχήσαντας *μίαν*, 693) became ‘masters instead of slaves’ (κάντι δούλων δεσπότας, 694) – my emphasis on *μίαν* being justified since the verb ναυμαχέω is used elsewhere on its own to refer to Arginousae (33, 191). Other slaves had rowed in other naval battles too. They had also toiled for Athens in all sorts of other ways, above all in the mines at Laurium: might the ensuing reference to silver coinage (718-26) possibly recall the work of the slave-miners there? Many of those slaves, after all, would have been non-Greeks, alluded to by the ‘foreigners and redheads’ (καὶ ξένοις καὶ πυρραίαις, 730) insulted in the *antepirrhēma*; while the current debasement of the Athenian currency partly stemmed from the mass desertion of slaves from the mines after the Spartan occupation of Decelea.⁶⁴⁵ In any case, any negativity stemming from the particular enfranchisement decree after Arginousae is immediately disavowed (κοῦδὲ ... ἀλλ’ ἐπαινῶ, 695-6): this is praise, not shame or even blame.⁶⁴⁶

Yet Aristophanes’ bid to include the slaves goes deeper than the chorus’ unique praise of the enfranchisement decree. Any claim in any Aristophanic *parabasis*, after all, might be subject to ironic deflation, although it is the *antepirrhēma* and not the *epirrhēma* that has been particularly subject to such readings in the scholarship (see below). More significantly, *Frogs* goes so far as to demonstrate the non-naturalness of a citizen identity, an identity which is perhaps most determinately, if not solely, grounded on the inviolable body of the free person, particularly as set against the violable body of the slave (cf. e.g. Dem. 22.55, 24.167), constituting the so-called ‘democratic body’ in Halperin’s words.⁶⁴⁷ For when it comes down to it, the human condition of embodiment, revealed above all through common suffering, is a great leveller. We all end up in Hades, after all, a location with particular pertinence given that the death toll at Arginousae was higher than that after any battle during the whole Peloponnesian war, with the exceptions of Delium and the Sicilian expedition.⁶⁴⁸ Moreover, *this* Hades, at least in the first half of *Frogs*, seems to put particular emphasis on the lack of status distinctions among the dead, since the chorus of initiates include women as well as men (157, 445 with Σ *ad Eq.* 589) and profess their righteousness towards all (457-9), granted that initiation is an activity that divides those in from out.⁶⁴⁹ By serving in the naval battle, described

⁶⁴⁵ On the context, see Griffith 2013: 46-7.

⁶⁴⁶ Cf. Dover 1993: *ad* 730, seeing no contradiction between the initial commendation of the granting of citizenship to slaves, and the subsequent condemnation of *political leaders* equated to slaves.

⁶⁴⁷ Halperin 1990: esp. 96-9. Cf. Hunter 1992.

⁶⁴⁸ See Sommerstein 1996a: 2 with n.12 for details, though no source explicitly gives casualty numbers.

⁶⁴⁹ The second half of the play envisions a stratified Underworld, comprised of a mass of Euripides fans versus an elite of Aeschylus lovers (772-83), a form of division that is exactly in keeping with the ‘police’ ordering of that part of the play: see below.

by Charon in an oddly corporeal image literally meaning the battle ‘about the flesh’ (τὴν περὶ τῶν κρεῶν, 191),⁶⁵⁰ the slaves were able to prove themselves equal to citizens simply by being able-bodied enough to row (and suffer in rowing); and if the fat, incompetent citizen-hoplite Dionysus ‘son of Winejar’ (υἱὸς Σταμνίου, 22) can do it (and suffer doing it) then so can anyone (197-268, esp. 203-5). And so what actually distinguishes the bodies that compose the citizen body from the bodies of non-citizens? *Frogs* confirms that the answer is nothing.

As we have seen, *Frogs* begins by emphasising Xanthias’ body and the painful load pressing upon his neck (τράχηλος, 19) and his shoulders (ὤμων, 87). It is a load that is burdensome enough for Xanthias to throw it down (160) and for even an unnamed corpse to refuse to carry it for anything less than two drachmas (172-8)! As the play goes on, however, it is also and equally Dionysus’ body which is subject to pain, though the pain affects different regions of his body, each body being vulnerable in its own way.⁶⁵¹ This is first of all made clear in the rowing scene. As the pot-bellied (γάστρον, 200; cf. 663-4, 1095) god begins to row, he moans that his arse is hurting (ἐγὼ δέ γ’ ἀλγεῖν ἄρχομαι / τὸν ὄρπον, 220-1) and, as Xanthias had complained about being neglected before by Dionysus and Heracles (87, 107, 115), that this is of no concern to the frogs who are providing the timing of the stroke (ὕμῃν δ’ ἴσως οὐδὲν μέλει, 224). While Xanthias is strolling around the lake to meet Dionysus easily on the other side, a trip that involves the ‘rest stops’ (ἀναπαύλαις, 195) that Dionysus had craved for his own comfort (113) – that really is the kind of τρυφή Dionysus had wrongly imputed to his slave earlier (21)! – Dionysus is struggling to row across it. He continues to moan as the frogs gleefully croak away, this time irritated by blisters and a sweaty arsehole (236-8):

Δι. ἐγὼ δὲ φλυκταίνας γ’ ἔχω,
 χὼ πρωκτὸς ἰδίει πάλαι,
 κᾶτ’ αὐτίκ’ ἐκκύψας ἐρεῖ—
 Χο. βρεκεκεκεξ κοᾶξ κοᾶξ.

While Xanthias had grumbled that he (or rather his neck) could not say (ἐρεῖ, 20) anything funny while being physically oppressed (though at least he got the joke out by *praeteritio*), Dionysus here cannot say (ἐρεῖ, 238) anything at all, since he (or rather his arsehole) is

⁶⁵⁰ This reading seems preferable to the alternative reading περὶ τῶν νεκρῶν, which would (too) contentiously refer to the generals’ failure to reclaim the bodies (Dover 1993: *ad* 190). In either case, however, corporeality is at stake.

⁶⁵¹ Bergoffen 2001: 132-3; Murphy 2011: 578.

immediately cut off by the frogs' croaky refrain (βρεκεκεκεξ κοᾶξ κοᾶξ). When Dionysus tells them to shut up (παύσασθε, 241) they respond by croaking all the louder (μᾶλλον μὲν οὖν / φθεγξόμεσθ', 241-2), displaying a sort of Schadenfreude towards Dionysus' struggles that prefigures the feelings mutually displayed by Xanthias and Dionysus later on, as each takes disturbing pleasure in the violence inflicted upon the other (563-8, 606-12, 618-21, discussed below). Dionysus finally pulls through, however, ostensibly winning the first 'contest' of the play, as he is able to beat the frogs at their own game only by out-croaking them – nothing to do with his rowing abilities, that.⁶⁵² In doing so, Dionysus becomes functionally equivalent to those frogs, just as Xanthias had protested that he was functionally equivalent to the stage donkey in the first scenes (159). Both animals, moreover, are present at but not participants in the Mysteries. By the time we get to the *parodos*, then, the doubling of Xanthias and Dionysus is well under way, a doubling that is predicated above all on their mutual reduction to quasi-animal bodies that feel pain.

Attention then shifts to less earth(l)y matters in the *parodos*, as the chorus enter having shed their amphibian identity to become sacred initiates who, existing 'without toil' (ἄνευ πόνου, 402), have transcended corporeality. Yet once Dionysus and Xanthias reach Pluto's palace, the pair's vulnerable bodies are put into increasingly sharp focus, building up to the torture scene. Physical punishment is the order of the day when they are greeted by Aeacus, who threatens Dionysus in extremely visceral terms with retribution for Heracles' heroic exploits in stealing Cerberus (465-78): laceration of guts, grabbing of lungs, and tearing asunder of bleeding balls and entrails. In fear of being completely mutilated, Dionysus shifts himself (ἐγκέχοδα, 479; cf. 308) – a different kind of corporeality being shown there – and in doing so becomes the direct object of derision (ὦ καταγέλαστ', 480).⁶⁵³ Master and slave are becoming increasingly hard to tell apart, a point dramatized by the frequent changes of costume, even as it is denied by Dionysus, who retrospectively maintains that 'Heracl-Xanthias' (Ἡρακλειοξανθίαν, 499) is never really anything more than 'whip-fodder' (μαστιγίας, 500) and that first costume swap was only a joke (522-5). It is said to be only a 'joke' (γέλοιον, 542) as well for the master to get hypothetically punched in the face without being able to retaliate (542-8); and it is presumably meant only as a joke when Dionysus invites Xanthias to take a swing at him for free (585), as a reward for swapping costumes for a third

⁶⁵² Note that the contest simply ends when the boat reaches the shore, as pointed out by Del Corno 1985: 170, so it is not even so much of a victory – something that applies to all the contests staged in *Frogs*.

