

Philocleon triumphs though he resembles Cratinus, or *Knights*, where the Sausage-seller out-Cleons the Paphlagonian, or *Frogs*, where 'Aeschylus' appears as first a bullish Cratinus, then a spokesman for Aristophanes (according to Biles), authoritative characters or positions are continually challenged and undercut. Nor does the poet's voice remain unaffected. At the very point we get nearest to it, say, when Dikaiopolis speaks as/for Aristophanes, the protagonist explicitly *assumes* a role to *deceive* an audience – how far and in what way *are* poet and hero alike? (S. Goldhill, *Poet's Voice*, Cambridge, 1991). When the chorus later claim that the Great King himself agonizes over their poet, taking this boast as sincere is hard, particularly when the praise given to Aristophanes for liberating the Athenians from cheating ambassadors is contradicted in this very play. Again, in the *Clouds'* *parabasis*, when the chorus complain that the audience wasn't clever enough to get the poet's play the first time, one takes it as heartfelt, like Biles, at the expense of the *comedy*. (Do you get it now?)

That is not to say that Aristophanes's *agôn* isn't serious. When Biles allies 'Aeschylus' with Aristophanes at the end of *Frogs*, he is swayed by the verdict of Dionysus, 'an ideal spectator' (213), who in 'implying a pretentious claim to a higher standard of entertainment ... expresses opinions remarkably similar to those Aristophanes takes up elsewhere in his self-positioning against his rivals' (214). But Aristophanes exposes those pretensions from the start, as Dionysus dons a costume to look fearsome, hoping perhaps to reprise his recent starring role in Euripides' *Bacchae* – and Heracles almost dies laughing! Dionysus is *not* just any spectator, but one whose love for *tragedy* means that he elides representation with reality; he takes *too seriously* what the tragedians say. Judge, poet, audience *and* critic are implicated in judgement (E. Barker, *Entering the Agon*, Oxford and New York, 2009).

Aristophanes's *agôn* opens all authorities – including his own – to challenge by representing discourses in rivalry: it both empowers the audience and forces them to judge. The poet whom Dionysus should take seriously, the one who can save Athens by making the audience enter the *agôn* and perform as democratic citizens, is no other than Aristophanes himself (*cf.* B. Heiden, 'Tragedy and comedy in the *Frogs* of Aristophanes', *Ramus* 20, 1991, 95–111).

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RUFFELL (I.) **Politics and Anti-realism in Athenian Old Comedy: the Art of the Impossible**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 499. £70. 9780199587216.

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Ruffell's work aims to carry out an analysis of Old Comedy by getting away from the traditional approaches, which in general are not very prone to deal with questions associated with humour and the absurd. This is why he introduces a more flexible approach. He focuses on topics connected with comic impossibility and the necessary cooperation of the audience in the construction of the fictional worlds of comedy, which the author considers essentially an act of communication. He claims that to value the impact that politics and ideology have on comedy, it is necessary to take into account precisely the role played by the mechanisms of absurd and comic fantasy, mechanisms which comic authors take advantage of in order to put current social and political issues on the stage.

As for the author's own approach, he chooses to depart from the strict frame of Greek philology, introducing elements from other disciplines usually outside the field of classical studies. He appeals to the theories of fictionality, the theory of the possible worlds and cognitive linguistics in his treatment of anti-realism in the building of comic worlds and their relationships with the real world. He resorts to the theory of communication to study how the audience processes what they see on stage and how they cooperate in the fabrication of a fictional world. He uses aspects of the theory of humour to study the mechanisms of comicality. The extensive bibliography at the end of the book is a good example of this variety of interests.

Not only in the field of theoretical assumptions does the author push the boundaries of a 'classics' approach. It is interesting and often provoking the use he makes of a variety of modern comical traditions in which he finds possible equivalents of Old Comedy. He considers that the comparison with these forms can be very instructive for the study of a genre that actually has little to do with the concept of comedy in the Western tradition. On the other hand, he finds common features in some modern forms, represented by films like *Airplane!* or *The Life of Brian* and other Monty Python productions or by TV series like *The Simpsons* or *South Park* (just to mention only some of the many examples named by Ruffell), in which he finds numerous parallelisms in aspects such as the

absurd, the use of jokes or metaphor, which he associates with evidence from the ancient texts.

