



Politics and Anti-Realism in Athenian Old Comedy: The Art of the Impossible (Oxford Classical Monographs)

Ian Ruffell

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The collision of politics and claims of political intervention with the fantastic, absurd, and impossible is characteristic of the Athenian comic drama of the late fifth and early fourth century BCE, and has proved persistently problematic for critics. This book sets the impossible centre-stage and argues that comic impossibility should not be ignored in political readings or, conversely, used as a reason for excluding comedy from political interventions, but that anti-realism and the absurd are precisely the mechanisms through which this sort of comedy had political and social effects, manipulated its audience, and maintained its position in an environment of many competing political claims. Drawing on a variety of theoretical paradigms, from semiotics and humour theory through to ancient literary criticism, this book seeks to articulate a model of comic narrative and argument that can be applied equally both to the impossible worlds of Old Comedy and those of related forms of comedy in other traditions. This model emphasizes complex and provisional conceptual development over the linear and inflexible models of traditional models of comic narrative, and makes the joke and routine the base elements of comic plot. Pervasive comic self-reflexivity ('metatheatre') is presented as a special case of comic impossibility and one that intensifies and consolidates audience response. The on-going dialogue with comic rivals and performance forms provides both foundational matter for comic worlds and a competitive dimension to those worlds, an argument about the best kind of comic world and a demonstration that comic anti-realism has the political and conceptual measure of its more widely-recognized and supposedly realist rivals.

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