

Aristophanes' Clever Spectators (*Clouds* 518-62)

The first parabasis of Aristophanes' *Clouds* (518-62) has long troubled readers for a number of reasons, chief among them the contradictions between it and the rest of the play (especially lines 537-44). In this paper, I offer a new reading of the parabasis according to which these apparent contradictions are read together rather than against each other, so that the text and subtext of the parabasis combine to describe how good comedy should be composed and enjoyed by qualified spectators.

An essential question for interpretation of the parabasis is how serious it is meant to be. Some (e.g. Fisher 1984) appeal to humor or the conventionality of the comic parabasis to explain the poet's specious statements about his own work; others (Hubbard 1986 and 1991, O'Regan 1992; contra: Olson 1994) argue that there are no real contradictions, since the parabasis describes two very different plays (the original and revised versions of *Clouds*) at the same time. My own stance is that Aristophanes should be taken seriously here but not at face value. This parabasis is a coherent and plausible piece of rhetoric (not all purely conventional) designed to present the poet in a manner appealing to the audience in order to promote his chances of winning the dramatic competition (cf. Biles 2011). While individual statements are blatantly false or outrageous, the parabasis as a whole advances a real argument about the critical appreciation of comedy.

My argument hinges on the reference to Electra in lines 534-6: Aristophanes' comedy has come looking for clever spectators and will know them when it sees them, just as Electra recognized her brother's lock of hair. The most common interpretation of this passage is that Aristophanes' comedy has entered the competition hoping to find some indication of the audience's favor, which is here represented by the lock of Orestes (Hackforth 1938, Dover

1968). Telò 2010 suggests that we should focus on Electra's relationship with Agamemnon rather than Orestes and that her filial devotion reflects Aristophanes' own devotion to his (paternal) audience. These readings are provocative and accurately illustrate some of Aristophanes' interests in the parabasis; but in both cases, the analogy between Electra and *Clouds* sits uncomfortably with its surrounding context. Both assume a rather jarring shift in paradigm (Aristophanes' first play was an exposed child, but his latest is Electra devoted to her father) and both stress ideas that are only implicit in the text (Aristophanes' need for reassurance, his desire to "save" his spectators).

While Aristophanes surely is hoping to find redemption with his revision, his chief focus throughout the parabasis is not on salvation or on his (or his play's) emotional stakes in the current competition, but on cleverness (σοφία), originality, and the intellectual appreciation of comedy. Through close reading of the text, I pursue a suggestion made in passing by Böhme 1938 but summarily dismissed by Newiger 1961 that the point of the analogy is to challenge the spectators to demonstrate the same degree of cleverness as Electra did in recognizing Orestes' lock. Electra's cleverness consisted of an ability to see beneath superficial appearances and to draw significant conclusions from seemingly insignificant evidence (such as the lock); similarly, a spectator should be able to see past the stock comic material described in lines 538-43 (of which Aristophanes himself is certainly guilty) to the more worthy substance of his play. Along the same lines, the absolute originality asserted by Aristophanes is offset by his use throughout the parabasis of traditional, mythologizing material (e.g. the *parthenos* analogy, Electra); the discerning spectator will not focus solely on one aspect or the other but notice that both are present and necessary. Aristophanes is thus inviting the spectators to prove their cleverness (whereby his play will "recognize" them) by understanding that comedy unavoidably comprises

a combination of old and new, cheap humor and serious thought. If his parabasis is properly understood, both clever spectators and clever play receive vindication.

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