

# The *Ecclesiazusae* and the *Republic*

HUNTER ELLIS  
LEWIS AND CLARK COLLEGE

---

“Many of the things we are saying, being contrary to custom, would stir up ridicule, if carried out in practice in the way we are telling them.”

(Plato, *Republic*, 452a)

## I. Introduction

In the end of the fourth book of Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates completes the task that Glaucon had given him at the beginning of Book II. He defines justice by examining an Ideal State, and shows that a well-ordered state, like a well-ordered soul, is preferable to one in disarray. He defines the Ideal State in specific terms: its citizens<sup>1</sup> are to hold property in common; they are to abide by the sexual “lottery” implemented by the State; and able women are not to be dissuaded from holding offices normally reserved for men. Around the same time,<sup>2</sup> Aristophanes produced a play depicting his own ideal state with provisions similar to those we find in Plato. Since both authors proposed constitutions that differ greatly from the existing Athenian constitution, and since the two proposals resemble each other so closely, scholars have given the relevant parallels between the two works considerable attention.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I will summarize the various interpretations put forth by scholars attempting to explain these congruencies, offer a somewhat novel solution, and explain why my solution is preferable to at least the consensus explanations.

---

<sup>1</sup> There is disagreement among scholars as to whether Plato’s “communism” extends to the craftsman class or not. Though it seems unlikely to me, I will not consider the issue in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> This is a point of contention among some scholars and will be the focus of the ensuing paper.

<sup>3</sup> For an extensive list of the earlier discussions on the topic, see James Adam, ed., *The Republic of Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 1:345.

## II. The Parallels

Aristophanes' comedy tells the story of a group of women led by Praxagora ("Woman Effective in Public")<sup>4</sup> that infiltrates the Athenian assembly one day and passes sweeping legislative changes designed to save the city. The women's proposals call for city-wide abolishment of private property, communal housing, and sexual equality—for example, Praxagora decrees that good-looking young men and women must have sex with ugly older partners before they can have sex with attractive younger partners (*Ecc.* 591-2, 674, 614-618).<sup>5</sup> This decree by Praxagora parallels Plato's suggestion that women participate in government, that goods be held in common, and that the state mandate sexual practices. The discerning reader will quickly notice that the women's legal reforms in the *Ecclesiazusae* do not exactly match Plato's, but similarities in theme are not the only thing at work here. James Adam skillfully points us toward seven passages in which there are parallels in language as well as in style.<sup>6</sup> We will explore some of these parallels in order to get a firmer grasp on how these two compositions correspond and the controversy that has ensued among scholars in their attempt to explain these correspondences.

The first and perhaps most textually explicit parallel between the *Republic* and *Ecclesiazusae* comes at lines 465b and 635, respectively. In each, the authors ask how, in the absence of a nuclear family, a person will know his father, son, or brother in order to avoid the possibility of parricide, or sons "pissing" on (*Ecc.* 642) their fathers. The answer in both cases is that each will treat the other as if they were their father or son, thus bringing peace and harmony to the State (*Ecc.* 637, *Rep.* 463b-c). Another similarity occurs at line 679 in the *Ecclesiazusae*, when Praxagora claims that she will use wine, water, and dinner as rewards for the brave soldiers. Plato makes a similar proposal at lines 468c-e when he

---

<sup>4</sup> This translation is from Bernard Freyberg, *Philosophy and Comedy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 113.

<sup>5</sup> All citations from the *Ecclesiazusae* are from Aristophanes, *Assembly of Women (Ecclesiazusae)*, trans. Robert Mayhew (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Adam, 350-51.

extols Homer's methods of decorating his heroes through gastronomical incentives. There are five more passages that Adam cites as being analogous, but these two illustrate some of the clearest examples.<sup>7</sup>

### III. Interpretations

The question then arises: why do these two pieces, each inarguably written within a span of thirty years,<sup>8</sup> resemble each so closely? Logic allows us four possible conclusions:

- a. Plato copied Aristophanes, applying his philosophical modification of the poet's comical innovations.
- b. Aristophanes got his ideas from Plato.
- c. They each drew from a common source.
- d. Coincidence.<sup>9</sup>

