

Is the notion of 'the poet's voice' a useful one for understanding Aristophanic comedy?

The notion of 'the poet's voice' in Old Comedy is a topic of interest to many scholars, all of whom come up against the problematic issue of identifying the poet's voice within Aristophanic comedy. Despite this seemingly insurmountable barrier to the study of the poet's voice, research can nonetheless be attempted into the role of this voice (identifiable or not) in the comedies of Aristophanes. This essay will explore some ways in which the mere notion of the poet's voice can be invaluable when analysing Aristophanic comedy, focussing on its use as a comic technique manipulated by the playwright.

It is pertinent to first specify what is meant by 'the poet's voice' in this context. Throughout the plays of Aristophanes, a poetic voice can be heard indirectly behind the drama, as the plays are the fictional works of the non-fictional poet, and as such the passages and characters in the play are all the playwright's constructs. At moments of direct address, the audience is led to believe it hears the *direct* voice of the poet, either through the chorus in the parabasis or a character (such as Dicaeopolis in *Acharnians*) onto whom the voice of the poet is projected. This essay will examine both the direct and indirect poet's voice and will also touch on the notion of 'the poet's voice' in reference to *other* poets' voices which are heard as characters in the plays, i.e. Euripides and Aeschylus in *Frogs*.

It seems logical when discussing the notion of the poet's voice to first address issues of identification. Some scholars insist on taking Aristophanes at his word, interpreting passages where the poet seems to be speaking to the audience, such as the parabases, at face-value, and ignoring the various comic strategies employed to undermine such an interpretation. As Wright maintains, some passages in Aristophanes do seem to invite the audience to treat

them as especially authoritative; however 'this apparent authority is no more than an illusion'¹. I would argue that we can never assume it is Aristophanes speaking. Nowhere in his extant plays is there a character named explicitly as Aristophanes, nor is there a moment when the apparently authorial words of a character are not undermined by other comic techniques. Many scholars have been content to explicitly identify Dicaeopolis with Aristophanes; however this identification is clearly problematic as Dicaeopolis is a character who takes on many personae and voices (such as both the rustic comic protagonist and the tragic Telephus), undermining how seriously a reader should take his claims. Old Comedy is a genre in which characters can take on many voices and personae, it is inherently polyphonic, and as such the whole notion of voice is radically unstable². It becomes impossible to find a true authorial voice within the comedies, an impossibility which certainly complicates any research into the notion of 'the poet's voice', but also, I would argue, points towards the conscious manipulation of this notion as a comic technique.

The ways in which Aristophanes manipulates the notion of the poet's voice are just as crucial to understanding Aristophanic comedy as our understanding of the use of obscenity, parody, and other comic techniques. Aristophanes purposefully invites the audience to assume they are hearing the direct voice of the poet when they are in fact hearing a voice constructed by the poet, frustrating attempts to find an 'authentic authorial voice'³. He constantly undermines passages which purport to be the poet's voice, for example in *Acharnians*⁴, where 'the parabasis...describes the author's aims in a way that directly

¹ Wright (2012) 10

² Ibid.

³ Rosen (2010) p.299

⁴ *Acharnians* pp.37-41

contradicts Dicaeopolis' claims....the chorus leader promises that Aristophanes will never stop *making fun of what is right*⁵. The audience is presented with two characters who are both supposedly representatives of the poet but who offer contradictory views, destabilising the notion of the poet's voice. Aristophanes complicates rather than elucidates this voice, playing with the expectations of authorship and voice of an audience who would likely have taken direct addresses as though they were a hotline to the poet's opinions. As Wright argues, by frustrating these expectations, Aristophanes can be seen to implicitly critique author-centric approaches to comedy⁶, the placing of too much importance on the search for and views of the author, especially as the poet's voice is impossible to pin down in Aristophanic comedy.

The dramatization of this search for the poet's voice and fruitlessness of such a search can arguably be seen in the plot of *Frogs*, where Dionysus searches for a real poet who can save Athens, but finds only Aristophanic parodies of two tragedians, Euripides and Aeschylus, who end up farcically parodying one another in a literary competition. The complex layers of parody disguise the voices of these poets; the reader is unable to find the true voices of the tragedians through the layers of parody, just as the audience is unable to find Aristophanes' poetic voice through the layers of comedy. Euripides and Aeschylus are fictional constructs of Aristophanes, as is Agathon the (fictionally) effeminate transvestite but also tragic poet in *Thesmophoriazusae*, all of whom demonstrate the manipulation of a poet's voice to comic effect.