⁶⁵³ Cf. Sommerstein 2009c, writing that 'Xanthias is possibly going too far when he uses this form of address to his owner who is, moreover, a god' (110). Yet the point of this straight insult instead of a subversive aside is surely that the master and slave are interchangeable here.

time in fear of further physical threats from an outraged innkeeper (572-5) – this time teeth-bashing, execution, and disgorging of the windpipe. Dionysus is asking for it. The joke will be on Dionysus when he is actually ‘to be whipped’ (μαστιγωτέος, 633) in the torture scene.

There, the embodied identities of Xanthias and Dionysus, both having stripped (641) to remove any external signs of identification,⁶⁵⁴ become fused together in pain. The result is that they become entirely indistinguishable, for at the end of it all, Aeacus cannot decide who is who (668). Yet what matters is not just that the ‘test,’ which recalls exactly the Athenian judicial procedure of ‘evidentiary’ torture (*basanos*),⁶⁵⁵ completely and utterly fails. That much has already been noticed: ‘the test that is supposed to shore up the difference between slave and god leads only to an emphasis on their underlying similarity ... The *basanos*’ inability to uncover a hidden, authentic identity suggests that there is no inner ground of being that truly separates Dionysus from Xanthias.’⁶⁵⁶ As such, it is worth adding, the scene undoes the paradigmatic tale reported by Herodotus about the Scythian slaves’ ‘recognition’ of their inherent servitude at the mere sight of the whip (4.1-4), ideological justification for ‘natural’ slavery like none other.⁶⁵⁷ For Xanthias, unlike those Scythians, is animated rather than submissive at the prospect of being beaten: “bring it on!” is the sentiment of his responses (δίκαιος ὁ λόγος, 637; καλῶς λέγεις, 643). Above all, however, what ultimately matters here is that the specific framing of the test draws attention to the embodied experience of the vulnerable human being, who, as we have been constantly seeing in *Frogs*, feels pain.

This is because there is a shift in emphasis in the scene.⁶⁵⁸ The *basanos* is initially proposed as a legal procedure to settle a dispute about Xanthias’ (i.e. Heracles’) innocence (615-7). Aristophanes might well have chosen to show how absurd the use of torture to validate evidence would have been, if it were ever actually followed through; indeed, one can easily imagine an alternative comic scenario where Dionysus and Xanthias say absolutely anything to make the torture stop, an argument that could be deployed to discredit the evidence gained by torture, as advised for instance by Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1376b-77a). Yet it ends up becoming an ontological issue, on the (evidently disputable) grounds that gods do not feel pain (634), about which of Xanthias and Dionysus is a god. That shift is extremely telling. It implies that what is

⁶⁵⁴ On the stripping consisting in the removal of outer garments but not padded body suits, see Sommerstein 1996a: *ad loc.*

⁶⁵⁵ For different views on the *basanos*, see Gagarin 1996 (invoked as a rhetorical strategy); Mirhady 1996 (used for privileged evidence); Hunter 1994: 174-6 and Thür 1996 (ideologically distinguishing the slave from the citizen).

⁶⁵⁶ Lape 2013: 84-5.

⁶⁵⁷ Finley 1980: 118-9.

⁶⁵⁸ Noted by Sommerstein 1996a: *ad* 634.

at stake is not whether the testimony of a slave can be trusted, but rather whether the objects of torture are human at all. The joke is that the god, who is a free quasi-citizen too, is just as vulnerable as the human. The latter, described at one point by Aeacus during the torture as a ‘sanctified human’ (ἄνθρωπος ἱερός, 652; cf. 299), just happens to be a slave.

Try as Dionysus and Xanthias may to mask the fact that they have sensation (αἰσθίσεται, 634) and are concerned (προτιμήσαντά, 638, προτιμᾶς, 654; οὐδέν μοι μέλει, 655), and to deny the fact that torture causes them to feel pain (ὠδυνήθης, 650; ἤλγησεν, 660, 664) and wail (κλαύσαντα, 638, κλάεις, 654), neither is anaesthetised to the lash of the whip. Each manifests his precariousness in the sense of ‘a primary vulnerability to others, one which we cannot will away without ceasing to be human,’ and fails to uphold the ‘fantasy of mastery’ that denies human vulnerability.⁶⁵⁹ This is proven, above all, when at various points each utters an ineffable cry (ἄτταταῖ, 649; ἰὸν ἰοῦ, 653; οἴμοι, 657) that is the outward sign of the body in pain.⁶⁶⁰ The more they try to explain away their cries by turning them into jokes – one of which has Xanthias defeat the point by saying that he exclaimed οἴμοι only because he was taking a painful thorn out of his foot (656) – the more brutal the lashings become and the more pain is felt. After several rounds of ‘blow for blow’ (πληγὴν παρὰ πληγὴν, 643), Aeacus becomes frustrated with the lack of progress and, upon Xanthias’ prod that Dionysus is breaking (659-1), goes on to whip Dionysus even more cruelly on the front (662-3). This prompts Dionysus to respond with even more intensity: whereas he started off explaining away his pain by referencing mundane incidents (646-7, 653-5), he ends up reciting a passage of tragic verse (664-7 = Soph. fr. 371), thus also implicitly giving the game away.

Yet none of this proves anything for Aeacus. His indecision must be the consequence of both characters’ conspicuously failing the test to prove who is a god, rather than of both demonstrating their divine anaesthesia. The whole exercise, in any case, has been in vain, as Dionysus protests too late, since he claims the gods of the underworld will immediately recognise their divine relative (670-3) – also an echo of courtroom procedure in cases of disputed identity where nothing more than who is willing to vouch for you is key.⁶⁶¹ The gods could have easily distinguished the god from the human, it may be retrospectively admitted,

⁶⁵⁹ The quotes are from Butler 2004: xiv, 29.

⁶⁶⁰ Scarry 1985. As Scarry shows, drawing on Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* as a work of art dedicated to the expression of pain (5, 10, 17, 53), pain ‘does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned’ (4).

⁶⁶¹ Vlassopoulos 2009.

but could they have distinguished the slave from the free, or at least a slave body from a free body? The answer the play gives is a resounding no.

The effect of this scene, nevertheless, is typically said not only to generate laughter, but also to normalize the use of torture against slaves and to reinforce their legal status as violable, a point often made about the comic abuse of slaves more generally.⁶⁶² In fact, even advocates of ‘corporeal humanism’ hesitate when pronouncing the vulnerable body to be an incentive for ethical obligation, since the perception of vulnerability might in other cases inspire violence or abuse.⁶⁶³ Accordingly, we might say that the pleasure Xanthias and Dionysus take in witnessing the violence inflicted upon each other models not so much a feeling of corporeal solidarity that transcends status distinctions; although that is the response that I am suggesting the scene is designed to elicit.

