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Ancient Sexuality and Gender

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Eros in Classical Athenian Literature

Writing to a friend, Horace describes the man as fascinated by “the discordant harmony of the cosmos, its purpose and power” (*Epistles* 1.12.19). Horace refers to Empedocles’ doctrine of a world order in constant flux between cohesion and fragmentation, Love and Strife, harmony and discord. Compressed into a single concept, this flux represents, in Horace’s phrase, *concordia discors*, a dynamic tension whose meaning offers something for Horace’s friend to ponder.

I mention Horace’s concept of *concordia discors* because, as I argue in this book, it will help us understand the fit between text and context, representation and reality, in literature produced under the classical Athenian democracy. For that fit is, by its very nature, susceptible to destabilization in ways described by David Konstan:

Where society is riven by tensions and inequalities of class, gender, and status, its ideology will be complex and unstable, and literary texts will betray signs of the strain involved in forging such refractory materials into a unified composition. (5)

Texts will always bear the stamp of their social-cultural-political matrix. But when they actively engage tensions within that matrix, when they reflect on what throws their world off balance, then we often find “lapses in unity at the level of plot and characterization” (Konstan 6) — ambient dissonance, one might call it, marring the harmonious unity of the literary *Kunstwerk*.

An example will help. Produced in 424 BCE, Aristophanes’ comedy the *Knights* could be described as a play with not one but two plots (so Brock). Of course, those are not really separate

plots but different ways of “spinning” one, basic story line, the unlikely tale of a Sausage-Seller’s rise from humble street-vendor to democratic leader. But that one plot seems to end up in different places: on the one hand, with the ouster of the play’s demagogic villain and the restoration of the ancestral democracy; on the other, with all three main characters, comic stand-ins for politicians and the Athenian body politic, pursuing self-interest at its most unenlightened and narrowly defined. Again, those are not separate sub-plots, but discrepancies in the development of a single, master plot — discrepancies projecting ambivalence about democracy as a system in which the collectivity, the *dēmos*, has succeeded to the powers, perks, and vulnerabilities of an absolute monarch (Wohl 105–23, 215–69; McGlew 183–212), a system freeing individuals and groups to compete in a zero-sum game destabilizing the system.

And through it all runs the theme of *erōs*, desire to possess and dominate love-objects — pleasure, power, honor, wealth — that in their turn possess and dominate the desiring subject (Scholtz “Terms”). But what about the playwright’s ambition — his *erōs* — to win a favorable hearing for his play? Is it not ironic that Aristophanes, to make his critique stick, avails himself of a *rhētōr*’s trick in attacking tricky rhetoric, and goes in for some audience-bonding of his own when satirizing the audience-bonding of politicians? We see, then, our playwright fighting rhetoric with rhetoric and doubtless enjoying himself in the process. But to the extent that his play mirrors what its satire targets, does it not at some level bite its own tail? Does not any work that goes in for social or political commentary, yet voices its critique from within the frame of its focus? (Slightly adapted from opening to Scholtz *Concordia Discors*.)

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