As for the Greek comic authors, the most quoted by large is Aristophanes, quite probably because it is in whole works where the resources to build the comical plots used by playwrights are best appreciated. Throughout the book Ruffell comments on extensive passages of some of his comedies in order to illustrate different aspects of his analysis, like *Wasps* in chapter 4 or *Acharnians* or *Peace* in chapter 5, dedicated to comic narrative. The extensive quotations and commentaries on Aristophanes' contemporaries – chiefly Kratinos, Eupolis and Phrekrates – are mainly in the last three chapters, where the role of the audience, parody and the rivalries among comic authors are discussed.

This book is without doubt a very recommendable work for those who wish to approach, in a different way from the traditional, the mechanisms of comicality employed by ancient playwrights and it opens new insights in the study of Old Comedy, focusing not only on literary aspects, but above all on its character as an act of communication.

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WRIGHT (M.) **The Comedian as Critic: Greek Old Comedy and Poetics**. London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012. Pp. xii + 238. £65. 9781780930299.

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The non-literal discourse of comedy is the main issue that exercises Wright in this study of the poets of Old Comedy as critics. By 'critic' he means specifically a 'literary critic': he is exploring how Old Comedy anticipates the tradition of ancient literary criticism from Plato and Aristotle onwards. He is also, however, after larger fish, namely the interpretation of Old Comedy in general and the kind of audience for whom the poets were really writing. Because Old Comedy is not literal or 'serious', it must be ironic (chapter 1.1–1.4). The irony and the (in the fullest sense) literary games are to be caught by an educated, élite audience.

Others have suggested that Aristophanes, in particular, has at least one eye on an educated subgroup of the audience, usually by taking the

parabasis of *Clouds* rather too literally. Wright's argument is different. Indeed, he (rightly) points out that the comic play with cleverness (*sophia*) and novelty (*kainotēs*) is distinctly double-edged (see chapters 1.5 and 3 respectively). Rather, the motivations of the poets of Old Comedy are to be explained through the nature of literature (rather than performance) and the difference between élite and mass culture. Irony, parsed here as ambivalence and ambiguity, is the mark of literature which is the province of an élite (see especially 59 for creativity stemming from élite culture). Despite nods to Bourdieu and Raymond Williams, this book is most at home in the language of new and practical criticism, Beardsley, Empson, Richards et al., but also more traditional notions of culture: not mentioned but surely hovering behind this is the ghost of Matthew Arnold.

The main argumentation comes in the second chapter, an expanded version of Wright's article in *CLAnt* 28 ('Literary prizes and literary criticism in antiquity', 2009, 138–77), to the effect that the poets of Old Comedy were not concerned to win prizes. Certainly, the historical success of plays did not particularly bother ancient literary critics, but this seems poor grounds for supposing that the comedians felt the same way. The positive arguments for such concern are that the judging process was 'unsatisfactory' (47), because the audience (and thence judges) were amateurs and sometimes politicized. Both flattery and abuse of the audience (including frequent appeals for victory) could hardly be taken seriously, and therefore must be ironic and indicate an 'anti-prize' mentality (neither follows).

The essence of his suggestion that the poets lacked interest in prizes is this (56): 'The comedians never give the impression that they are *terribly* bothered about their previous failures: after all, they are hardly reticent about mentioning them, and they even make (rather good) jokes out of the situations'. Neither is a good basis for this entirely impressionistic claim (indeed the opposite might more readily follow). Wright (in common with many ironists) is all too clear about what the authors *really* intended and the real concerns of modern readers too: 'we know we ought to admire Proust, but we guiltily read Agatha Christie'. Not me, on either score.

Better arguments for the literariness of Old Comedy come in the fifth and final chapter on parody. For Wright, the sheer quantity of small-scale parody indicates that comic poets wrote for