It is the case that, in the spirit of *Schadenfreude*, Dionysus first eggs on Aeacus to punish Xanthias (606-12), just as Xanthias had earlier egged on the Innkeeper to punish Dionysus (563-8); but then, once the tables have been turned and Dionysus is offered up for torture as a slave-witness, Xanthias relishes the prospect of his former master’s suffering. He bids Aeacus torture him in whatever excruciating manner he desires (618-21) – binding to a ladder, hanging, whipping with bristles, flaying, laying on a rack, forced snorting of vinegar or anything else – and then negotiates away any compensation for maiming (623-5). The sadistic parody of the procedure for offering a slave up for torture, followed by the enactment of a form of torture which seems never actually to have been followed through in Athenian courts and which in any case turned out to be entirely unnecessary here, might be said to reflect the Athenians’ unenlightened sensibilities (not that ‘we’ moderns, with ‘our’ Sarah Kanes and Quentin Tarentinos, are much better). It is the fact that a god is being tortured, not the use of torture itself, that is said to be incongruous and hilariously so. Here, unlike in scenes of tragic suffering where the feelings of the sufferer meld with those of the spectator, the comic suffering is thought to prompt ‘not empathy but alienation, not infectious grief but disengaged, self-conscious laughter.’⁶⁶⁴

Yet it is precisely the fact that (some of) the spectators are laughing at bodily suffering – and thus also re-enacting the masochistic laughter of Dionysus at the start⁶⁶⁵ – that makes the torture scene extraordinarily uncomfortable. For the violence staged in the torture scene of

⁶⁶² DuBois 1991: 33-4; Hunter 1994: 165-9; Osborne 2010a: 99; Hunt 2011: 31.

⁶⁶³ Bergoffen 2001; Murphy 2011.

⁶⁶⁴ Lada-Richards 1999: 117.

⁶⁶⁵ See above n.637.

Frogs is so gratuitous, so over the top, and so extraordinary on the ancient stage that it seems to be calibrated to create a cognitive dissonance between empathy for and alienation from the sufferers. After all, this is the most viscerally and uncompromisingly violent scene staged in Greek comedy, if not in all of Greek drama, excepting the beginning of the Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound* (1-81) and one scene from Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* (825-907).⁶⁶⁶ Given how often comedy breaks down the boundaries between fantasy and reality, one may wonder how violently and realistically this scene would have been staged, and how much pain the actors in padded body suits (even after stripping off their outer costumes) would have felt in performance.⁶⁶⁷ At any rate, even if the staging makes it clear that the actors' bodies are not being harmed, scientific knowledge about mirror neurones shows that completely fictional and unrealistic representations of pain still trigger an empathic response⁶⁶⁸; while the fact of theatre as 'an art of bodies witnessed by bodies' means that the staging of bodies in pain produces its own 'intercorporeal' effect on the audience.⁶⁶⁹

This, in fact, is where the Brechtian 'Verfremdungseffekt' may be particularly punchy.⁶⁷⁰ This is not merely because not everyone is necessarily laughing, including any slaves and ex-slaves in the audience who may have been subjected to violent abuse themselves and whose mirror neurones may have been particularly triggered.⁶⁷¹ It is especially because both Dionysus and Xanthias take so much pleasure in each other's pain, even as pain will be equally inflicted upon themselves and their own bodies – bodies that time and again collapse any inalienable distinction between inviolable 'self' and violable 'other.' Given how easily status distinctions can be reversed with a mere change of costume in this play, and in a context where the prospect of mass enslavement by losing the Peloponnesian War might have been felt to be all too real (Xen. *Hell.* 2.2.3), the joke may ultimately be on those Athenians who, like

⁶⁶⁶ Tragedy tends to place extreme corporeal anguish well off stage, even as it might be the genre which typically shows the 'misadventure of the human body' (Zeitlin 1996: 349-52). Comedy regularly stages the infliction of bodily violence, on the ubiquity of which see Kaimio 1990, but nothing quite as prolonged or extreme as in this scene.

⁶⁶⁷ Slater 2002 goes so far as to see the *actors'* pain as constituting a 'significant part of the audience's enjoyment' (190).

⁶⁶⁸ Freedberg and Gallese 2007.

⁶⁶⁹ The quote is from Shepherd 2006: 73. On 'intercorporeality' in tragedy, see e.g. Weiss forthcoming, with further references.

⁶⁷⁰ Lada-Richards 1999, in fact, cites Brecht's desired effect, "I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh" (117, quoting Brecht 1964: 71), without quite following through the political implications of such alienation: see my 'parabasis.'

⁶⁷¹ On ex-slaves in the audience of *Frogs* see Hall 2006: 200 with n. 58, 2020: 97. For a unique slaves' complaint about the grim reality of being whipped (μαστιγονόμος), see the tablet at Agora inv. IL 1702 with Harris 2004.

Dionysus, felt themselves to be inviolable and invulnerable. The difference is that Dionysus, unlike the Athenian citizen, is a god who can get away with it.

The first half of *Frogs* thus anticipates a kind of ‘politics of the vulnerable body,’ to adopt the phrase used by Debra Bergoffen to call for recognising vulnerability as the grounds for a more humanistic ethics.⁶⁷² The more Xanthias is noticed – and we will remember his implicit call to be noticed at the start (περὶ ἐμοῦ δ’ οὐδεὶς λόγος, 87, 107, 115) – the more he can be seen as a vulnerable human and not merely a violable slave. With that in mind, we may go even further and argue that Xanthias is not the only slave in Aristophanes’ plays who is meant to be perceived as such in moments of corporeal anguish.

Consider the following: his namesake Xanthias in *Wasps* (*Vesp.* 1292-1325), the unnamed slaves in *Lysistrata* (*Lys.* 1216-24), and ‘Manes’ in *Birds* (*Av.* 1313-36), the three examples cited by Dover which are said to attest to the ‘extraction of humour from the mistreatment of slaves.’⁶⁷³ In each case, however, Aristophanes seems to be at pains *not* to allow the comic slapstick to overshadow the plight of the slave.⁶⁷⁴ Xanthias’ envy of tortoises with their protective shells (*Vesp.* 1292-6; cf. 429) and intent to get out of his violent master’s way (*Vesp.* 1325) is an admission of his own vulnerability, even as his violability is asserted by the chorus. Adopting the kind of perverse logic of the Unjust argument followed by Pheidippides in *Clouds*, the chorus of *Wasps* say that it is right to call anyone who takes a beating, including an old man, a ‘slave’ (παῖς, *Vesp.* 1297-8) (also meaning ‘child,’ ironically applied here). Yet that comment, enacted by Philocleon during the symposium as he beats up his slave to the refrain of παῖ παῖ (*Vesp.* 1307), becomes rather awkward in the light of the protagonist’s hyper-aggressive behaviour, which includes beating up people who are not slaves but citizens. As a result, they legitimately threaten legal recourse (*Vesp.* 1332-4, 1388-91), exactly what Xanthias in *Frogs* does by calling the people around to witness that he is being assaulted by Dionysus (ταῦτ’ ἐγὼ μαρτύρομαι, 528), his alleged crime being clothes-stealing (*lōpodusia*). This is a legal right denied to slaves in reality but which plenty of Aristophanic characters – in all other instances citizens – express when they too are being flagrantly assaulted

⁶⁷² Bergoffen 2001. For Bergoffen, however, it is the violation of consent rather than the infliction of pain that is the key expression of vulnerability and constituent of a so-called crime against humanity: ‘In adopting the standards of pain and suffering, we have set the bar too low’ (120). Aristophanes – not a human rights activist! – nevertheless seems to be setting a bar.

⁶⁷³ Dover 1972: 206. Further examples are cited in Dover 1993: 43-4, where one of the prime functions of slaves is said to ‘elicit laughter by being hurt, threatened, or frightened.’

⁶⁷⁴ Gestures towards this position are made in Kaimio *et al.* 1990: 66-8; Ruffell 2013: 248-54. See also Sommerstein 2009e: 140-44, observing that slaves are not solely victims but are sometimes the ones perpetrating the violence against citizens, and that, whereas comic heroes who are violent against fellow citizens are usually triumphant, comic heroes who are violent against slaves are usually the ones to come off badly.

by rowdy protagonists.⁶⁷⁵ As for ‘Manes’ in *Birds*, he might not complain about the beating he is dealt by Peisetairos for being too slow to follow his orders, even as he may be running around as fast as he can,⁶⁷⁶ yet as with Philocleon, the bossy tyrant of Cloud-cuckoo-land is hardly slow to beat up citizens who also threaten legal recourse as well (Av. 1397, 1462-9). In neither case is the assault of slaves merely tolerable, slaves being covered by the law on *hubris* after all (something grudgingly ceded by the ‘Old Oligarch’: *Ath. Pol.* 1.10; cf. Dem. 21.47-50; Aesch. 1.15) – unless you believe assaulting citizens is tolerable too.

