

MARTIN REVERMANN (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 498 pp., ISBN 978-0-521-74740-0.

The great appeal of *The Cambridge Companion* series is its ability to offer “lively, accessible introductions to major writers, artists, philosophers, topics and periods.” Having a volume in the series devoted to Greek comedy is especially welcome not only because *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy* expands the series’ offerings on ancient drama—it is an ideal companion volume to the well-received *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (1997) and *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre* (2007)—but also because the study of Greek comedy entails such a wide range of topics, issues, and approaches. Regarding this latter concern in particular, the success of *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy* stems from its organization as a “continuum” that moves conceptually through the social and cultural circumstances that shape the interpretation of ancient comedy (3). The result is a volume that excels in balancing concerns of text and performance along with those of historical context and subsequent reception, and that also manages to present fresh perspectives from which students at all levels may contemplate Greek comedy. In particular, editor Martin Revermann and his fellow contributors deserve unreserved praise for keeping this volume from being too “Aristophanes-centric” or “Menander-centric” (6) and, one may add, from being too “Athen-centric” as well. Greek comedy was a highly competitive field with a vital presence outside of Athens, and the authors acknowledge this by presenting their readers with the development of comedy beyond the long shadows cast by Aristophanes and Menander, and independent of prescriptive ideas about the evolution of the genre.

In *Part I Setting the Stage (in Athens and Beyond)*, the authors provide a “topography of the genre” for comedy (5). David Konstan’s chapter (*Defining the genre*) opens the volume with a discussion of the key features of Greek comedy that highlights the propensity of both Old and New Comedy to define themselves “against a constellation of neighboring forms” (29), their own boundaries always distinct from tragedy and yet always shifting in an “evolutionary dance” that both confirms and challenges the norms of drama (42). Zachary Biles (*The rivals of Aristophanes and Menander*) focuses on the intensely competitive nature of Old Comedy, particularly the extent to which open rivalry was, due to the textual constraints of tragedy, the particular preserve of comic poets (44) and how these rivalries fostered the

development of “demagogue comedy” (57). Of particular note in this section is Keith Sidwell’s challenge to the theory of a linear development for comedy from Old, to Middle and New (*Fourth-century comedy before Menander*). In addition to making the reader aware of how much evidence for Middle Comedy we do have (60–64), Sidwell suggests that this evidence—when taken on its own merits, rather than as a way station between Aristophanes and Menander—provides a frame for re-interpreting the diversity of subject and tone in Middle Comedy: The genre may in fact be better understood as “two separate highways” (72), a distinction reflective of Aristotle’s categories of satirical and plot-based comedy, with the two varieties running parallel to each other until the satirical fades under the pressure generated by restrictions on speech. Kathryn Bosher’s chapter (*Epicharmus and early Sicilian comedy*) turns the reader’s attention to the 300-year tradition of comedy in Sicily and south Italy. Bosher’s excellent overview of the wealth of information, albeit fragmentary, for Western comedy provides a context for the career of Epicharmus and for a tradition of theatre created “by tyrants, not by the democracy” (93). In this section’s concluding chapter, *The iconography of comedy*, Eric Csapo surveys the visual evidence that survives for Greek comedy which exists preserved across a surprising variety of media (vase paintings, terracotta masks and figurines, reliefs, mosaics [9]). Csapo moves chronologically through the materials—and provides numerous illustrations—as he emphasizes the influence of Greek comedy on visual arts and urges the importance of integrating these artifacts into a study of Greek comedy for a more comprehensive understanding of performance practices and conditions.

Part II Comic Theatre explores the specifics of performance, focusing on dramatics and dramaturgy, the synergy between performance and audience, and the particular language and diction of Greek comic theater. C.W. Marshall’s chapter (*Dramatic technique and Athenian comedy*) introduces the reader to the structure and features of Old Comedy, and to how these elements informed the audience’s expectations as to what they were going to see on stage (131). In *Character types*—his first contribution to the volume—Ian Ruffell examines the back-and-forth between recognized character types (cook, slave, soldier, etc.) and individual characters. The interplay between stock types and unique individuals was both a sort of dramatic shorthand for the audience and a way to push against, thwart, or confound audience expectations of both plot and humor (165). At the close of this section, Andreas Willi (*The language(s) of comedy*) offers an analysis and overview of the dialect, register, function, and mode of comic language. Of particular note in this chapter is Willi’s discussion of the rapid changes in the register of comic language (175) and his inclusion of the language of Sicilian comedy, which forms a second and distinct dialect for the genre.