⁵ Wright (2012) p.11

⁶ Ibid. p.15

If read seriously, there are passages in *Frogs* which seem to prescribe the role of the chorus (and the poet, if he is to be identified with the chorus-leader) as advisors to the city,

‘We chorus folk, two privileges prize:

To amuse you, citizens, and to advise.’⁷

The plot itself, the search of a poet to save Athens, seems to suggest that the poet has a didactic role in society. However, Aristophanic comedy avoids such straightforward interpretation, and encourages a more ironic reading of the action, a reading supported, for example, by the useless solutions to Athens’ problems proposed by each poet⁸ and the fact Dionysus ends up making an entirely arbitrary decision on which poet to take back with him ‘I shall select the man my soul desires’⁹, not the poet who would best help the city (if a poet would help the city at all). The decision is also undermined by Dionysus’ appropriation of a Euripidean phrase ‘It was my tongue that swore’¹⁰, not to choose the creator of this verse, but to choose Aeschylus. Aristophanes’ manipulates the notion of the poet’s voice to poke fun at those who would attempt to extract genuine lessons from poetry¹¹, using parodied voices of tragic poets and undermining the expectations of poetry as a didactic genre at every turn.

The poet’s voice in Aristophanic comedy can also be used to develop characters within the plays, giving them the ability to do or say more than they should strictly be able to within the confines of their dramatic personae. Dobrov terms this departure from fictional

⁷ *Frogs*, p.160

⁸ *Frogs* p.188

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.189

¹¹ Wright (2012) p.23

character as ventriloquism, 'a character becomes...a puppet in the hands of a clever ventriloquist'¹², able to transcend the limitations of their character as seen in the rustic elderly farmer character of Trygaeus in *Peace* who should arguably not have the talent for sophisticated tragic language.

'Come, Pegasus, go on with joy,

Behind thee put all fears,'¹³

He breaks his fictional personae, an act which can be attributed to the intrusion of the poet's voice, and also allows Aristophanes to parody other voices, such as tragedy here, to comic effect, the 'Pegasus' that Trygaeus rides is, of course, a dung beetle. New fictional dimensions can be conferred upon characters through this indirect use of the poet's voice and creates what Dobrov terms 'discourse irony'¹⁴, the incongruity between what a fictional character *should* be able to do, say or know, and what they *are* able to do, say or know.

By using the notion of the poet's voice to allow characters to speak outside the confines of their literary personae, Aristophanes creates characters which are inherently polyphonic, a characteristic best illustrated by the rustic protagonist of *Acharnians*, Dicaeopolis, who takes on multiple voices and dramatic personae. Dicaeopolis is seen by many to explicitly represent the direct voice of the playwright, especially by de Ste. Croix who is convinced that the words of Dicaeopolis should be read as straight from Aristophanes' mouth¹⁵. A simple surface reading of Dicaeopolis' use of the authorial 'I' and references to a quarrel

¹² Dobrov (1995) p.47

¹³ *Peace* p.103

¹⁴ Dobrov (1995) p.56

¹⁵ de Ste. Croix (1972)p.363

with Cleon¹⁶ may lend weight to this identification, however the multitude of personae in Dicaeopolis' character seem to challenge such an interpretation. As Wright argues, for much of the play Dicaeopolis is not Aristophanic at all, but polyphonic¹⁷, demonstrated well by the scene in which he defends the peace he has made.¹⁸ He identifies himself as a comic poet ('a' not 'the' which could be congruent with one of Hesk's suggestions, that Dicaeopolis represents 'any poet who has suffered or might suffer political attacks'¹⁹), and makes apparently serious claims about the nature and duty of comedy.

'I'm a comic poet. Even comedy knows something about truth and justice'²⁰

However at this point, Dicaeopolis is submerged in levels of fiction which undermine the solemnity of his declarations. We are presented with a comic actor, playing the comic figure of Dicaeopolis (who takes on multiple personalities within the comedy, the rustic, the comic hero, the paratragic persona, a comic poet²¹), who is dressed as the prince Telephus (a Euripidean tragic figure), who himself is disguised as a beggar. It seems almost impossible to take Dicaeopolis' words seriously when he embodies so many voices, and it is worth asking why we would take his appropriation of what seems to be the poet's voice (but may not be at all) as the most convincing persona he adopts, rather than treating it with suspicion. If Aristophanes had truly wanted to project his voice onto Dicaeopolis seriously, why does he make his character so polyphonic?

