BMCR
Bryn Mawr Classical Review

BMCR 2022.06.17

Plato and Aristiphanes: comedy, politics, and the pursuit of a just life

Marina Marren, *Plato and Aristophanes: comedy, politics, and the pursuit of a just life*. *Rereading ancient philosophy*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021. Pp. 144. ISBN 9780810144194 $99.95.

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In this book, Marina Marren develops an ideal dialogue between Plato and Aristophanes by taking the latter as a serious philosophical interlocutor and stressing the former's often unrecognized comedic potential. I say 'ideal' because Marren's project is by and large a philosophical one: in her view, Aristophanes and Plato showcase the benefits of self-scrutiny that is achieved through laughter and a comedic attitude, and which promotes civic self-awareness. In other words, while Marren is sensitive to historical context, the book contributes little to the ongoing research on the historical and intertextual relationship between Plato and Aristophanes. Rather, Marren makes a philosophical point *through* Aristophanes and Plato.

Throughout the book, Plato's *Republic* takes centre stage. After a lively chapter that sets the stage for Marren's argument ("Plato's and Aristophanes's Comedy"), chapter 2 explores the ideal city sketched in book 5 of the *Republic* through the comedic lens provided by Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen*. Marren adopts a subversive approach, designed to uncover the ironic side of Socrates' arguments, which should not, in her view, be taken at face value. The strategy is a familiar one, which is perhaps best exemplified by the following excerpt, which is worth quoting in full:

> ‘Attentiveness to Plato’s playfulness in the way that he uses language puts the present analysis in conversation with authors like Strauss (1966), Freydberg (2008), Ellis (2011), and Saxonhouse (1978). The latter notes that the *Republic*’s “language seems to undercut the ostensible perfection of Socrates’s city and illustrates rather its connections to the comic world of Aristophanes” (888). In Ellis, who observes that “Aristophanes produced a play depicting his own ideal state with provisions similar to those we find in Plato,” I see an affinity to my own interest in political innovation. In agreement with Saxonhouse, I trace out “similarities in the communistic programs, both economic and social, and the introduction of women into the ruling classes” (891). These developments in the comedy and in the dialogue, Saxonhouse claims, “suggest a close link between the two, but the significance of the link has seldom been considered with attention to the attendant comic interrelationships” (891). Following Saxonhouse’s interpretation, I take up the question that she asks: “If it is funny in Aristophanes, why isn’t it funny in Plato?” (891)’[1]

As is clear from the scholarship she cites, Marren’s approach is firmly Straussian in character. Accordingly, as is the case for other Straussian books and articles, asking ‘why isn’t it funny in Plato?’ ultimately boils down to questioning the seriousness of Plato’s most radical proposals, such as communism. Most tellingly, the passage quoted above appears in a chapter titled ‘Communist Terror’. Marren construes *Assemblywomen* as a play that exposes the horrific shortcomings of communism, only to extend this perspective to book 5 of *Republic*, which notoriously overlaps with Aristophanes’ play in so many details that some degree of direct relationship, in one direction or another, seems to be certain. The premise, then, is that Aristophanes’ gynecocracy in *Assemblywomen* is a self-consciously nightmarish one. This is shaky at best, given that such a reading is far from universally accepted. It is true that a number of the (predominantly male?) audience were willing to take Aristophanes’ ‘male’ utopias (such as those found in *Acharnians* or *Peace*) as more serious and/or alluring than their ‘female’ utopian counterparts, on the grounds that they found the women-led regime depicted in *Assemblywomen* undesirable. Yet this is surely not the only way to read the comedy, whose interpretation also depends on how we understand its staging.[2] A second problem is that ‘funny’ does not necessarily mean ironic or self-subversive. Indeed, book 5 of the *Republic* refers more than once to the potential laughter elicited by the practices to be adopted in the real city, but, in making these references, Plato is most likely trying to pre-empt, rather than endorse, the aura of comedic escapism surrounding Aristophanes’ utopias.[3]

The whole attempt to read *Republic* 5 as ironic, then, is made implausible by the highly controversial assumptions on which it rests. It does not help Marren’s case that the book mostly ignores other interpretative traditions and even fails to take into account standard works.[4] As early as 1947, Gilbert Murray described the similarities between *Assemblywomen* and *Republic* as ‘one of the most famous puzzles in classical Greek

literature', implying that, by then, this was already a vexed question.[5] Yet there is hardly any trace of the relevant debate here. Even when she ventures outside the narrow boundaries of Straussian scholarship, Marren sometimes seems to misunderstand the literature she quotes and all too often fails to provide references to primary sources.[6] It is not surprising, then, that hardly any works written in any language other than English are included in Marren's bibliography.[7] To be clear, this is not a complaint about lack of bibliographical exhaustiveness, which would be impossible and perhaps undesirable for authors such as Plato and Aristophanes. Rather, the problem is that Marren's arguments, however ingenious and engaging, sometimes seem to hover in a vacuum, failing to engage in a meaningful dialogue with 'unaffiliated' scholars and so running the risk of misleading students and general readers.[8]