The *Lysistrata* example is more disturbing: the Athenian delegate knocks over the doorkeeper and then callously threatens to set the slaves’ hair on fire, in a plainly gratuitous act of abuse designed to make them wail. But even there that action is being performed only reluctantly in order to gratify the audience (οὐκ ἂν ποιήσαιμι· εἰ δὲ πάνυ δεῖ τοῦτο δρᾶν, / ὑμῖν χαρίσασθαι, προσταλαιπωρήσομεν, *Lys.* 1219-20). It is just not on, the Athenian protests. What is more, the action is described as a ‘vulgar routine’ (φορτικὸν τὸ χωρίον, *Lys.* 1218), exactly the kind of thing which is often said to represent *bad* taste on the comic stage, but is almost immediately restaged when the slaves reappear only a few lines later as ‘whip fodder’ (μαστιγία) to be chased away once more (*Lys.* 1239-40). The gag is designedly unfunny, at least according to the usual ‘Aristophanic’ standards of sophisticated humour.

The most direct example of comic bad taste relating directly to slaves, however, comes from the *parabasis* of *Peace*, in which the chorus boast that one feature of Aristophanes’ plays is that he does not ‘do’ scenes involving slaves getting a beating (742-7):

καὶ τοὺς δούλους παρέλυσεν
τοὺς φεύγοντας κᾶζαπατῶντας καὶ τυπτομένους, ἐπίτηδες
{οὓς ἐξῆγον κλάοντας αἰεὶ, καὶ τούτους οὐνεκα τουδί}
ἴν’ ὁ σύνδουλος σκώψας αὐτοῦ τὰς πληγὰς εἴτ’ ἀνέροιτο· [745]
“ὦ κακὸδαιμον, τί τὸ δέρμ’ ἔπαθες; μῶν ὑστριχίς εἰσέβαλέν σοι
εἰς τὰς πλευρὰς πολλῇ στρατιᾷ κάδενδροτόμησε τὸ νῶτον;”

⁶⁷⁵ Sommerstein 1996a: ad 528. For a more charitable view, which regards the ‘criminal’ actions of the comic heroes as legitimate, see Spatharas 2008.

⁶⁷⁶ Dunbar 1995: ad 1317 suggests that the scene is more ‘dramatically effective if [Peisetairos] becomes impatient and annoyed at 1324-5 *despite* the obvious speed with which the slave is running out and in.’ For other slaves who do complain about abuse against them, see *Eq.* 4-5, 64-70; *Nu.* 58; *Pl.* 1144.

That, as the chorus go on to say, is a terrible ‘vulgarity’ (φόρτον, *Pax* 748) and a form of ‘lowbrow buffoonery’ (βωμολοχεύματ’ ἀγεννῆ, *Pax* 748) said to be entirely out of keeping with Aristophanes’ ‘high art’ (τέχνην μεγάλην, *Pax* 749). Of course, Aristophanes is being disingenuous, as usual in his parabolic professions; *Peace* itself is the play involving the most blatant use of violence by a (divine) master against a (divine) slave, in this case Polemos against Kudoimos (*Pax* 255-62). Nevertheless, it is revealing that he would even suggest that mockery (σκώψας, *Pax* 745) combined with the violent abuse of slaves, including the use of the bristle-whip (cf. *Ra.* 619) and the beating of the sides and back (cf. *Vesp.* 1295), represents the opposite of what Aristophanic comedy is said to stand for. When Aristophanes does employ (twists on) those very gags, then, might it be disgust rather than derisive laughter or vicarious pleasure that is being deliberately prompted? In the end, Dionysus at the start of *Frogs* may actually have a point about jokes involving baggage-carrying slaves: perhaps their comic abuse for no other reason than that they are conventionally slaves is an emetic after all (μὴ δῆθ’ ἵκετεύω, πλὴν γ’ ὅταν μέλλω ’ξεμεῖν, 11).

II

Frogs changes tack after the *parabasis*. This is the case at the level of plot, since the *agōn* between Euripides and Aeschylus does not appear to have any immediate connection to Dionysus’ catabasis to save Euripides (it just so happens that Dionysus – like those two tragic poets but, somehow, not Sophocles! – is in Hades at the right time). It is also the case at the level of theme, since the second half is about tragedy and the responses it ought to provoke (esp. 1008-10), whereas the first half is about comedy and the responses it ought to provoke (esp. 1-20); while, more importantly for the present purposes, the agonistic (‘tragic’) part of the play appears to resurrect forms of essentialism that had been killed off in the katabatic (‘comic’) part. That the play ends up taking a conservative turn is a reading that is common in the scholarship. For some scholars, it comes from privileging two loaded moments in the play and taking them at face-value: first, when the chorus in the *antēpirrhema* of the *parabasis* advise the audience to make use of noble leaders and to reject those without a birthright, including those such as the slaves who after Arginousae had ‘arrived latest’ (ὕστατοις ἀφιγμένοισιν, 732) into the citizen body; second, when Aeschylus, the poet who ostensibly embodies traditional and aristocratic values, is resurrected at the end of the play.⁶⁷⁷ According

⁶⁷⁷ See above n.628.

to other scholars, it comes from reading the play in terms of Dionysus' successful initiation and subsequent reintegration into a civic society that is inherently exclusive.⁶⁷⁸ When it comes to Xanthias, the character who is central to understanding the play's political meaning according to my reading, his time in the spotlight is up, as the hierarchical order of things is restored. As Segal writes of his role after the *parabasis*, which is to set up the *agōn* in prologue-style dialogue with another slave (738-813) before apparently disappearing altogether, 'the proper separation is made between τὸ χρηστόν, and τὸ δουλικόν, and each element is to go its own way: the slave element disappears after Dionysus' proper attainment of his true divinity and his appointment as judge.'⁶⁷⁹

Against those conservative readings of *Frogs*, however, there are plenty of convincing alternatives, which regard the advice of the *parabasis* as detached, ironic, or contradictory, and the choice of Aeschylus as ambiguous, arbitrary, or scandalous. Regarding the *parabasis*, it has been shown how the very first words after the *antēpirrhema*, in which the citizens were urged to make use of noble leaders (esp. 727-9), deflate exactly what it means to be considered noble, since Dionysus' description as a 'nobleman' (739, γεννάδας) – a word previously applied only to Xanthias (179, 640) – is immediately defined in terms of knowing how to 'get trashed and smash' (πίνειν ... καὶ βινεῖν, 740).⁶⁸⁰ The choice of Aeschylus, not unreasonably described in Hypothesis I as being 'against expectation' (παρὰ προσδοκίαν, 31) given Dionysus' desire to revive Euripides at the start (66-7), has come under even closer scrutiny. It has been argued that Aeschylus and Euripides are much less different than their assigned comic characters would like us to believe, and that the play does not represent the straightforward triumph of an 'aristocratic' over a 'democratic' poet⁶⁸¹; that neither tragic poet comes across particularly well, and that it is really (if anything) Aristophanes and comedy that come out on top in the end⁶⁸²; and that Dionysus' decision to swap allegiance from Euripides to Aeschylus utterly fails to convince, with the result that Aristophanes is undermining not just the higher value bestowed upon Aeschylus but also the very notion of literary value.⁶⁸³

⁶⁷⁸ See above n.625.

⁶⁷⁹ Segal 1961: 216. As he continues: 'This disappearance is not merely an economy of actors (for presumably the same two men would impersonate Aeschylus and Euripides in the second half of the comedy), but a reflection of the careful structuring of the play about the developing character of Dionysus' (216). I do not think we should simply discount the requirements of staging *a priori*, since it simply would not work to fit Xanthias in. That said, I am going to argue that we cannot get away with ignoring Xanthias, even after he has disappeared: see below.

⁶⁸⁰ Goldhill 1991: 203-4.

⁶⁸¹ Scharffenberger 2007; Telò forthcoming.

⁶⁸² Heiden 1991; Alonge 2014.

⁶⁸³ Rosen 2004; Halliwell 2012.