#### ***a. Plato Copied Aristophanes***

The first possibility that we will look at is that Plato got his ideas from Aristophanes. While this argument may at first strike the reader as absurd—Plato was, after all, a serious philosopher, and it would have been unlikely for him to base the *Republic* solely on a comedy—there are a few details to consider before this possibility is rejected. In fact, passages in the *Republic* seem to refer to Aristophanes' play, especially at line 452b and following: "We must not be afraid of all jokes of the kind

---

<sup>7</sup> Adam also sees parallels at *Rep.* 457c and *Ecc.* 614; 458b and 583; 462a and 594; 464d and 657-673; 465a and 641-643. See Adam, 1:350-51.

<sup>8</sup> Here we begin to tackle the question of chronology. Traditional estimates place the *Republic* between 380 BCE and 370 BCE; see Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1974), ix, and E. David, *Aristophanes and Athenian Society of the Early Fourth Century B.C.* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984), 21, 92n. *Ecclesiazusae* was first performed between 393 and 390 BCE, 392 being the most popular estimate. See Mayhew, 10, and K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (London: Batsford, 1972), 190.

<sup>9</sup> While coincidence is surely a *logical* possibility, I will not discuss it in this paper for two reasons: first, there is no evidence that allows us to argue for *or* against this conclusion, and second, because it would invalidate all the other reasons that scholarship has led us to so far.

that the wits will make.”<sup>10</sup> This passage, with its reference to comedy in general, could be used to support the notion that Plato’s political ideas had precedence in the theater. I do not, however, think that the evidence suggests that Plato got his *ideas* from Aristophanes, nor that the *Ecclesiazusae* was necessarily produced before the *Republic*.<sup>11</sup> However, pure logic dictates that we at last consider the priority of the *Ecclesiazusae* to the *Republic*, and though I do not agree with this conclusion, I consider it the best evidence in support of that claim. Though it is safe to say that Plato’s ideas did not originate with Aristophanes, I am convinced that he was in some way influenced by the comic and that they were in a “conversation” of sorts.

***b. Aristophanes Copied the Republic.***

The second theory likewise runs into difficulties, though of a different sort. It is generally believed that the finished version of the *Republic* was published at some time between 380 and 365 BCE (see note 4 above). Thus, the idea that Aristophanes’ *Ecclesiazusae* is a parody of the *Republic* in its current form seems chronologically impossible. Furthermore, some scholars, notably Bergk and Meineke, suggest that Aristyllus, who appears in the *Ecclesiazusae* as a coprophiliac, is Plato.<sup>12</sup> If this suggestion were so, one could make the point that a reference to Plato in the *Ecclesiazusae* is evidence that that Aristophanes is parodying the *Republic*. It is certainly possible that Aristyllus is Plato—Plato used to be called Aristocles, of which Aristyllus would be the diminutive, insulting form.<sup>13</sup> However,

---

<sup>10</sup> Freyberg, 112.

<sup>11</sup> Rather, Plato could be simply anticipating that his proposals in the *Republic* are ripe for parody. It should be noted that, while this first theory presents itself as one *logical* explanation of the parallels between the *Ecclesiazusae* and the *Republic*, there is little scholarship supporting this view.

<sup>12</sup> For a summary of Bergk and Meineke’s views, see Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae*, ed. R. G. Ussher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 165, and Adam, 348, respectively. On Aristyllus as a coprophile, see Mayhew, 85 and 68n.

<sup>13</sup> Adam, 348.