The merits and shortcomings of Marren's approach are equally clear in subsequent chapters, which, due to space constraints, I discuss very briefly. Chapter 3 ('The Rule of Satiated Mediocrity') maps Aristophanes' *Knights* onto *Republic* 6 and rightly compares Aristophanes' Demos character with Plato's allegory of the Ship of State, only to claim, quite astonishingly but unsurprisingly in a Straussian world, that Plato's philosopher-king and Aristophanes' sausage seller 'adopt one and the same kind of rule: tyranny' (48), as 'Aristophanes is as good at exposing political corruption as Plato is excellent at the comedic art' (61). The payoff is that we, as readers, should appropriate the art of navigation in terms of a 'hermeneutical thinking which does not stop at the close of the text, but rushes into the seemingly sound foundations of the political ideals and arrangements in our own lives, washing away their edifying glamour and exposing the incongruities within' (63). Chapter 4, in turn, offers a combined reading of *Republic* and Aristophanes' *Birds*, emphasizing the perils of absolute rule in both works and the dangers of what Marren calls 'political elitism'. Intriguing analogies emerge in the ways both Aristophanes and Plato sketch idyllic scenes of political perfection only to show that we must wake up to the fact that 'real' politics is always looming large on such utopias. The final chapter ('No laughing Matter: Tyranny in *Republic* VIII and IX') construes Plato's narrative about the decline of constitutions as an exercise in maieutics, which can work insofar as we realize that 'Plato has staged for us a kind of tragi-comedy' (93).

The book features a short conclusion, whose very last lines adopt a markedly generalizing tone, thus showing, once again, Marren's tendency to make a philosophical point that transcends the ancient texts she discusses. In the last paragraph, we hear that 'the virtue of comedy is that it often treats very serious realities lightheartedly, allowing us much-needed room to laugh at ourselves. This laughter undermines our self-importance and decenters the privileged position that we lend to our convictions. It takes the sting out of our desire to defend our deep-seated views. This is where comedy becomes most expedient to philosophy, because having taken our guard down, we stand in a better position to examine ourselves. Without such examination, there is no hope for a just life' (97).

Do we need Aristophanes and Plato to make such a point? And would Aristophanes and Plato agree? It is hard to say, and I cannot find compelling reasons in Marren's arguments to answer in the affirmative. However, Marren no doubt succeeds in showing that both authors, especially if read in conjunction, are very good to think with.

In conclusion, Marren's is an ingenious, lively and generally well-produced book.[9] In many ways, however, it is all too often unscholarly, at least from a classicist's perspective. In her acknowledgments, Marren unfavourably refers to those 'for whom Strauss and his writings are *anathema*' (xii). Though I have significant disagreements with Strauss's approach, I certainly do not belong to such category. I hope it is clear, then, that my criticism does not depend on anti-Straussian prejudices, though, admittedly, the issue is complicated by the problem of whether to use the same yardstick for Straussian works and mainstream academic writing. It may also be a matter of generic conventions. I believe that each of Marren's chapters could easily work as a fascinating and thought-provoking lecture – a genre in which, perhaps not by chance, Strauss famously excelled. As it stands, however, i.e. as an academic monograph, the book is no doubt indicative of talent, but, in my opinion, sometimes comes across as a bit parochial as well as lacking in rigour and precision.

Notes

[1] Here are the works Marren refers to: Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966; Bernard Freydberg, *Philosophy and Comedy: Aristophanes, Logos, and Eros*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008; Hunter Ellis, 'The *Ecclesiazusae* and the *Republic*', *International Journal of the Humanities: Annual Review* 9, 2011, 177-186; Arlene Saxonhouse, 'Comedy in the Callipolis: Animal Imagery in the *Republic*', *American Political Science Review* 72, 1978, 888-901.

[2] Andrea Capra, 'The Staging and Meaning of Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen*', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 112, forthcoming, with extensive bibliography.

[3] See *Republic*, 451c, 452a-c, 452d, 457a-b. Crucially, the dramatic date of *Republic* precedes that of the production of *Assemblywomen*, which means that Socrates is in fact, in a sense, pre-emptively fighting back the comedic laugher inherent in Aristophanes' play.

[4] For example, Marren makes much of the opposition between old and new in Aristophanes as well as in Plato, but ignores the fundamental work by D'Angour (Armand D'Angour, *The Greeks and the New: Novelty in Ancient Greek Imagination and Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), which could have helped her put her arguments in a wider context. Marren, however, is not in principle hostile to other approaches, as she recognizes that 'theories of political moral psychology, feminism, and communism can and have been derived from Plato's dialogues' (31).

[5] Gilbert Murray, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Literature*, in Id., *Greek Studies*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947, 36.

[6] For example, Marren states that in all likelihood Plato's dialogues were not meant to be performed (31). However, the book she quotes to support this view actually argues the opposite (see Nikos G. Charalabopoulos, *Platonic Drama and Its Ancient Reception. Cambridge Classical Studies*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). While most primary information is taken from secondary literature, on occasion Marren lingers on details such as a *skyphos* held at Tübingen University Museum and thought to commemorate the Bendidean festival.

[7] To be precise, there are five works in German, including Freud's *Unbehagen in der Kultur* and such classics as Hildebrant's *Platon*, Jaeger's *Paideia*, and Wilamowitz's *Platon*.

[8] Marren does not specify her targeted audience, but she does provide basic information such as 'A History of Ancient Greek Comedy and Politics', complete with the etymology of 'drama' and other such obvious data.

[9] There are occasional typos, such as 'Schlutz' for Schultz in the bibliography. In fact, there seems to be a problem with non-English names. Such an influential scholar as Claude Mossé is repeatedly referred to as 'Laude Mossé'.