Following these accounts, the failed *basanos* at the end of the first half of the play is more repeated than reversed at the end of the second half. Indeed, Dionysus, exaggerating Aeacus' indecision in the torture scene and an admittedly poor judge (δυσκρίτως γ' ἔχω, 1433), continually cannot decide between the poets until he is absolutely compelled to do so – and even then, his reasoning is hilariously non-committal (esp. 1413, 1468). *Basanos* may work as a 'touchstone' for coins in the numismatic metaphor of the *parabasis* (719-26), but it blatantly does not work for people (*basanos* as 'torture', 616, 618, 625, 628, 642) or poetry (*basanos* as 'test', 802, 826, 1121, 1123, 1367). The advice in the *parabasis* and the choice of Aeschylus thus need not be taken at face value to indicate Aristophanes' aristocratic-oligarchic political inclinations, but rather as artificial and unconvincing efforts to re-assert essentialist oppositions that are constantly being undercut: not just slave-free, but noble-base and Aeschylus-Euripides too. It is in keeping with what we have already seen in *Frogs* that structural binaries are artificially set up only to be collapsed. That, we might say, is Aristophanic *peripeteia* in action.

Frogs is structured as a kind of *peripeteia* overall. The play's two halves give a particularly strong impression of jarring, hardly unique in Aristophanes' plays, as we saw already with the bipartite structures of *Acharnians* and *Assemblywomen*; hence the old argument that *Frogs* is a play composed of two separate plot ideas that have been artificially wedged together is entirely discreditable.⁶⁸⁴ What is crucial is the jarring of political worlds therein. In the other plays, we saw how Dicaeopolis and Praxagora had achieved 'political life' (*bios*) only to end up forsaking it for 'bare life' (*zoē*). In this play, however, there appears to be a progression from conditions of *zoē*, marked by the focus on bodily pleasures and especially pains afflicting the protagonists in Hades, to conditions of political life, signalled by Aeschylus' procession to Athens out of Hades at the end. Yet *Frogs* is not so different from the others as it may seem, since the apparent progression turns out to be a regression. For the form of *bios* that emerges, a form associated with the triumphant 'Aeschylean' essentialism, turns out to be associated rather with what Rancière terms 'police.' It is antithetical to democratic politics, which 'exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part.'⁶⁸⁵ That, as we have seen, is manifested through the emancipation of Xanthias, someone about whom nobody speaks (περὶ ἐμοῦ δ' οὐδεὶς λόγος, 87, 107, 115), a part without a part and a body that interrupts the natural order of domination by proving to be no less vulnerable than any other body. Hence, the subsequent return of Xanthias to his 'proper'

⁶⁸⁴ Dover 1993: 8 n.9.

⁶⁸⁵ Rancière 1999: 11.

place as a violable slave and then his disappearance never to speak or be spoken about again might be said to prove that *Frogs* ends up shutting down the egalitarian possibilities that it had promised. That, after all, is the direction in which *Acharnians* and *Assemblywomen*, as well as *Lysistrata*, had gone as well.

But just as there was resistance to the ‘police’ order in those plays, so there is resistance in *Frogs*, and perhaps even more directly. If we are meant to find the advice of the *antepirrhēma* of the *parabasis* troubling and Aeschylus’ victory problematic, and if we are meant to view the entire *agōn* as farcical, even pointless, then it will be much easier to see how *Frogs* ends up resisting the hierarchical structures it appears to set up. What is more, if we stop end-gaming the play or reading it backwards, as if the choice of Aeschylus is what determines the entire play’s political meaning (Aristophanes being one to resist neat closural gestures, as we saw), and if we pay more attention to the dynamics of the first half than in political readings of the play are often underestimated, then a very different conception of the politics of *Frogs* will emerge. As we will now turn to see, the egalitarian possibilities of the first half do continue to interrupt the ‘police’ order, occasionally but perceptibly resurfacing in repackaged or disguised form in the second half. This includes, above all, the re-emergence of Xanthias qua fully-fledged human being, even after he becomes a slave again and then disappears – and then possibly reappears silently in the procession at the end.

Immediately after the *parabasis*, Xanthias returns to the stage in conversation with a fellow slave who may be Aeacus,⁶⁸⁶ having suddenly shed his most recent identity as the ‘Heracleian’ master of Dionysus to play the role of an extraordinarily ‘slavish’ (δουλικόν, 743) slave. In this scene, the cat seems to have been put back into the bag, just as we saw at the end of *Lysistrata* when the women willingly consented to go back to their homes, since the two slaves recollect all the ways in which they enjoy getting one over their masters even after suffering physical punishment (741-53) and take for granted their own violability (756, 812-3).

And yet just as the ending of *Lysistrata* seemed too good to be true for the men, the conservative gesture of ‘order restored’ is so sudden, artificial, and excessive that it arguably undercuts itself. This is largely because Xanthias’ conversation with a fellow slave is entirely stereotypical of slaves in Aristophanes’ prologues, as in those of *Knights*, *Wasps*, *Peace*, and *Wealth*, in which they comically express grievances behind their master’s backs before delivering an exposition of what is to come. Here is just another role for Xanthias to play. The

⁶⁸⁶ On the identity of the slave in this scene, named Aeacus in the manuscript, see Dover 1993: 50-5.

point about role-playing is reinforced if the slave in dialogue with Xanthias is indeed Aeacus: that would be further evidence that the slave is a conventional role that could be played by anyone, as it also was by Heracles in the parallel ‘door knocking’ scene at the start – the role of slave having been played interchangeably by Dionysus and Xanthias as well, of course. That role, it is worth adding, still allows slaves to retain a considerable degree of informal agency. As potential meddlers (πολλὰ πράττων, 749), eavesdroppers (παρακούων δεσποτῶν / ἅττ’ ἄν λαλῶσι, 750-1), and above all spreaders of gossip (τοῖς θύραζε ταῦτα καταλαλῶν, 752), even in this most ‘servile’ picture of slaves, they are not merely passive, obedient instruments to be used.⁶⁸⁷

More specifically, the dialogue at one particular moment directly hints back at the indistinction of slave and master that had been paraded over the course of the first half of the play. This comes when the fellow slave announces that he ‘feels like an *epoptēs*’ (ἐποπτεύειν δοκῶ, 745) when cursing behind his master’s back; the reference is to the person who has passed through all the stages of initiation at the Mysteries, which could include Greek-speaking slaves.⁶⁸⁸ Whereas Xanthias had in the early stages of the play complained about being equivalent to the donkey excluded from the Mysteries (159), here the slave boasts about the feeling of ‘nirvana’ (trans. Henderson) experienced by the complete initiate. As with the double-edged definition of nobility that kicked off the conversation (738-40), here the very exposition of servility (the pleasure in cursing behind a master’s back) may contain the seeds of its disavowal (given the possibility of equal participation alongside masters in ritual). And so even as a more narrow, hierarchical vision of Athenian society is to be erected over the course of the second half of *Frogs*, Aristophanes slips in a reference to a more expansive, egalitarian vision. If the latter vision is predicated on the inclusivity of Eleusis, the former is predicated on the exclusivity of the Apaturia, which is alluded to in reference to the weighing of poetic art like the weighing of sacrificial meat (μειαγωγήσουσι τὴν τραγωδίαν, 798).⁶⁸⁹ But, as proven by Xanthias’ comic scepticism about that evaluative act here as well as by Dionysus’ hesitancy and the scales’ inefficacy later on (1365-1410), the act of weighing is a complete absurdity. So too is a world of elitism and exclusivity. The inclusive atmosphere of the first half of *Frogs* is never entirely – and certainly never convincingly – squashed. It will keep on interrupting.

⁶⁸⁷ On slave agency at Athens in these regards, see Hunter 1994: 70-95.

