

NOTICE

ROBSON (J.) *Aristophanes: An Introduction*. Pp. xii + 244, ills. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009 (re-issued in paperback 2024). Paper, £22.99, US\$30.95. ISBN: 978-0-7156-3452-3.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X24001197

R. has produced a guide that is both more and less than a simple introduction to Aristophanes. Typically, introductions to Athenian comedy and tragedy devote significant space to presenting and analysing single plays, usually within individual chapters, in a way that enables readers to grasp the sweep of a given play's plot, characters and major themes, and includes analysis of key moments of dialogue and action as well as illustrative examples of literary style and dramatic technique, among other things. Readers, who are primarily assumed to be, in the first place, students, will thus come away with a fairly coherent and comprehensive appreciation of the plays with regard to their content, literary significance and social and historical background. Even if, overall, such introductions are meant to provide a general appreciation for a dramatic genre, along with an author's place within the development of the genre, the integrity of individual plays remains paramount. R.'s is an introduction of an entirely different sort. His approach is instead thematic, with discussions that fall within two categories that can be broadly defined as historical framework and performance context, on the one hand, and on the other, artistry and comic technique. The arrangement is thus more similar to what one finds in a 'Companion' volume. In so far as the plays themselves contribute to the presentation, it is by way of providing discrete opportunities to illustrate how this or that feature of Aristophanic comedy operates in practice. The advantages of this approach include that R. is able to distil the building blocks, so to speak, of comedy and thus help inexperienced readers obtain an admirably nuanced and refined understanding of what makes Old Comedy distinctive, as well as an appreciation for Aristophanes' challenges and solutions as a practitioner of it. For this introductory approach to succeed best, however, readers will ideally not only have read the plays already, but will also retain a clear enough memory of their plots and other details to enable them to reconnect selected examples to their contexts within a play.

This last consideration will weigh heavily in deciding whether one will be able to rely on this introduction for its intended purpose, as R. obliquely acknowledges in the preface, namely as a guide for undergraduate students, perhaps even for inclusion in course materials (at any rate, the book has just been re-issued in paperback and is now even more accessible to students). Introductions of the first kind described above lend themselves well to courses for the simple reason that their individual chapters can be paired directly with readings of the crucial source material, the plays themselves. The same cannot be said of R.'s chapters. For even though he does an admirable job of delineating in each chapter's introductory remarks which plays will be of primary importance for examination of a given topic, typically this means four or five titles per chapter, and in two cases (in the chapters on 'Aristophanic Politics' and 'Aristophanes as a Songwriter') seven. Nor is the coverage of plays even. *Acharnians*, *Clouds*, *Peace* and *Lysistrata* receive the most attention (contributing to four to six chapters each), while *Birds* and *Ecclesiazousae* contribute to a relatively small extent (one and two chapters), and *Wealth* does not make the cut at all. The other four plays fall somewhere in the middle. A wiser structure, perhaps, given the most likely audience and application for the book, might have been to tie each discussion to a single play, at least primarily, or to a pair of plays that might fit

together in a course syllabus. Thus, for instance, 'Aristophanic Politics' could be adequately treated by examining any one of several different plays. So too, an appreciation of Aristophanes' lyrics might be better facilitated by tracing the contours and contributions of songs in their variety within a single play.

If by this measure, with its more synthetic treatment of the plays, R.'s introduction places a greater demand on novice readers of Aristophanes, it also has appreciable intellectual advantages in enabling him to dissect Aristophanic comedy and put it under a microscope. In many respects R. attempts at an introductory level what M. Silk has done in his monograph *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy* (2000); indeed, his debt to this study can be gauged from the fact that it ranks as probably the most often cited work throughout, and even more so by simple comparison of the chapter titles of both books, which correspond with one another in a number of cases. His ambitious agenda notwithstanding, the book is thoughtfully pitched for its readership. Thus, for example, the chapters follow a regular structure in first offering a prologue that orients readers to the topic of focus while also indicating the range of ways it will be approached in the chapter and indicating the plays that will primarily contribute to the analysis. Chapter discussions are divided into short sections that have a clearly defined point of concentration and effectively relate to the overall arrangement.

The first three chapters adequately put in place basic matters of context: Aristophanes and his career; the performance context and organisation of festivals; the Greek theatre as performance space along with staging and costumes. Here R. is not content to blandly recite information on these topics as an established and necessary background. His presentation is dynamic, in that, to a great extent, he keeps his discussions keyed to passages drawn from the plays and consistently demonstrates for readers how one engages in a responsible and effective selection and evaluation of evidence. As a component of this approach, he is always honest with readers as to the state of our knowledge, alerting them to where evidence is weak, pointing out where questions remain, and implicitly encouraging them to be curious and reflective readers. Those principles pertain to the discussions throughout the book and amount to a signal virtue of the volume as an introduction for less experienced readers. Subsequent chapters delve into trickier literary topics related to Aristophanes as a practitioner of his art, in terms of comic technique (Chapter 4 'Aristophanes the Humorist'; Chapter 5 'The People of Aristophanes'; Chapter 7 'Talking Dirty: Aristophanic Obscenity'), literary quality and generic engagement (Chapter 6 'Tragic Fragments'; Chapter 8 'Waxing Lyrical: Aristophanes the Songwriter'), and political satire (Chapter 9 'Getting the Message: Aristophanic Politics'). This covers a lot of interpretative ground, and R. equips readers with ideas and critical approaches, tending towards both the practical and the mildly theoretical, for example with regard to character, relating the notion of discontinuity to that of recreativity (à la Silk) in order to capture fluidity as an expansive dynamic of Aristophanic comedy. While helping readers obtain a more sophisticated understanding of comedy, R. wisely does not overcomplicate the presentation of approaches, but rather zeroes in on a select few. The range of scholarship he introduces and cites is accordingly relatively narrow, and some of it is quite dated. A concluding section in each chapter on suggestions for further reading would have been a handy way to point outwards. The final chapter is ostensibly on reception; here R.'s consideration of later performance history is far less engaging than his concluding reflections on the challenges and virtues of translating Aristophanes for different audiences and in different times, whether for reading or performance.

R.'s is a valuable addition to available introductions to Aristophanic comedy. Its thematic arrangement poses challenges for incorporating it into a course organised around reading the plays themselves, but students and other relative newcomers to this

dramatic genre will undoubtedly acquire a refined sense for what is distinctive about Aristophanic comedy.

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