¹⁶ *Acharnians* p.28

¹⁷ Wright (2012) p.12

¹⁸ *Acharnians* p.33-34

¹⁹ Hesk (2000) p.264

²⁰ *Acharnians* p.33

²¹ See Fisher (1993) for a more detailed analysis of these multiple personalities

The similarities between Dicaeopolis and the poet's voice are deliberately created and arguably designed to encourage identification between character and poet, not to suggest that Dicaeopolis is the mouthpiece of his creator, but rather to build a comic persona for Aristophanes. 'The fiction of a persecuted poet'²² is created, and reappears in other plays (such as the parabasis of *Clouds*²³), a poet in rivalry with Cleon,²⁴ (a rivalry for which we have no other contemporary evidence except for Aristophanes' comedies and which also allows him to incorporate mockery and abuse of a public figure into his plays). Aristophanes is as much 'a literary construct as his hero'²⁵ and where some scholars may try to find autobiographical information in passages such as the parabasis of *Wasps*²⁶ (which has been pointed to as evidence for the evolution of Aristophanes' writing²⁷), I would argue that if any kind of autobiography can be found, it is the autobiography of Aristophanes the comic persona, not Aristophanes the real-life poet.

There is no character in Aristophanes' extant works directly named as the poet, and we might assume this is because such a technique was not used in Old Comedy. It would be pertinent then to note briefly the fragmentary evidence we possess of Cratinus' (a rival of Aristophanes) *Pytine*, a play in which the protagonist is also named 'Cratinus'. I would argue that even (or perhaps especially) when a character is explicitly identified as the poet, an audience should be extremely careful about identifying that character and his traits with an authentic poet's voice. 'Cratinus' is depicted as a drunk, past-it playwright whose wife

²² Hesk (2000) p.264

²³ *Clouds* p.94-98

²⁴ *Acharnians* p.28

²⁵ A. M. Bowie (1982) p.39

²⁶ *Wasps* p.46-47

²⁷ Rosen (2010) p.238

'Comedy' is leaving him, but this 'Cratinus' is a literary construct, created by the real Cratinus, and bound up in layers of fiction and irony. He creates the 'illusion that his actual biography is being played out on stage'²⁸ for comic effect and to frustrate the audience searching for the poet's voice behind the dramatic persona, just as Aristophanes does when he creates Dicaeopolis.

With each new persona, the audience should find it more and more difficult to take Dicaeopolis seriously and to explicitly identify him 'the poet's voice' which is in fact, just one voice amongst many. Fisher argues that the polyphony of Dicaeopolis is deliberately obfuscatory²⁹, making it more difficult to identify a genuine poet's voice, a plausible argument, though it is only one in a plethora of interpretations proposed by scholars, some of which contradict each other, yet all of which find their evidence within the same defence speech of Dicaeopolis.³⁰ The passage itself is clearly obfuscatory, *encouraging* multiple interpretations and points to the fact that Dicaeopolis cannot be categorised so neatly as representative of the playwright, but rather that the notion of the poet's voice is deliberately unstable, adding to comic effect and highlighting the dangers of reading Aristophanic comedy at face value.

It is worth mentioning here Bowie's theory³¹ that Dicaeopolis is a parody of Eupolis and the suggestion that Aristophanes is engaging in what Sidwell would term 'ventriloquial paracomedy'³²: he is parodying what Eupolis might say in *his* own poet's voice about his

²⁸ Rosen (2000) p.25

²⁹ Ibid. p.44

³⁰ See Wright (2012) p.18 for an overview of the different interpretations of this passage

³¹ E.L. Bowie (1988) p.183

³² Sidwell (1995) p.66

own poetry. Whether this theory is correct or not, it illustrates another potential layer to 'the poet's voice' and demonstrates how for many the notion of this voice is central to understanding Aristophanic comedy.

The polyphonic nature of Aristophanic characters can also be seen elsewhere, such as the opening lines of *Frogs* where Dionysus is seen to speak as actor, spectator ('Every time I go to a show'³³) and reader ('I was reading the *Andromeda*'³⁴).³⁵ Aristophanes is clearly playing with the poet's voice and using it in turn to play with other voices in such a way that the poet's voice logically leads scholars towards the study of other forms of comic dialogism³⁶.