⁶⁸⁸ Dover 1993: *ad loc.*

⁶⁸⁹ Dover 1993: *ad loc.*

Xanthias may subsequently depart from the stage, but, picking up on that glimpse of Eleusinian openness, there is enough for the spectators to catch several glimpses of him, or rather of the model of political inclusion for which he stands, during the *agōn*. The most glaring hierarchy-defying interruption comes in Euripides' 'daring' (τολμῶντα) – once again that quality associated with democratic empowerment – to stage women and slaves in his plays. That, contends Euripides, is a 'democratic' (δημοκρατικόν) act (948-53):

Ευ. ἔπειτ' ἀπὸ τῶν πρώτων ἐπῶν οὐδένα παρήκ' ἂν ἄργον
ἀλλ' ἔλεγεν ἡ γυνή τέ μοι χῶ δοῦλος οὐδέν ἦττον
τοῦ δεσπότου χῆ παρθένος χῆ γραῦς ἄν.

Αι. εἶτα δῆτα [950]

οὐκ ἀποθανεῖν σε ταῦτ' ἐχρῆν τολμῶντα;

Ευ. μὰ τὸν Ἀπόλλω·

δημοκρατικὸν γὰρ αὐτ' ἔδρων.

Δι. τοῦτο μὲν ἔασον, ὦ τᾶν.

οὐ σοὶ γάρ ἐστι περίπατος κάλλιστα περὶ γε τούτου.

The adjective δημοκρατικός, used only once in the entire corpus of Aristophanes and never attested in Greek earlier than this passage, is here defined as the act of giving everyone, including women and slaves, a place in his plays. Aeschylus does not deny this, but merely lambasts the audacity of the gesture and, with characteristic and hypocritical intransigence, asserts that it is worthy of the death penalty. Dionysus seems to suggest that it is ironic for Euripides to claim to act democratically for unspecified personal reasons, but also does nothing to reject Euripides' definition and prefers to move on swiftly to a new subject.⁶⁹⁰ Aristophanes' Euripides envisions an inclusivist and egalitarian conception of democracy, hyper-democracy, and does so without direct challenge. That conception, with its 'utopian tendency' since it is exactly what Athens was not,⁶⁹¹ is what was being presented and enacted during the first half of *Frogs* before Aeschylus came along to shut it down.

⁶⁹⁰ See Sommerstein 1996a: *ad loc* for some suggestions about Euripides' aristocratic connections. For what it is worth, it may be that Dionysus, not the most perceptive of commentators, is completely misreading Euripides' personal connections, since in *Frogs* (as elsewhere in comedy) the poet is presented as quite the opposite of an aristocrat: allegedly the son of a greengrocer mother (840) and a collaborator with the slave Cephisophon (944, 1408, 1452-3).

⁶⁹¹ See Hall 1997: 125-6. See also Wohl 2015: 63-88, discussing the tension between egalitarian content and non-egalitarian form in Euripides' *Electra*.

Or at least he tried to. For Aeschylus himself might be less opposed to these Euripidean (and Aristophanic) hyper-democratic tendencies than he makes out, and not just because it is a fact of his own art that he too stages wives, slaves, masters, maidens, and old women in his own plays. It is especially so because he makes several explicit references to Athenian naval affairs (1065-6, 1071-7, 1463-5), including having the last word in the *agōn*, where he gives the (rather riddling) ‘advice’ to save the *polis* that involves concentrating Athens’ resources on the fleet (1463-5).⁶⁹² These references take on new meaning in the context of the slaves’ participation at Arginousae, which had precipitated the ‘democratic’ extension of the citizen body. After all, as we know from the play’s distinctively insistent recollection of the enfranchisement decree, it is slaves as much as anyone who put their bodies on the line to support the navy – and slaves who might thus become citizens.

Even as Aeschylus appears to stand for the traditionalist position that hopes to restore Athens’ naval power apparently corrupted by Euripides (1069-72, 1076-7), he is thus also advocating a more radical position. Whereas Euripides’ concluding advice according to one version of the text restated the aristocratic advice of the *parabasis* to ‘make use of’ (χρᾶσθαι) the noble leaders (1446-50; cf. 718-37), a losing argument as it turns out,⁶⁹³ Aeschylus’ concluding advice ends up carrying the democratic edge by focusing on the Athenian navy.⁶⁹⁴ The link between democracy and thalassocracy, made elsewhere in Aristophanes (e.g. *Ach.* 161-2; *Eq.* 567-8; *Vesp.* 1091-1100), was given a theoretical basis by the ‘Old Oligarch’ (*Ath. Pol.* esp. 1.11-2). And so, the more opponents of democracy drew attention to the association of rowing with democracy, including drawing attention to the contributions of slaves in the navy – thus the ‘Old Oligarch’s’ striking expression that naval power makes the Athenians ‘enslaved to slaves’ (τοῖς ἀνδραπόδοις δουλεύειν) – the more proponents might also fix on that feature as key. Might Aeschylus’ focus on the navy in the end, if anything, be the clincher in the contest? There is a hint of confirmation that it might be when Pluto invites Dionysus and Aeschylus to a banquet in his halls where he will entertain them before they ‘sail away’ (ἀποπλεῖν, 1480). The nautical image is telling, since there are plenty of other verbs of

⁶⁹² On the putative practicality of this advice in 405, see Sommerstein 1974. On the textual problems at the end of *Frogs* (1407-67), controversial since antiquity, see MacDowell 1975.

⁶⁹³ Cf. Goldhill 1991: 218-9.

⁶⁹⁴ In another version of his concluding message, Euripides also advises Athens to ‘fight naval battles’ (ναυμαχοῦν) and bombard the enemy with vinegar (1440-1), which would in the end mark him as rather similar to Aeschylus and his newfound democratic affiliations.

departure, after all, and surely more pertinent verbs to describe ascent from the underworld.⁶⁹⁵ As at Arginousae, sailing and saving the city once again go hand-in-hand.

Finally, what about Xanthias himself? For one thing, the limits of comic staging could not incorporate him as an actor alongside Euripides, Aeschylus, Dionysus, and Pluto during the *agōn*.⁶⁹⁶ Yet even if he may never reappear as a principal character, there is reason enough for him to return to the stage as a silent extra, if it is *he* who is asked to carry the death-harbours objects that Pluto is gifting to allegedly dangerous Athenian politicians like Cleophon (1504-13).⁶⁹⁷ This would make sense in terms of the comic convention of having slaves bear such loads to accompany their triumphant masters, a slave called Xanthias performing this role for Dicaeopolis celebrating a rural Dionysia (*Ach.* 241-79) for instance. More importantly, having Xanthias return would make sense in terms of the dynamics of *Frogs*, which opened precisely with him as a baggage-carrying slave who represented the distilled essence of comedy and whose role was essential in progressing the plot. As Xanthias himself had warned earlier, here is another time when he may be needed (ἐμοῦ δεηθείης ἄν, εἰ θεὸς θέλοι, 533), the slave without whom Dionysus would never have made it so far in the first place.⁶⁹⁸ Above all, Pluto makes several explicit references to conventional punishments of slaves, now reserved for certain politicians: tattooing, binding with fetters and sending them to a harsher place of work (1510-4).⁶⁹⁹ And so with a baggage-carrier present and the category of the slave back on the agenda, we end close to where we began, quite possibly with Xanthias back onstage as well. Here, however, the slave is nothing more than a rhetorical construct used to threaten those politicians who will not hurry down to Hades. Xanthias (or whoever is carrying the items) may be playing a slave role, but, tellingly, there is no ‘slave’ addressed as such by Pluto. The slave seems to have shed the tag. If it is specifically and distinctively

⁶⁹⁵ For other offhand naval and nautical references throughout *Frogs*, besides the prolonged rowing scene and the explicit recollections of Arginousae, see 48-52, 303, 361-5, 430, 535-7, 824-5, 933, 999-1003, 1207, 1220-1, 1382.

⁶⁹⁶ It is sometimes suggested that the actor playing Xanthias, possibly Aristophanes himself, goes on to play Aeschylus (Segal 1961: 216; Heiden 1994). That does not of course preclude the character Xanthias from returning even if played by another masked actor, namely the one who had played Euripides, or by an extra. The role is silent, after all.

⁶⁹⁷ Of course, his return could have been made into a bigger deal in performance than the text alone allows us to know. Arguing for the presence of Xanthias, along with Persephone (another marginalised figure), see Sommerstein 1996a: *ad* 1500-27; Griffith 2013: 209-12.

