

Marina Marren's *Plato and Aristophanes*

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Marina Marren. 2021. *Plato and Aristophanes: Comedy, Politics, and the Pursuit of a Just Life*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

In *Plato and Aristophanes*, Marina Marren of the United Arab Emirates University has produced an exciting new reading of Plato's *Republic* by taking the dialogue's humor seriously. The humor begins, for her, with Socrates and his companions looking for the light of justice in the darkness of Hades. In the same vein, it continues with the irony of Plato having Socrates imagine an almost perfect city run by almost perfect people – philosophers – when at the time Plato wrote the dialogue, Glaucon, Alcibiades, Charmides, Theaetetus and other young men with whom Socrates had associated in fact had come to bad ends. For Marren, Socrates' failure with his youthful interlocutors makes the *Republic's* whole effort to create a beautiful city as laughable to Plato's contemporary readers as looking for justice in hell.

Other comic elements Marren finds include intellectual ideals conflicting with the reality of desires and passions when communal sex and property are instituted; the comically ambiguous status of the decent man who desires only simple pleasures but due to his simplicity is subject to the schemes of cheaters, corrupters and demagogues;

the humor of the simple man's exploitation by rulers who simply give back to him what he already wants; the comedy of rulers being philosophers (lovers of wisdom) when the eros of candidate philosophers more likely extends to the earthly pleasures of tyranny than to philosophic rule and divine philosophic pleasures; the laughable inconsistency between Glaucon's own intellect and passion made evident when he proposes that the best citizens of the beautiful city be allowed to kiss whomever they wish without there being any right of refusal; the tense and sadly comic intellect-passion inconsistency evidenced in the philosopher-kings's tight elitist control over sexual and poetic expression and benevolence-exclusion inconsistency manifest in his elitist exclusion of many from full civic participation, for example, the artisans; and the ironic inconsistency of an imagined city run by human beings who are better even than the gods – since they are led only by what is beyond being – being licensed to act in terrible ways because their 'divine' nature gives them leave to act without being contested.

Marren's comedic approach diverges from that of others who have seen the *Republic* as a critique of idealism and have found in it resources for a type of Cold War conservative critique of what they see as the problematic idealism of twentieth century leftist and communist movements. Such interpretations emphasize the tragedy of the rise and fall of the *Republic's* best city in speech and construe the rise to represent idealism and the fall to represent critique. For Marren, instead, the *Republic's* critique is of any kind of idealism and its antidote is not conservatism but democracy and democratic education. According to Marren, it is Plato's Socrates, not Plato the author of the *Republic* himself, who thinks the many cannot philosophize. In addition, for her it is Glaucon and Adeimantus who accept the idea of the beautiful city while we are not supposed to but are to see that city's origin in the somewhat tyrannic desires and passions that Glaucon and Adeimantus have – and we share.

For Marren, the positing and taking back of positions in the *Republic* as well as the dialogue's overall comedic tenor are meant to educate *us*. We share the posited views at first and then see them refuted, educating us about our views and feelings. Platonic comedy, for Marren, redirects apparently serious passages and turns their initial meaning on its head leaving us to wonder and think about our own views given our likely initial acceptance of the posited views. Actions in the dialogue such as Glaucon blurting out a desire to have sex with whomever he wants undermine the high-minded tone of stated views and positions. They give us a political education on the contrast between the purity of the pursuit of perfection and the desires that are sublimated into that pursuit. From such comedy we achieve freedom from inscribed concepts and idealistic views, specifically, the freedom that comes from laughing at them. Such a freedom is not disinterested, however, since the retraction of positions previously affirmed and the inconsistency seen in a character previously admired have an emotional effect similar to that of reversal and recognition in tragedy. What seems true or admirable turns out to be false or base

in strikingly funny, ironic and laughable ways that enable the dialogue to educate our passions, including the darkest and most tyrannical among them.

Where do Aristophanes' comedies fit in Marren's account? Her goal is not to take a position on scholarly disputes concerning the exact debate between Plato and Aristophanes but instead, taking for granted the view that Plato was familiar with Aristophanes and his comedies, to use specific comedies as interpretive spurs to rethinking Plato's *Republic* and giving it its comedic due. Specifically, she treats the *Assembly Women*, the *Knights* and the *Birds* each as providing motivation and resources for noticing the *Republic's* comic features – the *Assembly Women* providing a bawdy portrait of unrealistic egalitarian innovation, the *Knights* displaying how the people are sweet-talked and swindled, and the *Birds* portraying characters who aim for the high life of the birds but end up on the road to the underworld. What results both from using the comedies as such a spur, along with thinking about how features of the dialogue would have been received in its time of composition, is the *Republic* as a democratic critique of (for us) both left and right idealism on behalf democracy itself and as an exhortation to face, not flee, the ambiguities of human personality and political life.

Finally, *Plato and Aristophanes* is commendable for the range of interpretations, as well as related books and articles, consulted in it, from North American interpreters who take a 'Continental' approach such as John Sallis, Michael Naas and Marina McCoy, to Italian interpreters such as Claudia Barrachi and Cinzia Arruzzo, to U.S. interpreters out of the Anglo-American tradition such as Julius Moravcsik, Gregory Vlastos and Debra Nails, to classicists and classical historians such as Michael Vickers, Helen Foley, Arthur Pickard-Cambridge and Arnaldo Momigliano, to various interpreters influenced by (and including) Seth Benardete and his teacher, Leo Strauss, such as Drew Hyland, Charles Griswold and Michael Davis. *Plato and Aristophanes: Comedy, Politics, and the Pursuit of a Just Life* is a well-informed, ambitious and appealing book, one that holds out promise of more good work to come.