apart from the name, this character is hardly recognizable as Plato.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Middle Comedy, the category into which the *Ecclesiazusae* is generally placed,<sup>15</sup> tended to shy away from personal satire.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, the fact that passages of the *Ecclesiazusae* mirror those in the *Republic* remains. The echoes—and the fact that each author is depicting a drastically new system of government—are too strong to be overlooked. Despite this fact, there is not a homogeneous continuity between the two works. There remain dramatic differences in the political programs described by the two authors that need to be examined. First, Plato’s communism and sexual selection may only be confined to the guardian classes,<sup>17</sup> whereas Praxagora’s decrees are city-wide (*Rep.* 423c ff.; *Ecc.* 577 ff.). Plato is relatively quiet about the craftsman class, but it is probable that they will at least own property.<sup>18</sup> Second, the entire parallel between Plato’s and Aristophanes’ “community of wives and children” begins to fall apart if we examine it more closely. Praxagora is in favor of *equal-opportunity* sex—the least “fit” are forced to mate with the “fittest,” which would beget a homogenous “average” race, were it presented as a reproductive program. But Plato’s scheme, elaborated in Book V, entails the opposite of this scheme. For Plato, the State is in charge of who mates with whom (*Rep.*, 460a). Unlike Praxagora, Plato does not care about the feelings or reproductive rights of the ugly, less fit members of his State. Instead, his breeding program is instituted with the aim of producing a highly differentiated citizen body, with the best people mating with the other best people to create more of the best people. Thus he

---

<sup>14</sup> Aristophanes would probably have done a better job identifying those he was satirizing, if that had been his intent. See the introduction to *Clouds* in Douglas M. MacDowell, *Aristophanes and Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 130, and Adam, 348.

<sup>15</sup> Mayhew, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas K. Hubbard, “Utopianism and the Sophistic City,” in *The City as Comedy: Society and Representation in Athenian Drama* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 35.

<sup>17</sup> Plato does not say definitively whether or not technicians and craftsmen will have their reproductive lives regulated, though the benefits derived from his program of eugenics seem to serve the guardian class best.

<sup>18</sup> That is, if *Kallipolis* is to be a functional state, those with practical *technē* must possess the tools and materials necessary to create artisanal products. Thus, we can suppose that it is most likely that the lower classes will have private property of some sort.

enforces a “strict division of the classes,”<sup>19</sup> which is not at all what Praxagora had in mind.<sup>20</sup> Hence, a close examination of the apparent similarities between Praxagora and Plato reveals incongruities, and we can begin to see that attempts to show that Aristophanes copied Plato whole-cloth have generally been misguided.

**c. There Was Something “in the Air.”**

Faced with the difficulties of the previous two theories, many scholars<sup>21</sup> have adopted the third theory, asserting that both authors drew from a third source. Herodotus mentions Agathyrsians (Scythians) and Libyans who practiced “sexual communism” (*Herod.* IV, 104 and 180), each with the supposed aim of promoting a spirit of brotherhood amongst the tribesmen—although this could be an instance of Greek rationalization, as Mayhew reminds us.<sup>22</sup> The constitution of Sparta was also well-known to the Athenians. Sparta’s distribution of land and the presence of a military aristocratic ruling class, overseen by a council of twelve elders and two kings,<sup>23</sup> are echoed in Books IV-V of the *Republic*. But Plato differentiates Kallipolis from a *timocracy* such as one might find in Sparta in Book VIII. Aristoxenos says in a fragment that Plato lifts his plans for Kallipolis from Protagoras,<sup>24</sup> and Hubbard tells us that Cleisthenes, Democritus, and Archytas all articulated political programs in which the sharing of wealth was intended to bring about social harmony.<sup>25</sup> There may be some truth to these arguments: Plato was undoubtedly influenced by the Pythagoreans, and Archytas himself was a member of this sect. However, it is likely that that group’s influence on Plato was limited to his theories on the tripartite soul

---

<sup>19</sup> Karl Popper, *The Spell of Plato*, vol. 1 of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 5th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 86.

<sup>20</sup> It is important to keep in mind as well that Praxagora did not have any sort of eugenics or breeding program in mind—she simply wanted “equal opportunity” sex for everyone.

<sup>21</sup> See Ussher, MacDowell, and Hubbard.

<sup>22</sup> Mayhew, 25.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of Lycurgus’ “communist” reforms, including the abolition of private property and redistribution of land, see Plutarch’s *Life of Lycurgus*, chapters 8-10 especially.

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth H. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 1972): 201.

