

BOOK REVIEW

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Agora. Ancient Greek and Roman Humour. By R. DREW GRIFFITH and ROBERT B. MARKS. Kingston, ON: Legacy Books Press, 2007. Pp. ii + 234. Paper, \$32.95. ISBN 978-0-9784652-0-9.

A breezy overview of the subject, covering most of the necessary ground with verve, but marred by omissions and idiosyncrasies, this book is better on Greek than Roman humor.

There are three sections, one on theories of humor, laughter and society; the largest on character types; and one on genres. Chapters proceed by topics (e.g., the quack, the sucker, the ironist) and consist of ample excerpts from ancient authors, translated into contemporary colloquial English, with helpful connecting discussions. Griffith and Marks examine more than just the expected comic authors, such as Aristophanes, by offering generous helpings of others such as Homer, Catullus and Petronius. They argue that ancient comedy is character-driven: "In modern humour, comedy lies in the situation. In ancient humour, it lay in the individual" (p. 65). While this may serve as a starting point, it is certainly overschematic and cannot be accepted without modifications. The emphasis on character does have the virtue of producing a book that goes beyond plot summary, and it occasionally yields good insights, as for example the discussion of Socrates as both quack and ironist (pp. 107-14).

Some omissions are baffling. The replacement of "forum" with "agora" in the title betrays the book's tendency to slight Roman humor. Although the title puns on the Broadway knockoff of Roman New Comedy, only two passages from Plautus are cited and discussed, and Terence is entirely absent. A book subtitled "Ancient Greek and Roman Humour" that devotes a dozen pages to Mesopotamian and Hebrew humor and an entire chapter to Germanic saga should offer more than two pages on the *Palliata*; someone reading this book would have no idea of the influence of Roman New Comedy from Shakespeare to sitcoms. While Griffith and Marks maintain that Greek and Roman comedy is character-driven and invoke Theophrastus for four citations, they avoid engagement with Plautus and Terence, the playwrights who gave western comedy its most influential instantiations of "stock characters." Plautus is quoted only to illustrate specimens of the boaster and parasite (*Miles Gloriosus*) and the gluttonous cannibal (*Mostellaria*). Nowhere will a reader find a discussion of the clever slave, and there is no mention of his victims in the section on suckers. Roman verse satire, meanwhile, is ignored. Despite many pages devoted to Petronius, and even a few

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to *Apocolocyntosis*, there is not a single word on the satires of Juvenal or Horace. The claim (p. 185) that “[w]hile Greek poetry was composed orally and recited in public for aural consumption, Roman literature (like our own) was a literate product, committed to paper and intended for consumption by a reading audience” is debatable, and the latter half is only tenable if one chooses to ignore comedy and satire, the Romans’ most humorous genres. Likewise, there are some 17 pages of illustrations and discussions of Egyptian and Greek visual humor, but from the Romans only one phallic doorbell from Pompeii, which is presented as if Greek. Readers will not see a single graffito or dipinto from Pompeii or Ostia. Too bad, for the “Room of the Seven Sages” (Ostia Regio 3, Insula 10: *vissire tacite Chilon docuit subdolos* or *ut bene cacaret ventrem palpavit Solon*, etc.) offers an eloquent example of how Roman bathroom humor could be simultaneously lowbrow and a witty spoof of Greek cultural hegemony.

I turn now from omissions to idiosyncrasies. At times the interpretation of literary passages as humorous will strike some not as discovery and elucidation but as willful imposition, or at least insensitivity to frames of genre and culture. For example, the lengthy explication of *Genesis* 2:4b–10 and 2:15–3:24—Eden, Adam and Eve, the Serpent—as “amusing” has merit for showing how a modern comic might recast the episode as funny; think of Bill Cosby’s routine on Noah. But the text as written is not amusing. Or consider the assessment of the title character of *Prometheus Bound* as “[t]he most archetypal captive audience ... nailed to a rock listening to the whining ramblings of Io, the talking cow. Call us heartless, but we find this pretty funny” (p. 94). One could wholeheartedly agree only if *Prometheus Bound* were the satyr play in the tetralogy. Again, while the *Iliad* does have its own grim humor, I suspect that comparing the steed Xanthus’ fatal prophecy to Achilles with a routine from Mr. Ed and Wilbur (p. 159) will appeal only to the sophomoric or the callous. Northrop Frye once famously suggested that “[o]ne sometimes gets the impression that the audience of Plautus and Terence would have guffawed uproariously all through the *Passion*” (*Anatomy of Criticism*, 178). Even so, the burden of proof is on those who argue that the ancients considered humorous those passages whose context and articulation manifestly mark them as serious.

The chatty style suggests presentation in front of a live student or studio audience (e.g. p. 171 n. 7: “Woohoo! We’re dealing with sex ... we’re dealing with sex! Um ... er ... sorry. We get carried away sometimes. Breasts.”). Sometimes you can almost hear a call for a rim shot (e.g. p. 108 n. 6: “Less is sometimes more, a point of view we’ve tried—but failed—to have our accountant adopt”). Although pre-

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sumably aimed for a broader audience than classicists, the book offers no table of abbreviations and thus presupposes some familiarity with professional collections. What will the general reading public, for example, make of the reference to "566 F 149 *FGrHist.* = Athen. 2.37b-c" (p. 43)? The bibliography is reasonably full and includes many titles in German (and even one in Portuguese). One important addition would be John Morreall's sourcebook, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, for while Griffith and Marks give good discussion and sources for the so-called "Superiority Theory" and "Relief Theory" of the motivation of laughter, they barely mention the important "Incongruity Theory."

In short, the book is pleasant to read, useful for introducing students or general readers to the subject, probably helpful for someone constructing a course on ancient humor, but cannot be recommended without the reservations discussed above.

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