I. INTRODUCTION

Aristophanes, the last — and greatest — poet of Old Comedy, is Europe's first — and greatest — comic playwright. The verdict is time's, unless it is mere accident that his plays alone survive into our era. He was not, it is true, invariably successful in his lifetime, and Aristotle's somewhat jaundiced view of comedy did not assist his reputation later. Yet appreciative if not always fully comprehending readers have in every age responded to his χάρις. It was, we may suppose, this indefinable attractiveness that was ultimately lacking in his rivals: Alexandria classified him in a 'triad' or 'big three' with Eupolis and the bibulous Kratinos. Eustathios refers to him, unnamed and unaccompanied, as ὁ κωμικὸς, 'the comic poet'.

We do not know how truly he represents Old Comedy. Sixty years separate his first play (Banqueters, produced in 427 B.C.) from comedy's official recognition — not to mention its earlier 'unrecognized' existence — at the city festival of Dionysos, and we cannot confidently reconstruct from Aristophanes a model of preceding comic drama. There are, of course, numerous and sometimes extensive fragments of earlier and contemporary playwrights, but attempts at the interpretation of such fragments, when divorced from any certain knowledge of their context, may well be more misleading than instructive; and we should not infer from them that playwrights were restricted by rigid rules or immutable conventions. Certain themes and attitudes are shared with Aristophanes, who himself comments on the work of other dramatists, and whose claim to differ from 'Megarian'-style jesting must — given the evidence — be treated lightly. But we need not dispute his further statements — given their plots — that his comedies imported new ideas and 'opened a new vein' in the theatre, nor doubt his specific claim that Wasps is the first comedy in which a chorus made their exit dancing. The plays represent the culmination of Old Comedy, and may well have been in their own day — as they certainly have been since — unique.

The student of Aristophanes may adopt three basic attitudes — ideally, of course, in combination. It is possible to approach the plays (1) as a source for political or social history: Plato recommended them to Dionysios of Syracuse when the latter wished to learn more about Athens. A study of this kind is rewarding in itself, and forms a useful (indeed, essential) counterweight to the mainly linguistic/literary studies in which many older classicists have been nurtured (it is sometimes still considered, one suspects, a little shaming to display
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any intimate acquaintance with, or interest in, the pots and pans of a Dikaiopolis' kitchen). The comedies are unrivalled — except, perhaps, on a smaller scale by Theophrastos' Characters — as a primer, combining entertainment with instruction, on domestic, municipal, and socio-political arrangements in contemporary Athens.

(2) as a work of literature, a book: 'To this day', wrote T.R. Glover, 'most people who talk about Sophocles seem to me to think he was a book.' This belief may readily attach to any ancient dramatist: normally, his play had one, and only one production, and his reputation with posterity depended — like that of other, non-dramatic writers — on readers of his words upon the page. Aristophanes' pages show (a) fantastic 'plots'; (b) language, style, and rhythms of astounding versatility; (c) widely ranging verbal wit and humour. All these, and the formal structure that encloses them, a reader can appreciate in detail, though appreciation and enjoyment are increased if he also sees the comedies.

(3) as plays: this approach asks (a) attentive and imaginative reading, with a willingness to pardon the many inconsistencies — of no importance to an audience in the theatre — which such a close reading will uncover; (b) knowledge of the ancient theatrical conventions and the limits they impose upon production. The present essay will endeavour to combine dramatic and literary comment: its scope excludes detailed examination of contemporary Athenian life and manners.

NOTES

Books listed in the Select Bibliography are cited either by author's name alone or (in case of ambiguity) by author's name and abbreviated title.

3. Hor. Sat. I. 4. 'Eupolis atque Cratinus Aristophanesque poetae i atque alii quorum comedia priscarum est.'
5. 486 B.C. See I.G. ii². 2325, Suda s.v. Χιαονος ης.
8. C. 547; E. 584.
13. A notable exception, in comedy, was *Frogs* (Hypothesis I. 32, III. 17).
14. 'One misses the largeness of Aristophanes unless one appreciates his gift for self-contradiction', Whitman, p. 24.