Concordia Discors: Eros and Dialogue in Classical Athenian Literature

by Andrew Scholtz

This book takes a close look at Athenian democracy as dialogue and at literary reflections of that dialogue. Its focus is dissonance between communitarianism and individualism, consensus and conflict, in the works of authors for whom erōs, passionate, destabilizing desire, expressed that dissonance. My approach is an untried one for this kind of topic. In the past, scholars taking the pulse of Athenian society have pursued symptomatic reading of texts reflecting the Sturm und Drang of Athenian ideology, a technique allowing them to palpate the surface of texts for the mindsets that lie beneath. With symptomatic reading and its insights as my starting point, I ask what can be learned from an asymptomatic approach, one concerned with the text as Gestalt, what Holquist calls “the struggle to effect a whole out of the potential chaos of parts.” Through “aesthetic reading” building on the work of Bakhtin and others, I argue for concordia discors in works attuned to the songs Athenians sang about themselves—dissonance, in other words, as integral to the textual record of an author’s “hearing.”

After an introductory chapter, I undertake four case studies. In the first, I examine divergent implications of city-erōs in the Periclean Funeral Oration: erōs as, on the one hand, a lover’s generosity toward his beloved, on the other, a lover’s self-centered pursuit of a love-object. In the next, I look at the lover-as-politician image in Aristophanes’ Knights, where erōs expresses a whole tangle of contradictory reciprocities, symmetries, and asymmetries—strategies, in other words, whereby power is got through surrender, and dominance through subservience. I then turn to Aristophanes’ Lysistrata and Assembly-women, comedies in which consensus and individual autonomy contend as rival values under democracy. Following that, I consider Socrates as a kind of boundary phenomenon, a figure for the dialogical self as a negotiation between Self and Other, in works of Plato and other Socratics. I close by considering the methodological and ethical implications of my findings, and their relevance for today’s world.