Part III Central Themes opens with Stephen Halliwell’s *Laughter*, a

discussion of the fundamental link between *to geloion*, the laughable, and comedy. Here Halliwell surveys what the ancients themselves believed about the origin and nature of laughter, but also provides a well-considered contrast between the different shades of laughter in Aristophanes and Menander, with Aristophanic laughter being that which is always imminent, and Menandrian, that which is often unexpected or delayed for effect (198-202). Ian Ruffell's second contribution, *Utopianism*, considers the contrast between Old Comedy's pointed social commentary and its penchant for the creation of alternative worlds (206). This exploration of how utopias may be used by comedians to affirm or criticize is enriched by the inclusion of Mendandrian utopias, which may lack the magical realism of Aristophanes', but feature instead a "best possible" version of the world for the characters. In *The Greek 'comic hero'*, Ralph Rosen reframes the figure, "taking up the baton", so to speak, from Cedric Whitman, and presents the hero as a focal character created by the comic effect of the collision between the necessities of heroism and the ambiguities of real life. Moreover, beyond this initial effect, the hero also instantiates a "faux heroism" that parallels Aristophanes' representation of himself as a comic poet (239). David Kawalko Roselli (*Social class*) considers the relationship between comedy and social class. The diversity of the Athenian theater audience (242-246) is reflected in the challenges to the established order presented by Aristophanes' heroes, although Aristophanes never presents an unqualified idealization of the lower classes (15). Helene Foley, in *Performing gender in Greek Old and New Comedy*, discusses the constructivist nature of gender on the stage, with male characters having access not only to the garments and accouterments of men—including the grotesque of the phallus— but also to those of women. In contrast, female characters are not only tied to traditional gender roles, but denied the sort of freewheeling and brash gender appropriation and heroism of their male counterparts (273). At the conclusion of this section, Martin Revermann's own chapter (*Divinity and religious practice*) discusses comedy's engagement with the religious. Here, Revermann walks his reader through a seeming paradox: how comedy, which is itself part of a religious festival, flourishes by mocking the divine and its patron god in particular, and yet ultimately reinforces the unassailability of the divine in the real world (285).

Part IV Politics, Law, and Social History focuses on "comedy's interaction with its political and social environment" (16). Alan Sommerstein opens the section with *The politics of Greek comedy*, in which he explores comedy's engagement with "matters concerning the state" and the enmeshment of comedy and politics (291). Moving through the fifth century, Sommerstein observes a more conservative bend to comedy with the fourth century, although the material is scant, yielding apolitical works leading into the rigorously domestic world of Menander. Edith Hall (*Comedy and Athenian festival culture*) discusses dramatic festivals as an

experience that both inverts cultural norms and supports the unity of the city that sponsors them; while the plays themselves may challenge public opinion, the experience of spectatorship creates a sense of community identity through participation in a shared experience (307). In *Comedy and Athenian law*, Victoria Wohl delineates the relationship between the two institutions, an affiliation in which comedy whets the critical instinct that is so important to the judicial elements of the democracy. Here, Wohl makes a compelling case for the courts and comedy as “the vulgar tongue” of the city, a dialect both common (i.e. the lawcourts) and offensive (i.e. the comic stage), but central to communication. To close the section, Susan Lape and Alfonso Moreno (*Comedy and the social historian*) consider Old and New Comedy as sources for social history. Here Lape and Moreno present a thorough redressing of the perceived problems with using Aristophanes as a source for the socio-economic realities of Athens and the supposed benefits of using Menander (337).

Part V Reception deals with the survival of Greek comedy and its subsequent theatrical tradition. Here again, Revermann and his contributors deserve praise for dedicating a full section of the volume to the exploration of how the works of Aristophanes and Menander have been, and continue to be, re-contextualized and re-performed in order to inspire new creative works. This section begins with Richard Hunter (*Attic comedy in the rhetorical and moralising traditions*) discussing the reception of Greek comedy by the *cognoscenti* of the Hellenistic and Roman world. For the educated elite who lived their lives on a public stage, comedy was “good to think with” (373). To borrow lines from Aristophanes or Menander concerning public speech, censorship, or satire allowed the speaker to evince education as well as to illuminate current events, and Hunter supports this interpretation with a discussion of passages from Quintilian, Plutarch, and Dio Chrysostum. In *Contexts of reception in antiquity*, Sebastiana Nervegna considers the Hellenistic and Roman era adoption of comedy into pedagogical curricula and the continuing performance of and preference for Menander, with the plays being seen as compositional models for comedy and as instructive material for building character among young men (402). Michael Fontaine (*The reception of Greek comedy in Rome*) makes the case for Plautine comedy as not merely a translation of a Greek original, but rather as an operatic reboot that made use of “musicalized verse” and integrated song (406). Although Plautus’ audience would have undoubtedly recognized his plays as comedy, Fontaine suggests that Plautine comedy may also be understood as Hellenistic literature, in that it reflects the genre’s predilection for translation and adaptation. In *The transmission of comic texts*, Nigel Wilson provides an overview of how the dramatic texts were reproduced and disseminated, including thoughtful consideration as to what a collector might have to do to get his hands on a copy of a particular comedy subsequent

to performance (425). For the last entry in the volume, Gonda Van Steen (*Snapshots of Aristophanes and Menander: from spontaneous reception to belated reception study*) traces the “reverse polarity effect” of the survival of Menander and Aristophanes, discussing how the ancient’s preference for New Comedy over Old shifted throughout the centuries, thanks in part to the survival of Aristophanes’ comedies and the disappearance of Menander’s until the twentieth century. However, Van Steen is quick to point out—and rightly so—that the ascendance of Aristophanes is also due to his link to the Western intellectual tradition, as well as the long-standing tradition of re-performance in modern Greece (449).

To conclude, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy* strikes an astounding balance between the topics necessary for a thorough discussion of an often-tricky subject. This volume captures the continuing relevance and irrepressible vitality of Greek comedy without sacrificing discussions of text for those of performance, and without subjugating the ongoing reception of these works to the study of their historical moment. From the range of subjects and methodologies covered, to the inclusion of a “Further Reading” section in each chapter, it is clear that Revermann and his fellow authors have composed this volume not only to inform their readers—which it does admirably—but also to equip them to go out and discover still more on their own. As such, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy* is both a welcome addition to the *Cambridge* series and to the library of anyone who studies Greek comedy.

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