
The foreign reader of this 1999 Göttingen Habilitationsschrift cannot but wonder whether, had it not been for the requirements of its genre, it might have appeared more appropriately as a series of articles. The book consists, after two introductory chapters, of seven essentially separate studies of aspects of Aristophanic comic technique.\(^1\) In the earlier chapters a connecting thread is provided by the plan (pp. 22–24) of applying to Aristophanes the analysis by J. L. Austin\(^2\) of the pragmatic conditions for a speech act to be successful, on the hypothesis that comedy derives much of its laughter-raising power from the presentation of speech acts that violate these conditions. This potentially very interesting programme is not, however, consistently carried through, and in the later chapters is largely forgotten. The book’s real strength lies in its detailed analyses both of large- and of small-scale phenomena, which make a substantial, and in one case a major, contribution to our understanding of Aristophanic comedy.

After placing his work in the context of previous scholarship and explaining its ‘pragmatic’ rather than ‘semantic’ approach to the analysis of ‘the comedy of language’, K. presents studies of Ar.’s exploitation of foreign and dialect speech (ch. 3), of individuals’ speech peculiarities (ch. 4) and of some specialized sublanguages (hexameters, legal or cultic texts, skolia, military orders, ‘Aesopic’ and ‘Sybaritic’ tales, philosophical discourse) (ch. 5); of the bomolochos (ch. 6); of various forms of ‘disrupted communication’ (ch. 7); of verbal repetition (ch. 8); and of the prologue (ch. 9). The last chapter, though the least linguistic in content, is by far the most important.

A detailed analysis of all the Aristophanic prologues (pp. 240–261) reveals a fundamental structural feature of Aristophanic comedy whose existence had never previously been suspected. It is well known that each comedy begins with a distressing predicament, and is built around a character’s audacious, and usually thoroughly fantastic, plan for rescuing him/herself, and usually others, from it. K.’s contribution is to point out that this ‘Hauptplan’ is normally preceded by a ‘Vorplan’, always less fantastic and less comic, which at some point during the prologue proves ineffective and is superseded.

Dikaiopolis in the Acharnians begins by trying, through heckling, to force the Assembly to discuss peace (Ach. 37–39); only when he is ignored and silenced does he conceive the idea of commissioning Amphitheos to make a private peace for him and his family alone (Ach. 129–133). In the Knights, the two slaves’ first plan is to run away (Eq. 20–31); when one of them points out that they cannot hope to elude the ‘all-seeing’ Paphlagon (Eq. 74–79) they despair and think of suicide, until under the influence of wine they have the inspiration of stealing Paphlagon’s collection of oracles (Eq. 109–111) from which they discover that he is destined to be overthrown by a sausage-seller. A similar structure

\(^{1}\) These partly overlap with some of the studies contained in A. Willi, The languages of Aristophanes: Aspects of linguistic variation in classical Attic Greek (Diss. Oxford 2001); neither author appears to have known of the other’s work. In ch. 3 K.’s conclusions are broadly similar to those of S. Colvin, Dialect in Aristophanes (Oxford 1999), which only became known to him at a late stage (p. 34 n. 74).

\(^{2}\) How to do things with words (German tr. by E. von Savigny, Zur Theorie der Sprechakte, Stuttgart 1979) 37.
can be found in the Clouds, Peace, Birds and Thesmophoriazousai; in the Wasp, however, the initial plan (keeping Philokleon away from the courts by force) gives place to the definitive plan (re-educating him for the life of a gentleman of leisure) only at a much later stage of the play. In the Lysistrata there is another variation of the pattern; it has long been recognized that the heroine devises two plans (the sexual boycott and the occupation of the Acropolis), and here as in other comedies the second plan is brought into play because the first is thought unlikely to achieve its aim (Lys. 168–174), but this time it complements, rather than supersedes, the first plan. In the three later plays the pattern shows signs of degenerating (pp. 258–261), but the ‘two-plan’ schema remains traceable to the end (Frogs – bringing back Euripides from Hades, bringing back Aeschylus from Hades; Ekklesiazousai – seizure of power by women, creation of communist society; Ploutos – consultation of Delphic oracle, restoration of Ploutos’ sight).

The discovery of this pattern is a major new insight, showing how Ar. prepares the way for the revelation of the hero’s ‘Great Idea’ by presenting first the failure of a more modest scheme, and showing also that some plays which have been thought to be lacking in unity can be seen as embodying experimental modifications of a well-established and successful structural pattern. One might well suppose that spectators accustomed to this pattern would be likely to expect, in the early stages of a play such as Frogs or Ekklesiazousai, that the plan which Dionysos or Praxagora presents at the outset would not be, or at least would not be the whole of, the plan which they finally implement.¹

If K.’s analysis of the figure of the bomolochos (ch. 6) is less successful, the fault to a large extent lies with the attempt of previous scholarship to pin down the bomolochos as a highly specific character-type. K. declares (p. 136) that he aims to avoid this rigidity, but in that case it was a mistake to start, as he does, from a strict, precise definition of the type (p. 137) as ‘a figure who, in breach of the dramatic illusion, makes comments on the utterances of the principal characters, aimed at eliciting audience laughter, which the principals ignore’. Most of the chapter is then devoted to examining a range of characters who have in the past been classified as bomolochoi in particular scenes or groups of scenes, and classifying them as ‘bomolochoi in the strict sense’, ‘other figures with bomolochos-like features’, and ‘figures wrongly labelled as bomolochoi’. I wish K. had been bolder here. What his lucid treatment of the detailed evidence really makes clear is that we are dealing, not so much with a type of character, as with a type of utterance; such utterances can sometimes be fully or almost fully integrated into the dramatic action, sometimes wholly or almost wholly detached from it, and sometimes can waver (or be carefully steered in a zigzag course) between the two extremes, and any given character can be made to give voice to them over a period which may be the duration of a whole agon or other scene, or may last only as long as a single brief anecdote. This should have been a study, not of bomolochoi, but of bomolocheumata.²

