

BOOK REVIEW

Aristophanes and the Poetics of Competition. By Zachary P. BILES. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xi + 290. £60.00/\$95.00. ISBN 978-0-521-76407-0.

In this study Biles does not address the usual topics of Aristophanes' political "message" or his emulation of Euripides, but his "poetics of competition," the ongoing engagement among the comic poets competing at the dramatic festivals. Here his starting-points are: (1) that the persona established by the poet is a deliberate fiction; (2) that competition is deeply embedded in the Greek cultural psyche; and (3) how one looks matters greatly in a "face" culture and thus "a poet who stepped forward to engage in public contest risked overreaching with his ambitions and accompanying claims of superiority" (54). This affects how Aristophanes portrays himself, in particular in the parabasis, and here Biles distinguishes "parabasis," the distinctive structural unit, from "parabatic," those occasions that "express something positive about Aristophanes and his play" (224). But there is far more to a parabasis than just the chorus' appeal for the poet, and far more to Aristophanes' comedy than comic rivalry, e.g. his political themes and his imaginative fantasy. Biles assumes also that the atmosphere of the competition was bitter and antagonistic, that jokes against rivals were made in deadly earnest, while I would see the "poetics of competition" as more jocular and part of the "great game" being played.

In Chapter 2 Biles "equates" Dicaeopolis with Aristophanes, but not for any political message. He argues plausibly that both use competitions to achieve their ends and that this "poetics of competition" runs the entire length of the play. The next chapter examines Aristophanes' put-down of rival poets at *Knights* 507–50, where he neatly sandwiches his current rival Cratinus between poets of the past such as Magnes and Crates. One of the strongest points in Biles' study is the light he sheds on the poetic rivalry with Cratinus, reminding us that in 425 and 424 Cratinus was the great adversary whom any aspiring poet would have to take on. This parabasis he reasonably considers "a kind of literary *tropaion* for the victory of *Acharnians*" (98) but his attempt (129–35) to equate somehow Aristophanes' triumph over Cratinus with his crusade against Cleon in the play seems rather

unlikely to me. There is much more to *Knights* than celebrating a victory over Cratinus in 425.

Chapter 4, originally published in *AJP* (2002), is the strongest part of this book, where he examines the rivalry between Aristophanes and Cratinus, starting from the latter's F 38 (*Didaskaliai*), where "you [female] were despised for ladling fine dithyrambs [*thriamboi*]." Biles takes *thriamboi* as Cratinus' "vituperative comic mode" (134), but it could refer also to an ability to write lyrics (cf. *Knights* 529–30)—granted that these celebrated songs could also have been abusive in tone. He then takes us to *Wine-flask* (423), whose brilliant success marks the climax of a rivalry that featured many exchanges, using and re-using each other's material, and spills over into *Wasps*, where the inebriated Philocleon in that comedy must owe more than a little to the drunken self-caricature that Cratinus creates in *Wine-flask*. I am less convinced, however, that the trial of the dogs is a conscious reflection of whatever "trial" of Cratinus took place in *Wine-flask*.

The last two chapters are less successful. The first assesses the parabasis proper of the extant version of *Clouds* (419 or 418). Biles talks of a "bitter failure" behind such revisions as *Clouds* and Euripides' *Hippolytos*, but there could be other reasons why a dramatist might revise a play, notably the desire to do something different with the same theme. Biles does consider (186 n. 74) that five comedies, not three, were presented in the 420s, but it makes a considerable difference if Aristophanes finished third of three, or won "the bronze medal" in a field of five. Thus a desire "to erase the memory of his disgrace" (172) may be overstating the case. We simply do not know enough about the original performed version of *Clouds* (423) to evaluate what Aristophanes was doing with a revision that was not far advanced. We should consider also that Eupolis, replying in F 89 (*Baptai*) to the charge of plagiarizing *Knights*, is not responding to *Clouds* but to Aristophanes' *Anagyros* (F 59). Aristophanes may have written the parabasis of his intended revision of *Clouds* about the same time, and then not done much more.

The final chapter attempts to read *Frogs* as a play-long exploration of the poetic *agon*. Here Biles must make Dionysos a more serious spectator of drama throughout, but plays down the fact that Dionysos is a frequent comic buffoon, witness Eupolis' *Officers* or Aristophanes' *Babylonians*. Thus at 918 when Dionysos agrees readily that he was a fool to be taken in by Euripides, this is not a sign of his changing tastes (239) but the typical comic Dionysos in action. Biles argues that "the *agon* comes as a surprise" (218), but contests are a staple of Old Comedy and any seasoned spectator will be expecting some sort of competition

in the underworld. Nor do I agree that the outcome of the *agon* is decided long in advance (250) or that Dionysos' decision is "no unprincipled or arbitrary choice" (255). My reading of *Frogs* is that while Euripides is so "good" (technically) and Aeschylus so "good" (morally), Aristophanic comedy is the dramatic form that provides the best of both worlds. On the whole, however, Biles has some provocative and enlightening comments to make about the persona that Aristophanes adopts in presenting himself and his comedy to the Athenian theater-going public.

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