<sup>25</sup> Hubbard, 36.

and Philosopher-Rulers.<sup>26</sup> As these theories do not figure into the *Ecclesiazusae*, citing the Pythagoreans as a potential “common source” seems dubious at best (Klosko, 60-63 and 70-71).<sup>27</sup>

In addition, Aristotle makes the possibility of a common source difficult when he claims that no one before Plato, philosopher or statesman, had ever proposed a state that held women and children in common (*Pol.* 1273b). This statement of Aristotle’s is cause for some consternation among scholars: if Plato was the first to propose such a constitution, then surely his *Republic* came before Aristophanes’ *Ecclesiazusae*—an important chronological detail, generally thought impossible, to which we will return later. This apparent contradiction to Aristotle’s claim can easily be explained, however; Aristotle, though familiar with the *Ecclesiazusae*, would not have considered it an actual proposition of a constitution. The poet Aristophanes would likewise not have ranked among statesmen or politicians. Herodotus’ reports predated Plato’s *Republic*, but again, barbarian tribes’ customs would not have held much sway in the minds of Athenian intellectuals, and Aristotle would not have taken their constitutions seriously. In the end, Aristotle hinders those who favor a “common source” theory regarding the congruities of the texts. If Plato was the first “credible source” proposing these reforms, then neither author could have drawn from a common source, in the concrete sense of the word. This conclusion leaves subscribers to “common source theory” no choice but to claim that the idea of a communistic, utopian city was merely “in the air” (see note 9). While the idea surely was “in the air,” we shall see that there was more to it than that.

We have now examined each of the prevalent theories and seen that while each has its own merit, each still leaves questions unanswered. It seems improbable that Plato plagiarized a comedy—that his seed of inspiration came solely from Aristophanes. It is also chronologically and thematically difficult to allow that Aristophanes copied from the completed *Republic*. This process of elimination

---

<sup>26</sup> For the Pythagoreans’ influence on Plato, see Cicero, *De republica*, Book 1, Section 16. On Archytas as a Pythagorean and Pythagoreans influence on Plato, see George Klosko, *The Development of Plato’s Political Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 60-61.

<sup>27</sup> George Klosko, *The Development of Plato’s Political Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1986): 60-63 and 70-71.

leaves us to resort to the idea that they each drew from a common source—yet attempts to provide concrete evidence of such a source have been speculative at best. A cautious scholar would then maintain that these ideas were simply floating around Athens at the beginning of the fourth century BCE and that Plato and Aristophanes coincidentally covered the same ground.<sup>28</sup> But these coincidences seem too fortuitous to chalk up to chance. The ideas and language are too similar to allow me to resign myself to the position that the time was simply ripe for literary representations of “communistic utopias” in Athens. So what are the forces at work here? I propose an idea that has seldom been explored, but which will, I think, paint an equally if not more logical and much more concrete picture of what actually happened.

#### IV. An Unconsidered Possibility

I think that all three theories discussed above have validity, to a certain extent. Though we can easily see how theories (1—Plato copied Aristophanes) or (2—Aristophanes copied Plato) can each work with (3—the ideas were in the air), how can we reconcile (1) and (2) with each other—how could Plato have copied from Aristophanes and vice versa? For the answer, we must turn both to chronology and the texts themselves.

I said before that the *Republic* as we have it (Books I-X, in that order) was not completed until sometime around 375 BCE. However, it seems unlikely that Plato spun it off in a few years' time.<sup>29</sup> It is obviously a central work in Plato's entire corpus and iterates fundamental ideas of his metaphysics.<sup>30</sup> Thus it seems possible, even probable, that earlier versions were produced and perhaps circulated, with or without the author's consent or knowledge. Most Plato scholars accept that Book I was written

---

<sup>28</sup> Ussher is certain that a common source, which he cannot name, is responsible for the coincidences.

<sup>29</sup> Nails' argument, based on strong cases for different dramatic dates of the *Republic*, shows that the *Republic* was “cobbled together and revised over decades.” See Debra Nails, “The Dramatic Date of Plato's *Republic*,” *The Classical Journal* 93 (1998): 385.

<sup>30</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1974), ix.



before the rest of the *Republic*—its format and language are different from the rest of the work.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, it reaches a familiarly Socratic ending: *aporia*.<sup>32</sup> But Book I mentions none of the things with which the *Ecclesiazusae* is concerned—Aristophanes could not have gotten the idea for his play from the first book.

