

## REVIEWS OF BOOKS

DUBOIS (P.) **Democratic Swarms: Ancient Comedy and the Politics of the People.** Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2022. Pp. xv + 261. £36/\$45. 9780226815749.  
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This book marks a new era in the scholarship on Aristophanic comedy. It boldly touches upon the relationship between humanistic scholarship and activism and the place that antiquity occupies in the conceptualizations of this relationship. In a political context in which antiquity is often used to enforce the most pernicious ideologies, how can we look to ancient comedy, a profoundly political genre steeped in misogyny, transphobia and racism, to articulate forms of emancipatory thinking? At a time when, in many states in the US, critical theory is in danger of being silenced, Classics is self-servingly presented by some institutions as a code for the safe and apolitical. This is the reason why, as Page duBois suggests in the introduction of her brilliant book, a renewed discussion of the relationship between Classics and critical theory is urgently needed.

Comedy is a very complex discursive machine, in which the funny is always implicated with the unfunny, pleasure with pain, release with discomfort. The very dynamic of the joke presupposes an opposition between those who are in the know and those who are not, those who get it and those who do not. There is an in-built structure of exclusion that should inform our presuppositions. While the debate on Aristophanes has long centred the dichotomies of irony and seriousness, escapism and political engagement, the question now seems to be this: given that this is a deeply political corpus, how can we make a case for continuing to read it when we find it disturbing and often not funny at all?

An important starting point, for duBois, is a re-evaluation of the anarchic energy located in the swarming, buoyant energy of unruly chorality. In his theorization of the political aesthetics of Blackness, of refusal as a sensory break, an agential cut, Fred Moten coins the word ‘choreophonographics’, a term that nicely dovetails with duBois’ spot-on focus on Deleuzian becoming, on Aristophanic drama’s exuberant mobility. I could not agree more (and I hope that many other classicists will, too) on the necessity, in her words, of ‘break[ing] Greek comedy out of the scholarly insularity of its study’ and ‘challeng[ing] the complacencies of Western liberalism based on ancient models’ (x, 186). To do so, duBois calls for a shift of attention from personhood (that is, from the never fully abandoned notion of Aristophanic authoriality) to impersonality, the singular plurality of the Chorus.

duBois makes a powerful case for shifting critical emphasis from mockery to laughter as an insurrectionary vibration. In Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York (1967), translated from the French 1952 edition), laughter is an act of emancipatory intemperance, of bodily dissolution as escape from the control of the colonial oppressor. The phenomenology of laughter, the choreographics or choreophonographics of laughter, encompasses laughter’s vibrations and its indecent gaping at the purely representational. It constitutes the political not as the carnivalesque, or liberal inclusion-as-containment, but as an infinite, unforeseeable force of de-actualization. There is a kind of choreographic swarming even in the languaging of comic language, a rendition of the affective contradictions of laughter.

I am particularly taken by duBois’ compelling observation that ‘we can see, in such contemporary movements as the Yellow Umbrellas, the Sunrise Movement, Occupy, and Black Lives Matter, resistance to defined leadership, to named figures who stand for the

group as a whole, and by contrast, the cultivation of habits of collective decision-making and equality that could look back to ... the wild anarchy of [ancient] choruses' (xiii). This wild anarchy is what also brings her to see comic politics beyond the limited perspective of citizenship, and to see in a genre that codifies the most horrifying conspiratorial stereotypes about non-citizens the possibility for the undocumented, a politics that realizes itself, or rather never realizes itself, in the questioning of citizenship itself.

In the comic Chorus duBois daringly and powerfully suggests that we look for aestheticized, embodied expressions of radical impossibility, which we take to be the affirmative negativity for emancipatory change. For duBois, and for this reviewer too, Aristophanic metapolitics stems precisely from the comic enabling of an imaginative encounter with the continuously enfolded inscription of the impossible within the possible. duBois deftly shows that Aristophanic choreophonographics immerse us in a *super*-real process of continuous *poiēsis* of the word and the world, broken to be rebuilt anew, all over again. As Judith Butler observes, 'The global attacks on gender studies [and] critical race theory ... are linked with the situation of endangered scholars who are forced', like the protagonists of Aristophanes' *Birds*, 'to leave their universities and ... their countries ... because of the content of their scholarship' ('Endangered Scholarship, Academic Freedom, and the Life of Critique', *Critical Times* 5.2 (2022), 399–423, at 399). Butler's suggestion for responding to these attacks is to 'reformulate and publicize the critical nature of our work as central not only to the university but to democracy more broadly' (400). Aristophanic comedy, duBois shows us in her magnificent book, can participate in this inquiry. And that is an important reason why it matters, and should matter.

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