¹ This chapter also includes valuable discussions of ‘warm-up’ dialogue in the prologue (pp. 262–270; Nub. 133–221 is treated as a warm-up scene abnormally placed) and of what K. calls, following Brecht, ‘culinary’ scenes (pp. 280–5; he means scenes, usually near the end of a prologue, in which the action is advanced but there is also plenty of ‘colour, movement and fantasy’, as in Pax 236–298 or Thesm. 209–294).
² But the comparison of the Aristophanic bomolochos to the characters Statler and Waldorf in the Muppet Show (p. 186 n. 352) is inspired. Of all the modern creators of comedy with whose work I am acquainted, I know none whose imagination is so reminiscent of
For the rest, it will be best to draw attention to some of the many valuable general and specific conclusions which the book contains, especially in chapters other than those already discussed.

Ch. 3: (pp. 36–39) That Pseudartabas tells the truth (Ach. 104) proves him to be a real Persian (a coached imposter would not have given the game away); hence the ‘unmasking’ of the two eunuchs is merely a joke by Dikaiopolis (and by Ar., at the expense of Kleisthenes and Straton). Ch. 4: K. notes that there is relatively little mockery of individual speech-peculiarities, and (p. 62) that even of this a high proportion is only narrated, not presented on stage; he suggests (p.63), citing present-day comic practice, that this is because such mockery of any particular individual would soon lose its freshness and power to amuse. Ch. 5: (p. 82 n. 179) A vigorous refutation of von Möllendorff’s thesis that Demos’ last state in the Knights is worse than his first: the Sausage-seller, notes K., sheds all his evil characteristics at the moment when he defeats Paphlagon (and, significantly, acquires a new name). Bdelykleon’s advice in Vesp. 1258–61 (p. 107 n. 221) proves (contra Rothwell) that the telling of fables was quite a normal thing in élite company. A very nice solution to the crux of Nub. 178–9 (p. 122 n. 250): Socrates draws a circle in the ashes with a διαβήτης; then he deems the circle to be a wrestling-ring, the διαβήτης to be a wrestler (one who διαβάειν ‘plants his feet apart’ in a firm fighting stance, cf. Eq. 77) – and steals the imaginary cloak which this imaginary wrestler has laid aside for his bout in this imaginary ring. Ch. 6: (pp. 149–150) A very clear explanation of how the audience in Ach. 1–20 are induced, via the equation of political with theatrical/musical spectatorship, to cast themselves in the role of ἐπιληπτορίας at the coming Assembly meeting. Ch. 7: (p. 196) A gender blunder by Euripides at Thesm. 890 (καλυπτός, masculine, in reference to the pretended ‘Helen’), unnoticed by scholarship hitherto (and, one may add, by Kritylla!); (p. 197 n. 168) a good argument for assigning Thesm. 928 to ‘Mnesilocho’: μὲν shows that the speaker expects another rescue attempt will follow; Kritilla would not so assume, with the Prytanis already in sight (cf. 923). Ch. 8: (pp. 214–8) A valuable analysis of the ληφθένθων passage (Ran. 1198–1247), firmly rejecting any attempt to find secondary meanings in it, and usefully suggesting that the recurring feature, in the cited prologues, of a participle in –ον would serve as a signal to the audience to shout out ληφθένθων ἀπολέσαν at the next pause, a pattern ingeniously varied in 1238–41.

A few points on which I would have reservations:

The alleged allusions to Alkibiades in Thesm. 1. 782–1 (pp. 58–62) are very far-fetched; in particular, difficulties in writing the letter rho are a very different thing from difficulties in pronouncing it. On Vesp. 1246 (pp. 100–1), where K. defends the paradox, one would welcome a suggestion, if only exempli gratia, of some possible, intelligible sentence in which χρήματα and βίοι were accusative objects of the same verb. A valiant but doomed attempt is made to argue that the Clouds is not hostile to Socrates and philosophy (pp. 127–131), and that Socrates in the Apology is not made to say it is; it founders on the facts that (i) the play explicitly presents Socrates as denying that the traditional gods exist, (ii) he runs an establishment in which the young are taught to reject all moral constraints and also how to evade their just liabilities, (iii) in the Apology he says his ‘earlier’ accusers, of whom Ar. is named as the only one he can identify, are numerous and have been slandering him, uncontradicted, for a long time (18a–d); what one can say is that such allegations were not likely to endanger Socrates in 423 or even in 416 (the dramatic date of the Symposium), before Alkibiades had turned traitor or Kritias had turned tyrant.

Three appendices (pp. 286–296) discuss the text and/or interpretation of particular passages more fully than would have been convenient in the body of the work: Eq. 271–7 (where a very strong case is made for giving 275 to the Sausage-
seller – it could be added that 275 enables him, after fifty lines’ complete silence, to burst spectacularly into action with a volume and ferocity of which he had previously given not the slightest intimation), Ekkl. 621–2, and Ran. 1132–3.

This is a contribution to Aristophanic studies which all specialists will need to read, and which has significantly deepened our understanding of the ‘plot of predicament and rescue’ which is fundamental to all of Ar.’s comedies.

Nottingham

Alan H. Sommerstein


Das ist ein rundum erstaunliches Buch. Ein einzelner Alphilologe macht sich an die Herkulesaufgabe, den Epochenstreit um die Legitimität der Neuzeit anders und gegen die herrschende Tendenz wieder aufzunehmen.

