REVIEWs


Ecclesiazusae has never been regarded as one of Aristophanes’ best plays. The reasons are many—the play is lacking in Aristophanes’ customary flair (however hard it may be to pin down what exactly that means), it is ‘the most openly obscene of all A’s plays’ (Froma Zeitlin, ‘Counting the Votes: Politics, Myth and Utopia in Aristophanes’ [Victoria University of Wellington, Syme Lecture, 1988], 20), it poses great difficulties in the assignment of parts and, as a consequence (?), it is difficult to follow the articulation of the plot. Critics have been less than kind to it, speaking of ‘dramatic inconsistency’, ‘escapist farce’, the poet as a ‘broken man who could sink to the tired dirtiness of the Ecclesiazusae’ or even, somewhat unkindly, suggesting that the poet may have suffered a stroke (Gilbert Murray, Aristophanes [Oxford, 1933], 181 and 198, D.M. McDowell, Aristophanes and Athens [Oxford, 1995], 308, A.E. Taylor, Philosophical Studies [London, 1934], 210). McDowell later argues (Aristophanes and Athens 320) that Aristophanes originally planned a play on the women taking over the Assembly but ran out of steam mid way through and developed a new theme, that of communism).

Sommerstein’s (henceforth S) new text, notes, and translation in the now familiar Aris and Phillips format could well make the play fashionable again, helped also by the interest generated by Stephen Halliwell’s (H) new and racy translations of Aristophanes—his Assembly-Women appeared in the same year (Aristophanes: Birds and Other Plays [Oxford, 1998])—and by the Italian editions of Aristophanes by M. Vetta and D. Del Corno (Aristofane: Le Donne all’Assemblea [Milan, 1989]). One should note also new translation series by Peter Meineck, Aristophanes I: Clouds, Wasps, Birds (Indianapolis, 1998), and by Jeffrey Henderson, Aristophanes II: Clouds, Wasps, Peace (Harvard, 1998).

The problems with the play still remain (and as S notes, Aristophanes himself seems nervous about the outcome in the light of his comments to the judges in 1155-62), but S has done an excellent job in resuscitating interest and giving an overall cohesion to the play, not to say a sense of liveliness and fun, that has long been overlooked.
The introduction deals with some of the problems. The first is that of the date of the play. Most commentators have opted for 393 or 392 BC (e.g. Halliwell 393/2, R.G. Ussher [ed.], Aristophanes: Ecclesiazusae [Oxford, 1973] Spring 393 BC) but S argues cogently for 391 drawing together all the diverse and allusive threads within the play. He places greatest weight on lines 202-3 where the text requires a mood of hope followed by disillusionment in Athens and argues 391 BC best fits that situation. Certainty in such situations is difficult because hindsight gives a different perspective, and what looked like a setback at the time may now appear relatively minor, so that his argument is not totally compelling. The thoroughness of the discussion and the attention to detail is however characteristic of all S’s work on this and, indeed, on the other Aristophanic texts in the series.

One of the happy hunting grounds for scholars has been the relationship between the ideas of gynaecocracy expounded by Aristophanes in this play and the very similar views of Plato in the Republic 455d-56b. S is, as usual, provocative in his response. He asks three questions: 1) is Aristophanes caricaturing Plato?—unlikely, given the disparity of dates between Aristophanes’ play and the likely publication date of the Republic; 2) is Plato adopting Aristophanes’ model and putting it to serious use? Or, 3) are both dependant on common sources?—the solution favoured by most recent authors. S argues for 2) pointing especially to R. 452a-d where Socrates is particularly anxious lest his proposals be taken for comic fantasy. Again the argument is cogent even though one might take a less favourable view of how thorough Aristotle’s own research on the origins of the communist theory might have been that led to his view that Plato’s idea was unique among the ‘statesmen, philosophers and laymen’. S uses this to discount any idea of a common source for comic playwright and philosopher, though he argues later that Aristotle would never have regarded Old Comedy fantasy as a serious proposal for a model constitution. That, if true, somewhat undermines the argument against a common source.