As Dobrov argues, 'the presence of the poet....is quite palpable...not necessarily as an intrusive 'I' but often in the *unhomogenized internal variety of linguistic resources* organized in the form of a given character'³⁷, that is to say the notion of the poet's voice can be seen in the ability of Aristophanic characters to speak in many voices, using a variety linguistic resources.

The notion of the poet's voice is also useful to understanding Aristophanic parabases, passages where the audience is directly addressed and the chorus leader often temporarily assumes a quasi-authorial role³⁸, as in the parabasis of *Clouds*. These moments of 'speaking out' can be read as completely literal: they break the fictional drama, addressing the spectators who are part of the real, rather than the dramatic, world and often speak about

³³ *Frogs* p.134

³⁴ *Ibid.* p.135

³⁵ Dobrov (1995) p.80

³⁶ *Ibid.* p.92, Dobrov explains how the poet's voice 'provides a natural clue luring us on to discover the complexities of comic dialogism'

³⁷ *Ibid.* p.83

³⁸ Wright (2012) p.13

topics which appear removed from the main theme of the plays. However, passages in Aristophanic comedies which purport to be authorial or representative of the poet's voice are often deliberately misleading and have their seriousness undermined by other comic techniques, and passages which are deliberately self-reflexive:

'And also thought I'd never written any play so witty

As this – that is why I first produced it in this city'³⁹

reflect not the real poet, but his comic persona. The parabasis of *Clouds* promises to tell the 'frank and simple truth'⁴⁰ but is so self-aggrandising and makes claims that are proven to be false (pretending the play is new⁴¹, when we know had it been performed it would have been a repeat of the first *Clouds*), that such a straight reading is inadequate. As Wright argues 'the parabasis is just one among several types of conventional comic scene – a highly stylized, highly artificial creation'⁴², the creation of a knowing and manipulative poet who is once again deliberately playing with authority and voice for comic effect. Rather than taking characters at their word when they purport to 'speak the truth'⁴³ as does the chorus of *Knights*, or seem to speak as the poet, it makes more sense to be especially suspicious of any passage deliberately pointed to as imbued with authorial voice. If a chorus is speaking with the authorial 'I', it is the 'I' of a comic persona, consciously created by the poet and designed (just like the multiple personas of Dicaeopolis) to obfuscate rather than elucidate, and is a product of Aristophanes' manipulation of the notion of 'the poet's voice'.

³⁹ *Clouds* p.95

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. p.96

⁴² Wright (2012) p.14

⁴³ *Knights* p.56

A final point to be mentioned is that the notion of 'the poet's voice' can be useful to understanding Aristophanic comedy not only from a point of view but also from a genre-defining one. The intrusion (or apparent intrusion) of the poet's voice into the fictional drama is a hallmark of Aristophanic comedy as a genre. As Dobrov contends, the use of the poet's voice within comedy allows us to trace the evolution of comic language and identify a style of comedy (i.e. Old Comedy) which gives way to Middle and New Comedy where the notion of the poet's voice as 'a quasi-fictional persona/presence withdraws from the world and language of [the] play.'⁴⁴ In Old Comedy, the poet is free to ventriloquize his characters, to use them as tools for his comic ends, but in New Comedy the poet has stepped back from these characters and fallen silent. Aristophanic characters are polyphonic, incorporating the poet's voice into their repertoire of voices, whereas the characters in New Comedy become stable dramatic constructs, acting within the confines of their literary scope. The notion of the poet's voice seems to be a distinguishing generic characteristic of Aristophanic and Old Comedy.

This essay has examined several ways in which the notion of 'the poet's voice' can be beneficial to understanding Aristophanic comedy, from the effect of this voice on characterisation, to critiques of author-centric interpretations of Old Comedy and even to the notion of 'the poet's voice' as a defining feature of Old Comedy itself, an examination which is by no means exhaustive. I would argue that the authentic voice of Aristophanes cannot be found within his plays, but this does not detract from the importance of the ways in which the *notion* of such a voice's existence is manipulated by the playwright and how

⁴⁴ Dobrov (1995)p. 87

understanding this manipulation is vital to comprehending Aristophanic comedy. The notion of 'the poet's voice' should be considered primarily as a literary and comic tool, and I would purport that the tension intentionally created between the reality and fiction of 'the poet's voice' is a central dynamic of Aristophanic comedy, encouraging the audience (or reader) to question the validity and truthfulness of the play before them.

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