### ***The "Proto-Republic"***

There is, however, another possibility—that of a “proto-*Republic*”: an earlier, incomplete version of the *Republic*. This idea is in itself controversial,<sup>33</sup> but I think it is the only possibility that adequately explains how well the *Republic* and *Ecclesiazusae* dovetail. Holger Thesleff provides an illuminating discussion of the possibility of a “proto-Republic,” and I will go over some of what he says. His main evidence for the existence of an incomplete version of the *Republic* is the “re-cap” in the *Timaeus* of the “discourse [Socrates] delivered yesterday” (*Tim.* 17c). What Socrates says concerns the sexual reforms and communal property, not the Sun, Line, Cave, or Philosopher-Rulers. This focus implies that the discussion to which he was referring was not actually “finished”; Plato returned to and elaborated on it after the *Timaeus* was published.

In order to assign a date to the proto-*Republic*, Thesleff uses evidence from a pamphlet distributed by Polykrates and Plato’s *Apology*.<sup>34</sup> Though I do not necessarily agree with Thesleff’s dating

---

<sup>31</sup> Ruby Blondell, “Letting Plato Speak for Himself,” in G. A. Press, *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 128.

<sup>32</sup> Blondell, 136-37.

<sup>33</sup> Adam seems to dismiss the “separatists” and insists that the two questions should be kept separate. I think that the two questions are completely intertwined, as the anachronism between the works seems to be the only thing keeping scholars from wholeheartedly agreeing that Aristophanes is parodying Plato. See Adam, 353.

<sup>34</sup> Thesleff spends thirteen pages attempting to prove what I have simply glossed over, but he does sum it up nicely on 115: “Proto-*Republic*”—*Ecclesiazusae*—*Apology*—Polykrates; see Holger Thesleff, “Studies in Platonic Chronology,” *Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum* 70 (1982): 115. However, Thesleff is certainly not without detractors. David finds the idea of a ‘Proto-*Republic*’ especially abhorrent, standing by c. 375 as the most likely date of publication of the *Republic* and asserts that the theater-going Athenian audience would not have been familiar with Plato’s ideas, even if they had been circulated; see David, 21. Why then, would Aristophanes choose to parody him? An answer lies in some of the very ideas that David puts forth: that the idea was “in the air.” The audience did not need to know that Aristophanes had Plato in mind—they still would have found the play funny.

of the *Apology*, his conclusion supports my general thesis: Plato was miffed by the hostile reception given to the proto-Republic by Aristophanes, and probably others, and the proto-Republic was circulated before the *Ecclesiazusae*.<sup>35</sup>

### **Aristotle and the *Timaeus***

Accepting then the probability, or at least the possibility, of a proto-*Republic*, we can move on. Exactly what was written or disseminated by 392 BCE cannot be known with complete confidence, but I think that by exploring the text of the *Republic* and the ancient evidence provided by Aristotle and Plato himself, we might be able to glean some hints. The *Timaeus* has already been discussed, and it leaves us fairly certain that the *Republic* that it referred to contained no mention of Philosopher-Rulers or the advanced educational system that they were to receive.<sup>36</sup> It seems, then, that the proto-*Republic* contained Books II-V, but only the first half of V.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, if these gaps alone were not enough

---

Furthermore, the intellectual “elite” would probably have been familiar with Plato’s preliminary sketches. Plato himself would have recognized the jab, and that was what was important. Debra Nails offers similar arguments in neglecting the date assigned to the *Apology* by Thesleff while agreeing upon the existence of the “Proto-*Republic*.” See Debra Nails, *Agora, Academy, and the Conduct of Philosophy* (Dorrecht: Klumer Academic Publisher, 1995), 116. An important addition to Thesleff’s arguments that she makes is the fact that “there is *no* [emphasis in original] hard evidence—neither from plays, nor speeches, nor any other literary production contemporary with Plato—that refers to...” the Sun, Divided Line, Cave, Philosopher Kings, and other passages in the *Republic* generally regarded as middle to late period Platonic metaphysics. See Nails, *Agora*, 117. Nails continues to argue for—indeed, almost takes for granted—the Proto-*Republic* in a more recent paper; see Debra Nails, “Plato’s Republic in Its Athenian Context,” in *International Plato Society, IX Symposium Platonicum: Plato’s Politeia* (Tokyo: Keio University, 2010), 56.