⁶⁹⁸ Cf. Griffith 2013: ‘Xanthias provides indispensable service and support, both practical and moral, without which his cowardly and bumbling master would never have succeeded in his quest’ (210). Xanthias’ comment on the importance of slaves is generally true of comedy, in fact, where slaves’ contributions are manifold: as agents of humour performing baggage-carrying and other comic routines, as stagehands present in every production, and as enablers of the success of the comic hero’s project, especially throughout the first half of *Frogs* and the entirety of *Wealth*.

⁶⁹⁹ Sommerstein 1996a: *ad loc.* On the tag of slave as a rhetorical insult that could be used against politicians in lawcourt speeches, see Vlassopoulos 2009: 355-6.

Xanthias, then the focus is once again on him, the only human to make it to the underworld and back.⁷⁰⁰

If it is not, however, the effect may be even more pronounced. For we then might ask who *is* carrying the items. It might be an anonymous slave, or it might rather awkwardly (and uncharacteristically in comic endings) mean that Dionysus or Aeschylus would have to carry the objects along with their torches – and so now *they* would be playing the role of the slave, the baggage-carrier being a ‘comic signifier of slave status,’⁷⁰¹ thereby resurrecting the trope of role reversal once again. Considerations of staging aside, the most pointed effect of an absent Xanthias takes us right back to the start of the play and his repeated outburst ‘but not a word about me.’ For what remains in this case is an absent presence – a sort of Aeschylean silence, if you will. If Xanthias is not included in ‘our city’ (πόλιν τὴν ἡμετέραν, 1501), the one that Pluto bids Aeschylus to save, it is downright scandalous. In the end, then, it is up to the audience to notice him without his needing to protest.

⁷⁰⁰ Noted by Griffith 2013: 212. Griffith also intriguingly entertains the possibility that Xanthias might be the play’s most successful initiate: ‘He began the play so sympathetically, and seemed to embody so vividly and concretely the essence of the suffering ritual victim: slave and donkey, carrying the burdens of the world, abused, tortured, patiently enduring all, assisting his master and carrying out all his duties, if not entirely willingly or uncomplainingly, at least conscientiously and successfully’ (198). Yet for Griffith this is not the whole story since Xanthias ‘remains a victim, a slave, and seems finally to lapse into the status of forgotten man’ (198). That is a conclusion I have been trying to resist.

⁷⁰¹ Compton-Engle 2015: 105.

EXODOS

Reperforming *Frogs* and Aristophanes’ ‘Commitment’

Of all extant comedies, *Frogs* parades itself as the most paraenetic and is the play that most insists on the didactic capabilities of the poet. It is the quality of the advice given by Aeschylus over Euripides that supposedly determines the winner of the *agōn*, while the advice given in the *parabasis* to re-enfranchise the oligarchs and replace the ‘bad’ leaders with ‘good’ ones is rare in Aristophanes’ plays for being genuinely (as opposed to wishfully or fantastically) practicable. That advice, it has been argued, may have been directly taken up not long afterwards with the decree of Patrocleides (Andoc. 1.73-80), which did actually restore citizenship rights to many (though not all) of the oligarchs who had been disenfranchised after the democratic counter-revolution of 410; while Cleophon, the democratic politician whose death is anticipated in the *parabasis* as well as at the very end of the play (*Ra.* 684, 1504), was actually executed by the Thirty.⁷⁰² The case for a causal link between the comic and the political stage draws upon two testimonia, which have always been somewhat of a thorn in the side for those scholars who see comedy as having no influence on reality at all, but who cannot simply ignore them.⁷⁰³ They tell us that *Frogs* was reperformed precisely because of its *parabasis* (Ar. test. 1.35-9; Hyp. I.39-40):

‘[Aristophanes] was especially praised (ἐπηνέθη) and much admired (ἡγαπήθη) by the citizens, because he endeavoured to show through his plays (διὰ τῶν αὐτοῦ δραμάτων) the Athenian political system (τὴν τῶν Ἀθηναίων πολιτείαν), that it was free and not enslaved by any tyrant; and that it was a democracy (ἀλλ’ ὅτι δημοκρατία ἐστὶ) and, since the people were free, that they ruled over themselves. Therefore because of this (τούτου οὖν χάριν), he was praised (ἐπηνέθη) and garlanded (ἐστεφανώθη) with a shoot of the sacred olive, which was regarded as an honour equal to a gold crown, having spoken those words in *Frogs* about the disenfranchised (εἰπὼν ἐκεῖνα τὰ ἐν τοῖς Βατράχοις περὶ τῶν ἀτίμων): ‘It is right for the sacred chorus to offer good advice to the city [= *Ra.* 686-7]’

⁷⁰² Salviat 1989; Sommerstein 1993; Rosenbloom 2012: 431-3; Canfora 2017: 257-342.

⁷⁰³ See e.g. Heath 1987: 19-20, with MacDowell 1988: 217.

‘The play was so admired because of its *parabasis* (διὰ τὴν ἐν αὐτῷ παράβασιν) that it was produced again, as Dicaearchus says.’

But could the *parabasis* really be a driving force behind major political events and the explanation for the entire play’s reperformance? There is, in fact, a different reading of the testimonia, originally proposed in 1882 by Henri Weil and recently revived and developed by Rosen.⁷⁰⁴ According to this reading, while we have no reason to doubt the fact of reperformance (the exact date of which can only be conjectured), we do have reason to doubt whether the *dēmos* really did grant such a thing on the basis of a mere nineteen lines from the *parabasis*, and especially of lines advocating the re-enfranchisement of the oligarchs.⁷⁰⁵ Weil’s explanation for the reason behind the reperformance therefore comes from proposing a bold, though long since discredited, emendation of Hypothesis I. This suggests emending εἰς Ἀίδου κατάβασιν for ἐν αὐτῷ παράβασιν not only on textual grounds – for the words ἐν αὐτῷ are both clumsy and redundant (‘inutiles’) – but more importantly on aesthetic and dramaturgical ones, including the fact that Dionysus’ catabasis is damn funny.⁷⁰⁶ Be that as it may, as we know well from reading Aristophanes today, originally ‘good’ jokes may travel no better from their immediate context than originally ‘good’ political advice; while, as we saw in episode one, the katabatic portion of *Frogs* is not even continuously and uniformly funny.

Whatever reasons there may be for valuing *Frogs* as an exceptional work of art – and, if anything, the *agōn* proves the difficulty if not impossibility of straightforwardly evaluating aesthetic criteria⁷⁰⁷ – it is worth revisiting the political grounds that may have been behind the play’s unique reperformance. What if the *dēmos* really did appreciate *Frogs* for its politics, defined not in terms of practical or specific advice offered, but rather in the way it effects a Rancièrian ‘redistribution of the sensible’ to imagine new political worlds? As a matter of fact, the actual line cited from the *parabasis* of *Frogs* in the *Life* testimonium is not merely the prelude to the bit about the disenfranchised oligarchs (περὶ τῶν ἀτίμων), as its author says. The very ‘first’ (πρῶτον, 686) thing the chorus in the *parabasis* say, rather, is that the ‘citizens should be made equal’ (ἐξισῶσαι τοὺς πολίτας, 687), before going on to make the case for the

⁷⁰⁴ Weil 1882; Rosen 2015a.

⁷⁰⁵ For other sceptical accounts of the reperformance on the basis of the advice in the *parabasis*, as well as on the relevance of Cleophon to a play in which he is hardly the object of a sustained attack (not least by comparison with the titular character of Plato Comicus’ *Cleophon* that was being staged in the same competition), see Goldhill 1991: 203, 1995b: 87-8; Sidwell 2009: 41-4; Rosen 2010: 275-77.

⁷⁰⁶ Weil 1882: ‘N’est-il pas vrai que les premières scènes, que nous sommes disposés à considérer comme un hors d’œuvre, sont ce qu’il y a de plus amusant dans toute la pièce?’ (99).

