

BOOK REVIEW

Aristophanes' Frogs. By MARK GRIFFITH. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. P xv + 291. Paperback, \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-19-532773-1.

This book is a substantial addition to the Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature series. As tends to happen with such series, the initial brief (in this case, to 'introduce' individual works to first-time readers of them in translation) easily becomes exceeded in practice. Griffith's book acquires a hybrid status by turning an introduction into something with the dimensions and range of a monograph. But the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. At every stage Griffith moves skilfully between the play's cultural background and textual/theatrical foreground. The result is an illuminating, all-in-one guide which will prove useful to many kinds of readers, including (perhaps even especially) more advanced students. Griffith starts with two chapters which provide a lively overview of the social and theatrical history of comedy at Athens, with information about (among other things) ritual obscenity, the Theatre of Dionysus, the formal conventions of Old Comedy, some of Aristophanes' predecessors and rivals, Athenian dramatic festivals, and Aristophanes' relationship to his audience. He signals a broad view of the genre as involving "temporary validation of an alternate reality" (8, but no Bakhtin in sight anywhere). He also takes Aristophanes' work in general to be characterized by a "traditionalist/populist comic vision" (27, an *idée reçue* which arguably skirts round various difficulties) and to aim for a kind of "inclusiveness" *vis-à-vis* its citizen audience. This last idea will turn out, problematically, to be key to Griffith's interpretation of the play as a whole.

After an extensive plot summary (Ch. 3, "What Happens in *Frogs*") which manages to make some nice *aperçus* along the way, Griffith devotes two central chapters (Ch. 5, "*Agôn Sophias*", and Ch. 6, "Old and New Styles in Tragedy") to unpicking the intricate threads of the play's contest of tragedians. Shrewdly diagnosing a tension at the heart of Greek agonistic proclivities between correctness and innovation, Griffith well draws out the instability of poetic values ("slippery, multifarious, and contestable," 87) that runs through the debate in *Frogs*. Unlike

most critics, he does not feel obliged to reduce the issues to a one-sidedly pro-Aeschylean stance; he will later observe that throughout the contest Aeschylus “is hardly more intelligent or observant” than Euripides (195). Griffith also consistently discerns how both Aeschylus and Euripides are double-sided pastiches of themselves, combining the characteristic with the extreme. There is much to admire in these chapters: the treatment, for instance, of so-called ‘new’ music and its relevance to Euripides is vigorous and incisive.

Chapter 6 (“Underworld and Afterlife”) situates the play within a religious perspective. Griffith deftly supplies background information about such things as hero cult, necromancy, underworld geography, and mystery religion. Finding ritual elements “at every turn” (196), he sketches a reading which tentatively ascribes to *Frogs* a kind of comically ersatz or vicarious experience of “salvation”, while at the same time refusing to follow those scholars who detect a clear initiatory story-pattern in Dionysus’s journey to Hades. This is actually the longest chapter in the book, and in some ways the most impressive. It handles a lot of material with a sure touch and pulls back from forcing the issue of what the work’s array of religious motifs add up to: the “prospect of eternal comic life” (199) is Griffith’s subtle way of (understandably) blurring the matter.

Chapter 6 does, however, contain hints of a sentimental desire on Griffith’s part to find an overriding message of “salvation” and civic “inclusiveness” in *Frogs*. That desire gets the upper hand in Chapter 7, where the significance of Dionysus’s ultimate choice of Aeschylus and the implications of the play’s finale come to the fore. Abruptly and bafflingly we are told that as we approach the last part of the comedy “there has been a gradual convergence of critical outlooks, a process of increasing unanimity and good will at all levels” (200). Really? Griffith struggles to establish inclusiveness in a passage where seven different individuals (in addition to Euripides himself) are excluded from the supposed promise of salvation—and where Dionysus, if he’s even on stage at all, does not utter a word in the concluding scene. Moreover, Griffith does not address a glaring comic contradiction in the last lines of the play: the notion that it is Aeschylus, earlier proclaimed the great poet of warlike spirit, who will somehow bring Athens an escape from war (1531–2). Nor does he ever tackle an irony that is built into the entire contest, namely that the audience of *Frogs* itself is branded, not least by Aeschylus, as “Euripidean”! (Cf. my own account of this point in *Between Ecstasy and Truth* (Oxford, 2011) ch. 3.) Griffith’s search for thematic unity and meaning in the play comes unstuck in the

end because of precisely the comic contortions that he himself elsewhere recognises as “frustrating” those “who seek tidy and consistent answers to big questions” (152).

The book is completed by a chapter which offers a brisk outline of the reception of Aristophanes' work in general from antiquity to the present, rounding things off with some thoughts on translations of *Frogs* (including an alleged 1994 version by myself which is, alas, totally fictitious!) and on selected modern productions of the play.

There is a glossary of personal and geographical names as well as a regular index. The bibliography supplies full details of works recommended at the end of each chapter, but Griffith nowhere says which edition of the text he follows in his copious translations. The book is mostly well produced, though some of the dozen black-and-white illustrations are of poor quality. I noticed few typos: on 95 *diallagê* should be *diagôgê*. Oddly, Griffith often gives variant translations of the same passage in different places but without explanation (e.g. 70/83, 75/201, 110/121). He is occasionally inconsistent: he tells us at the start that *Frogs* received a second performance (3) but later says we do not know whether this happened (220).

There are also quite a few factual slips: the Lenaea was not restricted to comic plays (10); Aristophanes is not mentioned in “several” works of Plato's (17), only in the *Apology* and *Symposium*; we do not know that Phrynichus's *Muses*, which competed against *Frogs*, involved “a trip to the Underworld” (19); the main *Vita* of Aristophanes is not found in the *Suda* (23 and later); Aristophanes' deme was *Cydathenaion*, not “*Cydathenaeus*” (23–4); in classical Attic *kômôidos* does not mean a comic poet but a chorus-member (28); Athenian dramatists *were* sometimes paid, as *Frogs* 367 shows (29); *kritêrion* (apparently confused with *kanôn*) never means “measuring rod” (86); the lekythion rhythm is wrongly called “cretic” (136); Aristophanes' *Gerytades*, as fr. 156 proves, *did* contain a scene in the underworld (166); comic actors did not standardly wear *kothornoi* (224); Menander's career did not start in the 330s (226).

But those are minor blemishes in a volume notable for its fresh writing and numerous insights. This is a book which keen students of *Frogs* will find both informative and stimulating.

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