<sup>35</sup> Thesleff does not commit himself to a specific method through which the public might have received the ‘Proto-*Republic*,’ nor do I. It is possible that Plato gave it in a speech, or an unpublished manuscript was circulated without his consent, or even that through discussions with his friends and colleagues his ideas became known among the Athenian intellectuals.

<sup>36</sup> To add emphasis to this point, the recapitulation concludes with Socrates asking Timaeus if they had “omitted...[any] point.” Timaeus says no—this was “precisely what was said.” See Plato, *Timaeus*, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989), 9:19b.

<sup>37</sup> Nails thinks that the ‘Proto-*Republic*’ contained II, III, V, and VII; see Nails, *Agora*, 117. Why she thinks that Book VII is part of an earlier “tier” of work is beyond both me and the scope of this paper, especially as that book contains the famous Allegory of the Cave and instructions on the education of Philosopher Kings, neither of which can really be considered early Platonic metaphysics. Furthermore, nothing in Book VII is paralleled in *Ecclesiazusae*, and Nails relies, as I do, on Aristophanes’ parody to establish the presence of a ‘Proto-*Republic*.’

evidence, we will see that evidence from Aristotle confirms the assumption with his own criticism of the *Republic*.

Thomas Robinson gives us an illuminating article on Aristotle's treatment of the *Republic*, thereby confirming the existence of a proto-*Republic*. According to Robinson, Aristotle has "divorced the political recommendations from their broader metaphysical context",<sup>38</sup> and has instead focused solely on the pragmatic implications of commonly held wives and property. Robinson also cites Aristotle's "unwillingness to engage [with Plato] in argument at [a] meta-level,"<sup>39</sup> and attributes both "errors" [my quotations] to a failure to "distinguish...his inaccurate understanding of what the *Republic* was up to from what Plato may *actually* [my italics] have written."<sup>40</sup> It is Robinson's claim that Aristotle is purposely referencing Plato in a "selective way,"<sup>41</sup> and that one possibility for this is a *Republic* that "went through several stages of publication by Plato himself."<sup>42</sup> I think that Aristotle was criticizing the proto-*Republic*, a work devoid of the metaphysics of Plato's Middle Period that could have still been in circulation, or perhaps was even better known by the majority of Athenians. Not only does this reading give much-deserved credit to Aristotle's aptitude as a literary critic, but it dovetails nicely with the evidence provided by the *Timaeus* of the kind of proto-Republic, that all these ancient sources had at hand, including Aristotle, Aristophanes, and Plato himself.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, it has been noted that while the general theme of the reforms that Praxagora introduces to Athens resembles that of the *Republic*, the reforms' particulars differ greatly. This difference would make sense if Aristophanes offered some of the character Polemarchus' criticisms (423e) in his *Ecclesiazusae*, after which Plato addressed them in his reworking of the beginning of Book

---

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Robinson, "Aristotle as a Political Critic," in *Aristotelian Political Philosophy*, ed. K. I. Boudouris (Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture, 1995), 155.

<sup>39</sup> Robinson, 157.

<sup>40</sup> Robinson, 157.

<sup>41</sup> Robinson, 153.

<sup>42</sup> Robinson, 153.

<sup>43</sup> Again, Fine's argument on 117, cited above, reinforces Robinson's argument.

V—a prospect that, as we can now see, seems quite likely. A few careless statements<sup>44</sup> claiming that community of wives, children, and property should be held in common would be ideal fodder for a witty comedian such as Aristophanes. If all he heard was that the guardians—soldiers, the backbone of the state—would not own anything, and that sex would be mandated by the State, he would most certainly feel compelled to put this theory into practice—in a comedy, of course—to see how it played out. This is exactly what Aristophanes did.<sup>45</sup> Based on the treatment given by Aristophanes, I suggest a proto-*Republic* that consisted of Books II-IV/V<sup>46</sup> and continued on to VIII-IX.<sup>47</sup> In summary, Aristophanes was the first critic to object, as Polemarchus does in the beginning of Book V, to Plato’s political and social innovations, and Plato was forced to rework the opening of Book V to address the concerns that Aristophanes brought to his attention.