⁷⁰⁷ See above n.683.

inclusion of the oligarchs as something that is only justified by the inclusion of the slaves. That, as we saw, represents the culmination of the democratizing logic of the first half of *Frogs*. In fact, if we were looking for direct causal linkage between *Frogs* and actual political events, we might then equally point to the fact that the *dēmos* did pass a further enfranchisement decree in 401/0 to the slaves and metics who helped to restore the democracy (although it was subsequently indicted by a *graphē paranomōn*),⁷⁰⁸ or to the fact that they granted citizenship to the people of Samos later in 405/4 and then again in 403/2.⁷⁰⁹

But to seek to unearth Aristophanes' political agenda from the perspective of the efficacy of his advice in the *parabasis* (or anywhere else for that matter) is surely to take the wrong approach. It is out of the comic poet's control, after all, how his work is received; thus if *Frogs* was taken to be aristocratic propaganda, Aristophanes may simply have been heinously misread.⁷¹⁰ The fact that Aristophanes never wrote another *parabasis*, at least as far as we can tell from the two subsequent plays that survive, may itself suggest that, as a result of *Frogs*, the comic convention had been taken too far. Instructing the *dēmos* how to conduct their affairs in the assembly was never *really* the point; there is, after all, more than enough ironic deflation of the advice given even in this play's unusually self-contained and formally simplistic *parabasis*.⁷¹¹ The *Life* testimonium, nevertheless, might still be worthwhile in intimating a different appreciation of Aristophanes' political agenda than the one usually assumed.

The first part of that passage in fact points towards a very different explanation of the politics behind the reperformance.⁷¹² For it says that it was 'because of this' (τούτου οὖν χάριν) that Aristophanes was honoured, 'this' referring back to his praise (ἐπηνέθη) and admiration (ἡγαπήθη) by the citizens on the grounds that he showed 'through his plays' (διὰ τῶν αὐτοῦ δραμάτων) that Athens was free, not enslaved to any tyrant and a self-governing democracy. On this account, the reperformance of *Frogs* seems more like a unique 'lifetime achievement' award (Rosen's phrase) for his *plays* (plural), the best of which may at some point have been deemed to be *Frogs*. This in turn may have earned him further praise (ἐπηνέθη) and specifically

⁷⁰⁸ Arist. [*Ath. Pol.*] 40.2; Rhodes and Osborne 2003: no. 4.

⁷⁰⁹ Rhodes and Osborne 2017: no. 191 and 2003: no. 2.

⁷¹⁰ Cf. Rosen 2020: 'even if it were true [that the play was reperformed because of its pro-oligarchic message in the *parabasis*], it tells us only about what Athenian audiences allegedly felt about the *parabasis*, not what Aristophanes thought he was trying to accomplish with it' (20 n.22). For what it is worth, the advice to re-enfranchise the oligarchs did not turn out to be so useful, as the reign of the Thirty Tyrants would prove: see Arnott 1991.

⁷¹¹ Esp. Goldhill 1991: 201-4.

⁷¹² Cf. Sidwell 2009: 42; Rosen 2015a: 243. In the analysis of Sommerstein 1993, to which those scholars are largely responding, the first half of the testimonium is ignored.

a garland (ἐστεφανώθη), although it was all of his plays that embodied an idea of what democracy means. On this account, then, the dating of that award, the language of which does resemble that of an honorific decree (even if an original inscription may be impossible to reconstruct verbatim), need not be limited to a date after the decree of Patrocleides and before democracy was restored.⁷¹³ Rather, it makes more sense for Aristophanes to have received an award at some point in the fourth century as a champion of democracy once it had been re-established. His plays of the fourth century are, as a matter of fact, ostensibly more aligned with democratic values – ‘democratic’ in the inclusivist sense uniquely defined by Euripides in *Frogs* (948-52) – than anything staged earlier, especially with the dramatizing of women’s empowerment in *Assemblywomen* and the casting of a slave protagonist in *Wealth*. The testimonium may therefore imply, even as its author seems to ignore or reinscribe, a very different political agenda from the one usually ascribed to Aristophanes, one that admits of Aristophanes’ political commitment to democracy. After all, it is in the *Life* testimonium that we read that Aristophanes endeavoured to show ‘that [Athens] was a democracy’ (ὅτι δημοκρατία ἐστὶ).

All of that said, my argument in this thesis as a whole does not rely on how we read these testimonia, hence the ‘perlocutionary’ effect of comedy. Even so, I have tried to incorporate that evidence, sometimes misused as external ‘proof’ of Aristophanes’ opposition to democracy, in support of my case for Aristophanes’ alignment with a particular conception of democracy. That conception sees the political heart of comedy contained in its distribution of freedom and equality to all, in its sympathies and allegiances with marginalised figures, in the truths it exposes about democracy through bodies on stage. This model of comic politics is more than just a reflection on civic processes and institutions, something that has particularly been said of tragic politics, but includes and advocates for the non-civic and extra-institutional. It is also not limited by the practical constraints of the lawcourts and assembly; it can afford to be radical, explosive, and idealistic. It is, above all, constituted by the embodiment of the marginalised as effective political agents within the ‘sensible’ realm of public space (the theatre being every bit as much a ‘political’ space as the assembly or lawcourts). Euripides’ staging of women and slaves *in itself* was the democratic act, we remember (*Ra.* 948-52). In the final analysis, we might say that it is in Aristophanes’ plays that ‘democracy’ (δημοκρατία) becomes

⁷¹³ For selective and antithetical attempts to reconstruct the decree, see Sommerstein 1993: 465 *contra* Sidwell 2009: 44. Rosen 2015a: 253 with nn.35-6 notes that there was a tradition of posthumously honouring poets and even establishing hero cults for them, usually in celebration of their entire career rather than of any specific work.

‘democratic’ (δημοκρατική) – or, to put it differently, democracy becomes hyper-democracy. Otherwise, as a minority government run by free adult citizen males (and typically elite males at that), the Athenian political system could only ever be a ‘democracy in name’ (cf. Thuc. 2.65).

In the light of this, it is possible to maintain that Aristophanes is a ‘committed’ (*engagé*) author, in the strong sense of the word coined by Sartre in reference to the socially responsible artist (notwithstanding Sartre’s limitation of *littérature engagée* to prose).⁷¹⁴ Discussing ‘commitment’ in terms of the formal ‘autonomy’ of texts rather than the purportedly irretrievable intentions of authors, Adorno writes that ‘committed art in the proper sense is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions... but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes... It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world.’⁷¹⁵ Rancière, exploring the shared terrain of aesthetics and politics, makes a similar point, claiming that what ‘makes an action political is not its object or the place where it is carried out, but solely its form, the form in which confirmation of equality is inscribed in the setting up of a dispute, of a community existing solely through being divided.’⁷¹⁶ What we have seen over the course of this thesis is that the political punch of Aristophanic comedy lies in its disruptive and emancipatory strategies of what Rancière calls *dissensus*. Yet I have also suggested that Aristophanes’ ‘commitment,’ while neither pragmatic nor practical, is also not strictly formal and a(nti-)historical. It is, I maintain, historically determinable: it was Aristophanes’ intention to reconceptualise what democracy means in the highly contested political atmosphere of the late fifth century.

Aristophanes’ ability to create hyper-democratic political worlds, even ones which only ever last momentarily before they are replaced, is remarkable. The fact that these remained largely unrealized, so far as we can tell, in Aristophanes’ own time does not lessen their political force. On the contrary, as Butler argues, ‘unrealizability’ may be a ‘condition of possibility’ for politics to emerge at all (2009: 305):

‘If, with regard to politics, we were to restrict ourselves to what has been realized or what is currently conceived as realizable, we would ratify the status quo, offer

⁷¹⁴ Sartre 1967. Sartre’s polemic against those whose creed is *l’art pour l’art* – ‘We must take up a position in our literature, because literature is in essence a taking of position’ (206) – itself seems an apt response to those classical scholars who see comedy as being ‘mere’ amusement, a view that has never gone entirely out of fashion since Gomme 1938 made an influential case.

⁷¹⁵ Adorno 1974: 78.

⁷¹⁶ Rancière 1999: 32.

legitimacy to forms of social and legal positivism, and undermine the critical capacity to differentiate what is from what might have been or is yet to be.'

Aristophanes imagines the unrealized and even the conceivably unrealizable. That, ultimately, is the political task of our poet.

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