The best part of the introduction however is the discussion of the themes of the play. S emphasises (perhaps over-emphasises) the continuity of theme throughout the play. Where other commentators have concentrated more on the difficulties the play presents, especially in the
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identification of characters on stage and their lines, S transfers such matters to the notes and is thereby enabled to demonstrate that the themes of the play are a good deal more coherent than some would have us believe. S shows too that the play fits well the standard Aristophanic pattern—community in difficulties, heroine with fantastic plan, success of that plan—but points also to the anomalies in the choral and lyric elements and to the last minute insertion of a chorus leader speech to the judges of the competition which might have been expected to occur in the *parabasis* in earlier plays. He concedes however that the characters in this play seem remarkably ordinary—no gods, famous contemporaries etc.—and that Praxagora, despite her control over the first half of the play has no divine assistance. Her departure after 729 (reminiscent of the way Lysistrata also disappears at her moment of triumph (*Lys.* 1188) is largely responsible for the less coherent final scenes.

Two matters which have become a *sine qua non* of recent discussions of the play receive scant attention in their own right, though they are dealt with briefly in a series of notes on particular actions. The first is the purpose/effect of metatheatre in Aristophanes in general and in the first half of this play in particular. While S discusses the rehearsal scenes sensibly and with a good deal of feeling for what is happening on stage, he does so (mercifully) without reference to the overworked term metatheatre (at least as far as I can tell: the lack of an index to the plays is apparently to be remedied in the final volume). Secondly, he refrains from speculation on the ‘men playing women playing men’ theme and its effects on the audience, an issue, interesting enough in itself, but one whose impact on an ancient audience is impossible to assess (see Laura K. Taaffe, *Aristophanes and Women* [London/New York, 1993] for an interesting discussion).

S is a master of the succinct but information-packed note. Time and again the depth of his information shows up previous editors (See S’s notes on Lamia (77), Phormisius (97), Agyrrhias (102) compared with the similar notes in Ussher and Halliwell.) Not everyone will agree with all his interpretations, but they are all fully argued and the views of previous editors discussed so that the work is a *sine qua non* for further study. One point that he does miss (unusually) is 277-9 as the women go off to the Assembly instructed to masquerade as ‘old men and from the country’. S questions why this should be so but surely the answer is that as old men
they can hunch up in their cloaks and be less revealing of themselves, and as country men because they can be less expected to know the workings of the Assembly and their mistakes may therefore be excused/ignored. S is very good too on what is happening on the stage; his eye for detail means that he asks the right questions about the implications of a word or a line for the stage and often produces new insights (eg. 470). The difficulties with line attribution however are not easily soluble: he does as good a job with this problem as the material will permit providing a number of new, and improved, attributions (eg. 631, 778/9 etc). The text as a whole is a new one, differing frequently from Ussher, despite the meagreness of the textual tradition for this play. Again, the judicious eye for detail and the feeling for Aristophanes’ Greek is apparent and welcome.

The translations are lively while being close to the text, which is what this series has excelled in. For an acting performance others are better (David Barrett, Aristophanes: The Birds and Other Plays [Harmondsworth, 1978] for instance); H is often more lively but S has his moments—Miss Anorexia for phthinulla (935), ‘he’s screwing up the city with the best of them’ (104: cf. H’s ‘now he dominates public life’) and ‘we are dead in the water’ (109: cf. H’s ‘we have neither sails or oars’) etc. On the other hand, while abuse is very personal to individuals, the culture in which they operate and a particular time, ‘moon-struck idiot’ (S line 794 for ombrontete) seems somewhat old fashioned against H’s ‘dunderhead’ or, better, Ussher’s ‘you head-case’.

The Vita Aristophanis 9 records the story that when Dionysius I of Syracuse wanted information on what Athens was like as a city, Plato sent him a copy of Aristophanes’ plays. Anybody now wanting to have similar knowledge, will do well to look at S’s editions of Aristophanes. It is to be hoped that once the series is completed with the Wealth promised for 2001, S will turn his attention to the Comic Fragments and replace the hopelessly out of date J.M. Edmonds, Fragments of Attic Comedy (Leiden, 1957-61).

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