#### V. The *Republic*: Internal Evidence of a “Proto-*Republic*.”

Having already examined the ancient evidence, we will now turn to Socrates’ language as he begins to address Polemarchus’ criticism. Plato reiterates the passage at 423e, where Socrates mentions the community of wives and children. Then Adeimantus reminds Socrates that even if he is right about holding wives and children in common, he had better explain the manner in which this will come about, because there are many ways of doing this, and the right or the wrong way will make “all the difference to the government of your city” (449d-e). He is essentially saying, “look, you did not quite give this idea enough attention, and people could really take this the wrong way and run with it.” Socrates was “still in

<sup>44</sup> Perhaps “careless” is too harsh of a word to use with Plato—nonetheless, we must suppose that his political program laid out in the ‘*Proto-Republic*’ was not a flawless system. Plato was still “searching and in doubt.”

<sup>45</sup> We must bear in mind that however Aristophanes influenced Plato, it was in regard to Plato’s more peripheral ideas, such as the practical functionality of his ideal State. The heart and depth of the *Republic* (i.e. the Sun, Line, and Cave passages) are unique to Plato. I believe that Plato would have eventually included these passages with or without influence from Aristophanes. Still, the inevitability of Plato’s arrival at these beliefs does not preclude the possibility that Aristophanes was responsible for Plato’s initial revisions, which is what I am claiming here.

<sup>46</sup> That is, the beginning of what is now Book V. This could have been attached to Book IV, Book VIII, or on its own.

<sup>47</sup> The “problem” of Book I has no bearing on this argument, so I will ignore it completely. It was probably an earlier dialogue or a proto-“proto-*Republic*,” but we will leave it at that. Book X is also dissimilar in style and theme, so I shall simply consider the proto-*Republic* to have contained “at least” the books mentioned.

doubt and searching” (450d) when the proto-*Republic* was circulated, so he did not yet have all the answers as to how this community of women and children was going to work; Aristophanes took advantage of this uncertainty in his *Ecclesiazusae*.

Then Socrates begins his explanation, showing that his way of communalizing the women and children was vastly different from Aristophanes’ by making a bow to Adrasteia. This reference in itself is important and has been often overlooked by scholars trying to find the connection between the *Republic* and the *Ecclesiazusae*. Adrasteia was an alias for Nemesis. She “hate[d] every transgression of the bounds of moderation, and restore[d] the proper and normal order of things.”<sup>48</sup> This “bow” *could* be interpreted as Plato acknowledging his earlier mistakes and actually “thanking” Aristophanes, who played the role of Adrasteia, for bringing them to his attention. This connection is not definitive by any means, but it is another possible piece in the puzzle.

Socrates then “begs these people not to practice their trade of comedy at our expense,” and says that it is “foolish to think anything ridiculous except what is bad, or try to raise a laugh at any other spectacle than that of ignorance” (*Rep.* 452c). It does not take a vivid imagination to suppose that these remarks are the result of the proto-*Republic* being lampooned. Only after having been insulted at the hands of Aristophanes would Plato preface his introduction of the Philosopher-Ruler<sup>49</sup> by saying that the suggestion needed to be made, even if, “[I]ike a wave of laughter, it will simply drown me in ridicule and contempt.”

---

<sup>48</sup> See Harry Peck, ed., *Harper’s Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1965), 1086.

<sup>49</sup> Plato, *Republic*, section 473c. Note that the Philosopher-Ruler was not mentioned in the *Ecclesiazusae*, making a “Proto-Republic” that contained the completed version of Book V next to impossible—Aristophanes surely would have jumped at the chance to make fun of Philosopher-Rulers.

