

BOOK REVIEW

The Birth of Comedy: Texts, Documents, and Art from Athenian Comic Competitions, 486–280. Edited by Jeffrey RUSTEN. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. Pp. xx + 794. Hardcover, \$110.00/£57.00. ISBN 978-0-8018-9448-0.

The world of Greek comedy has always been a mysterious universe for amateurs. The naive enthusiasm of Renaissance intellectuals, who, immediately after the publication of the *editio princeps* of the eleven Aristophanic comedies, edited their complete translations (without footnotes!) in Latin (Andreas Divus) and Italian (the Rositini brothers), has decreased as time has passed. In contrast to the fate of Greek tragedies, Aristophanes' and Menander's comedies have always been rarely performed; even the most recent translations cannot refrain from using explanatory notes if they want their readers to understand the nuances of the Greek text. Apart from the two main authors, the other comic poets (Cratinus, Eupolis, Alexis, Diphilus, Philemon) are almost unknown, in spite of the good reputation they had in the ancient world. From this point of view the difference with tragedy is even greater: among the majority of people, the three tragic poets of the fifth century BCE enjoy a much wider popularity than the single representative of ancient Greek comedy; Menander's popularity (a fairly recent one, based on the papyrological discoveries of the last century) cannot compete with that of his Roman followers, Plautus and Terence.

But things are changing: since the end of the 20th century, brilliant paperback translations of some Aristophanic plays have begun to appear on bookstore shelves; between 1997 and 2002 the Loeb library published Henderson's new translation of the eleven comedies of Aristophanes and completed Arnott's versions of the most fragmentary plays; moreover, three years after Henderson had completed his challenging work with a fifth volume containing the fragments of Aristophanes (2008), Ian Storey published in three volumes the translation of all the fragments of Old Comedy.

The work under review, edited by Jeffrey Rusten with the cooperation of other experts such as Jeffrey Henderson, David Konstan, Ralph Rosen, and Niall W. Slater, aims at the same goal by following the same path, the effort to make

understandable the secret treasures of a literary genre that enjoyed a large popularity in its time and can still offer surprising gratification in our time as well. Such a helpful target is made more visible by a fact that should not be concealed: Rusten's huge book (almost 800 pages!) is all in English—that is, there is no Greek in it, so that it can be read and appreciated by everyone.

It is a significant choice: if the authors really wanted to make “accessible for the first time the rich evidence for all aspects of classical Greek comedy,” it was necessary to avoid anything that could hinder the scope of the book. In its actual form, although the editor says that “this collection is intended not necessarily to be read straight through but rather to be easily navigable among its different parts and components,” the work nevertheless makes pleasant reading beginning with the main sections of the introduction, the sources of the comic fragments and the short history of Athenian comedy onwards. True, the following four parts (a wide collection of fragments from Sicilian comedy and the three canonical periods—old, middle, and new—of Athenian comedy) can be browsed by picking here and there the most interesting playwrights or the most curious fragments; but the peculiar structure of the book fosters a continuous reading because each part is preceded or concluded by enjoyable sections dedicated to interesting questions such as festivals and competitions, theatres and actors, literary and visual evidence (there are 42 black-and-white illustrations of vases and statues), not to mention the final sections on the survival of comedy in Hellenistic Greece and Republican and Imperial Rome, on ancient theories of comedy and laughter, and on ancient writers on comedy, included a list of *komoidoumenoi* (“a rogues’ gallery of names—and concepts—recurring in the fragments”).

But the effort made by Rusten and his colleagues is very helpful for classicists as well: if their analysis of the fragments is not so detailed as in S. Douglas Olson's *Broken Laughter* (a comic selection with Greek text and critical apparatus published in 2007 by Oxford University Press), the work is nonetheless valuable because the selection is much wider. The reader will find almost 2,500 translated texts; the comic fragments number almost 1,600, while the other translations include any kind of ancient witnesses, from the *testimonia* that mentioned either the playwright or the play to the *scholia* to this or that fragment, from the quotation of an historian or an antiquarian to a more or less fragmentary Greek or Latin inscription. And one should not forget that if translating Greek comedy is always a difficult task, translating a comic fragment is much more demanding, because the missing context often makes things extremely difficult. But this team of translators has accomplished its job with accuracy and brightness (to take just

one example, Alexis' "Asotodidaskalos" has been rendered as "Ph.D. in Profligacy").

As far as the criteria used to pick the fragments, I understand that personal choices cannot be discussed or blamed. The fact that among the Aristophanic fragments I did not find the celebration of the stimulant power of wine, fr. 334 Kassel-Austin (a masterly anticipation of a theme that was to be exploited by Shakespeare in the second act of his *Macbeth*), does not keep me from toasting such a valuable scholarly enterprise.

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