

BOOK REVIEW

Costume in the Comedies of Aristophanes. By GWENDOLYN COMPTON-ENGLE. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xiv + 200. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-08379-0.

In the present volume Gwendolyn Compton-Engle offers a fascinating and deeply revealing exploration of the poetics of costume in Aristophanic comedy. While relying and building upon the evidence assembled in L. M. Stone's *Costume in Aristophanic Comedy* (1981) and the many studies by Oliver Taplin, J. R. Green, Eric Csapo, and others, Compton-Engle seeks to lay bare the numerous yet far too little appreciated ways in which costume makes meaning in performance. As her lively introduction makes clear, poets and performers manipulate costume, stripping off elements of their own or others' costumes, layering new elements on top (sometimes but not always as disguise), and transforming or exchanging costumes with others. Some of this very lively traffic in travesty simply serves immediate purposes of comedy, but more of it traces central power dynamics of the plays. Costume is a means of competition, both within the plays where "control over costume is a sign of mastery that marks one character as dominant over another" (8) and also in the poets' competition with each other.

The subsequent four chapters examine the layering of meaning from the body outward. Chapter 2, "The Comic Body as Costume," shows how the use of the *somation* or bodystocking over traditional comic padding creates a male comic body that "is both grotesque and manifestly artificial" (17) and also instantly recognizable as profoundly different from the tragic body. Some female comic bodies, when introduced, are rendered as equally grotesque, while others may have been much less so and perhaps thus intended to read as "real" rather than artificial (36–37—this should prompt some re-thinking of Old Comedy's treatment of femininity).

A briefer analysis of the comedy of the body in *Knights* (giving "grotesque visual form [to] the bodily metaphors that are central to the play," 45) and a much more detailed analysis of the innovative uses of both costumes and female bodies in *Lysistrata* close out this chapter. Having shown how the typical early Aristophanic protagonist, such as Dicaeopolis in *Acharnians*, can aggressively

assert dominance through control of his own and others' costumes, Compton-Engle shows here how "the women in *Lysistrata* control costume... not *because* they are women but *in spite of* the fact that they are women" (58).

Chapter 3, "Cloaks, Shoes, and Societal Redress," unpacks the political and economic comedy of basic elements of the Athenian clothing, especially in *Wasps*, *Assemblywomen*, and *Wealth* (some fundamental observations on *Clouds* also). Cloaks and shoes work together to delineate the boundary between private and public (*oikos* and *polis*) and also between classes in ostensibly democratic Athens. Philocleon's *embades* (outdoor shoes, but not necessarily lower class) and *tribon* (a basic cloak) are fundamental to his jury service and participation in the public realm, while his son Bdelycleon's attempt to force the old man into a *chlaina* (a much fancier and emphatically foreign cloak) and Laconian shoes for a more aristocratic life leads to spectacular failure and possibly (as Compton-Engle suggests) to Philocleon stripping down to the stage naked comic body for the dancing contest that ends the play.

So too it is by purloining their husbands' *embades* and *tribones* that the women of *Assemblywomen* steal their way into control of the city: "a transgression onto public space of the *polis* as much as an inversion of gender" (75). One might wish to consider that all the talk about shoes might be just that: while cloaks were undoubtedly visible markers throughout the space of the open-air theatre, how many could see a difference in shoes? Compton-Engle notes (65) that the vase evidence often shows characters as barefoot—but this is a small point. In *Wealth* the restoration of the god not only transforms the costume along with the conditions of virtually everyone in the play, but the change from rags to better attire also deliberately enacts the movement from a tragic world to a comic one.

Chapter 4, "Disguise, Gender, and the Poet," explores the quest for power through deceitful manipulation of costume in *Acharnians*, *Thesmophoriazusae*, and *Frogs*. Compton-Engle demonstrates how Dicaeopolis's aggressive control of costume in the scene with Euripides connects with his stripping Lamachus of his military garb (and intriguingly connects this with Dicaeopolis's control of aggressive obscenity). This interpretation lays the groundwork for a significantly revisionist understanding of costume and gender in *Thesmophoriazusai*. While acknowledging the wealth of important previous work on this play, Compton-Engle challenges any sweeping identification of mimesis with femininity and focuses on competition and control (100). Where the Old Relative's mimesis fails disastrously, Euripides has some limited successes, especially once he aban-

dons his own tragic plots for comic ones. Dionysus in *Frogs*, however, fails as badly as the Old Relative in controlling both costume and play.

The final chapter before the brief conclusion, “Animal Costumes and Choral Spectacle,” offers some extremely interesting observations on the pre-history of choruses in animal costume and the agonistic rewards for *choregoi* in the pursuit of comic spectacle. It then turns to a richly detailed analysis of the many innovations both visual and performative in the deployment of costume in *Birds*. Peisitairus's not only gains wings for himself but becomes a comic *chorodikaskalos* himself, distributing wings to others in his ascent to universal dominance.

Many of Compton-Engle's insights should quickly enter our classrooms and influence how we teach these plays. While one might always wish for more, the 31 black-and-white illustrations of vases and terracottas are very well chosen to illuminate the essential elements of the argument and generally well reproduced. This book should be as invaluable for theater historians as for classicists. An illuminating and witty pleasure to read, it marks a great leap forward in our understanding of how costume makes meaning in comedy.

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