

In view of the upsurge of interest in recent years in the study of Greek cultural attitudes to exchange, money, and coinage (e.g. Kurke; Seaford; von Reden), it is a striking fact that despite the obvious importance of economic themes in Aristophanes' *Wealth* there has been no discussion of the play that focuses specifically on these issues. This paper bridges that gap with an analysis of the play that is grounded in recent and exciting scholarship on exchange in Greek culture and reads the play with an eye on the money. There are two particular objectives: firstly, to look at how the play presents money; secondly, to examine its attitude to exchange.

Aristophanes' *Wealth*, surprisingly considering its theme, makes very sparing use of unambiguous references to *coined* money and when it does, in contrast to the general approbation of other forms of riches, these references are overwhelmingly deprecatory. Apart from a single reference to gold currency, the value of which is indisputable, coined money appears in *Wealth* either in paltry amounts, or in contexts which are explicitly negative, or both: the sycophant is twice referred to as a piece of false-struck coin (862, 957); drachmas are used by the old woman in exchange for sexual favors (982); Chremylus flings them back at her in an insult (1019); and obols are only mentioned as all but worthless (125, 329). Thus *Wealth* presents the acquisition of vast riches as a self-evident good, but casts the exchange of smaller sums of money as the venal, fraudulent, and otherwise immoral economic activity of people who are characterized as being of dubious credentials. While the play apparently promotes the redistribution of money in Athenian society among those who deserve it (the view of Sommerstein 1984), actually the dream that it weaves for its audience is not a new vision of how a strongly moral egalitarian society could work (cf. Lévy 1997; Konstan and Dillon; Olson 1990) but the hope of achieving vast wealth on the scale of a Nicias or an Alcibiades. Far from offering a political solution to the problem, *Wealth* legitimizes divisive economic inequality and hierarchy by idealizing the position of the wealthy aristocrat.

Although the god Wealth's recovery from blindness has long been recognized as an important narrative juncture (Konstan and Dillon; Olson 1990), it has not been remarked that his transition from blindness to sight also charts, symbolically, a shift from one form of exchange to another. Wealth's move from blindness to regained sight, which has long been thematically linked to a restitution of justice, also marks a change from 'disembedded' transactions to embedded transactions. The blind god cannot see and therefore cannot know the parties to the transaction, but once his sight is restored exchange takes place between transactors who are known to each other and so stand in long-term relationships of trust, mutual benefit, and interdependence (esp. 834-37 cf. 1113-17). The model, then, for the form of exchange that the play idealizes is not the level playing-field of anonymous transactions using token coinage, whose value is guaranteed by the authority of the *polis*, but rather the world of aristocratic gift exchange – strongly embedded and founded upon the exchange of commodities of intrinsically high value.

The project of the hero of *Wealth* could be most succinctly described as a quest to end the equivocation in the word *ponêros* between its economic and moral senses: so that the good will become rich and the wicked poor. This paper demonstrates that in the play, behind the veil of this 'utopian' dream of an end to poverty and the creation of a just society, is concealed a tenaciously conservative attitude to money and exchange that takes refuge in a nostalgic vision of a happier and wealthier Athenian past. Ultimately the play is merely a palliative for the woes of impoverished

Athenians because its apparent utopian vision is systematically 'recontained' by the valorization of the very hierarchy it appears to contest and question.