

BOOK REVIEW

Aristophanes: Acharnians, Knights, and Peace. Translated, and with theatrical commentary, by MICHAEL EWANS. Oklahoma Series in Classical Culture. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012. Pp. xiii + 289. Paper, \$34.95. ISBN 978-0-8061-4231-9.

Athenian “Old Comedy,” despite its traditional title, has become accustomed to frequent renewal. Michael Ewans, an experienced scholar and director of ancient drama, offers the latest renovation with his able verse translations of Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*, *Knights*, and *Peace* that are complemented by a theatrical commentary. The very structure of Ewans’ book places welcome emphasis on the joint study of Attic drama as both cultural text and performance script.

Ewans helpfully supplements his translations with a chronology of Aristophanes’ life and times, lists of characters (with potential actor “doublings”) and necessary props, glossaries of both Greek terms and proper names, and an extensive cultural and thematic introduction. Despite repeated subject headings from his earlier volume of Aristophanic translations,¹ Ewans’ well-organized introduction has been substantially reworked and tailored to the key issues raised by these “politically engaged” plays (ix).

Ewans promises “new, accurate, and actable translations” that have been “road-tested” to give “Aristophanes a viable voice for the contemporary English-language stage” (ix, 10, 31). He delivers with verve, providing translations equally suited to the classroom, the stage, or (better still) some combination of the two. However, North American audiences may at times find the Australian English of Ewans’ prurient vocabulary unintentionally stilted. While in rehearsal it will suffice to substitute “cock” for “prick,” some puns, such as the near rhyme of “open-arsed” with “open carts of gold” at *Ach.* 108, pose knottier problems.

Ewans justifies yet another edition of Aristophanes by marking his work as a specifically poetic translation, inviting comparison with the abrupt parataxis of Kenneth McLeish’s verse translation for the stage which Ewans fairly considers

¹ Michael Ewans, *Aristophanes: Lysistrata, The Women’s Festival, and Frogs* (Norman, 2010).

“too free” (x).² However, Oklahoma University Press oversells this book’s contribution to the field by collapsing the distinction between verse and prose, printing on the back cover that “many English translations of the plays were written decades ago” in “outdated language.” Such complaints can hardly be lodged against Alan Sommerstein’s prose, let alone Jeffrey Henderson’s recent translations for Focus Press—thin, inexpensive paperbacks practically designed to be stuffed into an actor’s back pocket. And indeed Ewans’ poetry often passes as prose, regularly accommodating a stray beat or two with no recourse to markedly poetic diction (e.g., “o’er,” “e’er”). This metrical flexibility contributes to the actability of Ewans’ translations, but raises a fundamental question: is verse translation desirable for—or aurally detectable in—21st century comic performance at all?

The publisher also advertises Ewans’ translations as “accessible” and indeed they are—at times to a fault. Proper nouns, in particular, are problematic. While Ewans retains historical names such as Kleon (readers, but not audience members, may pause to consult the included glossary), Aristophanes’ many “speaking names” are not translated with an equivalent calque. Instead, Ewans feels it “better to abandon the puns and go for the *effective meaning*” of the joke (33, his emphasis). In practice this regularly involves softening the punch of Aristophanes’ deftly wrought name with a comparatively bland periphrasis.³ The problem posed by Old Comedy’s phonebook of proper nouns is an enduring one (cf. Plut. *Quaest. Conv.* 7.8.712a = *Mor.* 712a), but some may wish that Ewans had heeded Antiphanes’ observation (K–A 189, 17–8) that comedians must continually “invent new names.” Ewans, for his part, is puzzled why translators with “little confidence in the playwright” spuriously inject “touches of their own humor” (35). Faithfulness to the original is certainly a proper goal of translation, but this fidelity need not be literal or detail-oriented; it may be comedic as well. Speaking names suggest that humorous invention has an important and enjoyable role to play, even (or especially) in translation.

What manifestly sets Ewans apart from other recent Aristophanizers are his theatrical commentaries: scene-by-scene discussions of staging which are at once a user’s manual for directors, a theoretical exploration of Greek theater space in

² Kenneth McLeish, *Aristophanes: Plays* (London, 1993).

³ In the first line of her recent monograph, *Aristophanes’ Comedy of Names: A Study of Speaking Names in Aristophanes* (Berlin, 2011), Nikoletta Kanavou has rightly called proper names “one of the most entertaining aspects of Aristophanes’ art.” Their suppression in any modern translation is felt.

performance, and a comparative reception study of modern productions of ancient drama. Ewans' commentaries are admirably sensitive to real issues of theater, particularly blocking for a circular orchestra, and his solutions are consistently practicable—a distinct advantage over certain philological editions of these plays. Ewans is best when he includes readers in his experiment; his treatment (209) of when and where to set Euripides' many props mentioned at *Ach.* 448ff. is the best I have seen. And yet, partly on account of Ewans' otherwise admirably confident prose (the word "must" is not infrequent), the commentaries too often give the impression that modern workshops have the power to definitively resolve enigmas of historical production. There is some danger that Ewans' reconstructions of ancient staging, once "proven" on the modern stage, may circularly be taken as a historically informed benchmark for further contemporary (re)performance.

The paperback is well-made and Ewans' text is well-edited with very few errors: variant spellings of Keleus/Keleos within a few lines of each other early in *Acharnians* are an atypical and unfortunately prominent oversight. However the cover—a striking, red-tinted photograph from Ewans' own production of *Peace*—misses the mark by appearing unfittingly tragic.

In sum, Ewans' twenty-seven years' experience studying and staging Attic drama has been distilled into an attractive, approachable, and accurate text for both classroom and stage. This book serves the more advanced scholarly community by accessibly documenting a seasoned practitioner's thoughts on Aristophanic stagecraft, both ancient and modern. Scholars and directors will find points to dispute in the commentaries' prescriptions, and neophytes may come away with false confidence in modern knowledge of ancient stagecraft. Nevertheless, Ewans has not only renewed Aristophanes' comedies themselves but also reinvigorated debate over their performance—an extensive and fruitful discussion that had fallen silent for too long.⁴

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⁴ No monograph-length work dedicated to the staging of full Aristophanic comedies has been produced since Kenneth McLeish's *The Theatre of Aristophanes* (London and New York, 1980), though Carlo Ferdinando Russo's evergreen *Aristofane: Autore di Teatro* (Florence, 1962) has had subsequent editions in Italian and was translated into English by Kevin Wren (London and New York, 1994).