## VI. Conclusion

Unless we uncover an ancient version of the *Republic* different from the one we already have, we shall never know for certain what the relationship between the *Republic* and *Ecclesiazusae* was. But it does seem nearly impossible that two works written within twenty years of each other and traversing such similar ground had no connection or interaction. I do not think that we should become overzealous in our attempts to pin down a reason for their similarities. But it would be implausible to chalk their differences up to coincidence. I also believe that multiple versions of the *Republic* must have been circulated, even if it was among a small crowd of friends and intelligentsia. It is hard to believe that a mere seventeen years before its publication there were no drafts, speeches, or pamphlets discussing the basic ideas set forth in the *Republic*.<sup>50</sup> Our efforts, then, need to be directed toward finding the *most likely* scenario in which these two works are connected. By examining the chronology and the texts, I find the idea that Plato and Aristophanes were in a “dialogue,” of sorts, to be the most compelling.

---

<sup>50</sup> Again, citing David’s claim that 375 is the “almost commonly” accepted date for publication as a whole (21, 92n).

## Bibliography

Aristophanes. *Assembly of Women (Ecclesiazusae)*. Trans. Robert Mayhew. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1997.

---. *Ecclesiazusae*. Ed. R.G. Ussher. Trans. R.G. Ussher. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1973.

Aristotle. *Politics*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. New York: Cosimo, 2008.

Blondell, Ruby. "Letting Plato Speak For Himself." Press, G.A. *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000. 127-146.

Cicero. *De Republica*. Ed. G.P. Goold. Trans. C.W. Keyes. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959.

David, E. *Aristophanes and Athenian Society of the Early Fourth Century B.C.* Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1984.

Dover, Kenneth James. *Aristophanic Comedy*. Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 1972.

Freydberg, Bernard. *Philosophy and Comedy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Herodotus. *The Histories*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Hubbard, Thomas K. "Utopianism and the Sophistic City." In Dobrov, Gregory. *The City as Comedy*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1997. 23-50.

Klosko, George. *The Development of Plato's Political Theory*. New York: Methuen, 1986.

MacDowell, Douglas M. *Aristophanes and Athens*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Nagy, Gregory. *The Best of the Achaeans*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979.

Nails, Debra. "The Dramatic Date of Plato's Republic." *The Classical Journal* 93 (1998): 383-396.

---. *Agora, Academy, and the Conduct of Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 1995.

---. "Plato's Republic in its Athenian Context." *International Plato Society, IX Symposium*

*Platonicum: Plato's Politeia*. Tokyo, 2010. 55-66.

Peck, Harry, ed. *Harper's Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities*. 3rd Edition. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1965.

Plato. *The Apology*. Ed. G.P. Goold. Trans. Harold Fowler. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

---. *The Republic*. Trans. G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1974.

---. *The Republic of Plato*. Ed. James Adam. Vol. I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926. II vols.

---. *Timaeus*. Ed. G.P. Goold. Trans. R.G. Bury. 8. Vol. IX. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989. XII vols.

Plutarch. *Lycurgus*. Ed. E.H. Warmington. Trans. Bernadotte Perrin. Vol. I. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967. XI vols.

Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies Vol. 1: The Spell of Plato*. 5th edition. Vol. 1. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.

Robinson, Thomas. "Aristotle as a Political Critic." Boudouris, K.I. *Aristotelian Political Philosophy*. Ed. K.I. Boudouris. Vol. I. Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture, 1995. 152-159.

Thessleff, Holger. "Studies in Platonic Chronology." *Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum* 70 (1982).



English-language translations of ἀλκιμοκίβδηλος ἄνθρωπος...ἰσχυρὸς ἄνθρωπος include: *The Female Haranguers*, translated by C. A. Wheelwright (1837). *The Ecclesiazusae*, translation by William James Hickie (1853). *The Revolt of the Women*, translated by Benjamin Bickley Rogers (1872). *The Ecclesiazusae*, translated by Benjamin Bickley Rogers (1902). *The Ecclesiazusae*, or *Women in Council*, published by The Athenian Society (1912), anonymous translator presumed to be Oscar Wilde. Also issued as videocassette. Producer, Harold Mantell; director, Philip Hedley; narrator, George Rose; music, Larry Dann. Presents adaptations of Aristophanes' play *Ecclesiazusae* and Plautus' play *The braggart soldier*. Designed to convey the differing characteristics of Greek and Roman comedy.