
The question of what constitutes a *parabasis*, and more specifically in this book, how one identifies a second *parabasis*, has long been a matter of learned debate. Answers have ranged from the view of K. Agathe in 1866 (*Die Parabase und die Zwischenakte der alt-attischen Komödie*, Altona) that our texts of Aristophanes contain ten first *parabases*, nine second, five third, three fourth and one fifth (*Wasps*) to most modern commentators who settle for identifying second *parabases* in *Knights* 1264-1315, *Clouds* 1115-30, *Peace* 1127-90 and *Birds* 1058-1117. Even then there is much debate over what criteria can be applied in identifying them and whether there is some consistency. The introduction to Totaro’s book canvasses these issues and, while for the most part he agrees with Sifakis’ categorisations (*Parabasis and Animal Choruses*, London 1971, 33-52), he cogently argues some variations in viewpoint and illogicalities in the application of the categories, though without major change to the overall categorization. In then applying the criteria to the fragments of Old Comedy, where previous commentators have freely assigned lines to first or second *parabases*, he is judicious, demonstrating that the material is often insufficient, or the argument not robust. This sensible approach to a difficult topic is exemplified by his quotation of Malcolm Heath (*Greece and Rome* 37, 1990, 157), at the end of this section, ‘the greatest wisdom in the study of lost plays is the knowledge of when to fall silent’. It is a concept that could be usefully followed by others.

The main part of the book, and the part of greatest richness, is the line by line commentary on those second *parabases* listed above. The notes are detailed, impressively documented, wide ranging and illuminating. So on *Knights* 1273 he picks up a suggestion of van Leeuwen that the line hides a line of Pindar praising a victor in the games, links it with the praise of the Alkmeonids and their reconstruction of the Temple of Apollo in 548 and contrasts that with the Aristophanic image of Thumantis (*Knights* 1268), an imaginary starveling suppliant at Delphi seeking to escape his poverty. Or in the second *parabasis* of *Peace* he adds to the idyllic descriptions of an autumn/winter party, balanced in the antode by summer at its best by bringing in comparisons with Hesiod *Works and Days* 582-
96 and M.L. West’s comment, ‘an idyllic portrayal of relaxation... with a prescription for the perfect picnic’, together with the erotic overtones of sympotic poetry.

Along with the learning, there is also a nice sense of style and the occasional flash of humour. In discussing the problematic text of Birds 1093, he quotes Meineke’s comment ‘qui sint φύλλων κόλποι, nescio’, together with Rogers’ magisterial dismissal, ‘such nescience may be pardonable in a Berliner, but an Englishman will at once recognize in the words the happiest possible description of the billowy protruberances, the brakes and the bushes, which are everywhere noticeable in our English fields’. Despite Rogers, the Greek does still present problems to the editor.

In a book as detailed as this, there will inevitably be matters of debatable interpretation, though they are rare. One example will suffice. In his discussion of the second parabasis of Wasps 1265-91, he rightly dismisses MacDowell’s comment that this is ‘simply an interlude in which Aristophanes amuses the audience by satirical comments on well-known personalities’ by demonstrating that some, if not all, the people satirised are pertinent to the main themes of the play in their sponging on the rich, or their liking for malicious prosecutions. And the relevance would no doubt be clearer still if we had the antode extant. However, he goes too far in seeking to link Automenes and his three sons (mentioned here for yet another attack on the delinquent one, Ariphrades) with Karkinos and his three sons who bring the play to a close with a dancing scene. He argues that Automenes and his sons are praised here in an ironic way in order to make the parallel effective, but it is hard to see that describing someone as ‘a man dear to us all’ might be immediately taken by the audience as a homosexual reference or that describing someone in the superlative as ‘the supreme lyre player’ is necessarily ironic.

But these are exceptions. The book is stimulating in what it does. My real concern is the episodic nature of what is achieved. The meat of the book is the commentary on the individual pieces but one is left with a wealth of material on small pieces of play texts, given their diverse nature and the absence of any real attempt to tie them together at the end. (The two appendices deal with topics deriving from the parabases—the vexed
The question of the meaning of the antepirrhema of *Wasps* for the relationship of Aristophanes and Kleon, and the debate around the early career of Aristophanes, including his contribution to other poet’s work and their counterclaims on his work. Admittedly, Totaro does summarise the play and its themes in the introduction to his line by line analysis, and seeks to demonstrate the relevance of the second parabasis to the overall theme, but one misses a full and detailed commentary on a complete play.

The second hesitation is also possibly a function of the way the book is put together but it raises different issues. There is no discussion of how the audience reacted (or might be thought to react) to a parabasis or a second parabasis with its careful balancing of metres, singing and dancing, how they saw it functioning within the overall performance. There is a tendency to see plays as written texts, not theatrical experiences, and to judge them as though the audience took note of every word, and believed it. This is not to criticise Totaro: his elucidation of the text is excellent but it needs that feel for the realities of the fifth century theatre and its audience to balance it.

The hope is that Totaro will move now to doing the complete commentary on a play suggested above. On the basis of this book it will be worth waiting for.

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