

BOOK REVIEW

Humanist Comic Elements in Aristophanes and the Old Testament. By BENJAMIN M. LAZARUS. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014. Pp. x + 307. Hardcover, \$191.82. ISBN 978-1-4632-0243-9.

Humor is an exclusively human phenomenon, and no civilization can be understood without some appreciation of what made its people laugh. Benjamin Lazarus' study is a stimulating contribution to this field because it compares the workings of the comic in two seminal literary oeuvres from different traditions of antiquity, namely, Aristophanic comedy and Old Testament narratives. In spite of the disparity of the texts involved, this is a fruitful endeavor in that it closely juxtaposes conceptions and techniques of humor developed by the two great ancient cultures which supplied the fundamentals of western civilization. The book thus offers an insight into the roots of the western comic tradition.

Lazarus' theoretical approach to the comic is somewhat reductionist, insofar as he traces the essence of every ridiculous phenomenon to an "amusing incongruity", i.e. an association of disparate elements which does not entail negative emotions and thus produces an effect of pleasure. In fact, the multifarious manifestations of the comic scarcely fit under a single all-encompassing notion. The psychological mechanisms of comic feelings may be more composite, often involving other emotional procedures, such as the sense of relief or superiority. The author briefly discusses the relevant theories of Bergson and Freud but does not integrate them into his theoretical scheme, which remains one-dimensional. It would also have been useful to point out that even the basic process of incongruity may form part of quite different comic techniques, such as inversion (for example, animals which display human features), parody of various types of discourse (e.g. tragic poetry or prophetic literature), exaggeration, or debasement (as when mythical figures are brought down to the everyday world). Nevertheless, in practice Lazarus offers a more nuanced analysis, which carefully explores the particular humorous artifices employed in each text and their complex effects on the audience.

The main part of the book consists of a series of interconnected case studies. In every chapter, the main plot of an Aristophanic play is paralleled with a specific Biblical story. The first chapter pairs Trygaeus' flight on the dung-beetle (*Peace*)

with the tale of Balaam and his percipient ass (*Numbers* 22.21–31). Although these two narratives share some common motifs, notably the comically extraordinary animal which helps the protagonist encounter the divine and experience a changed world, the comparison is not particularly felicitous because the two central heroes are very different. Balaam is an *alazon*, an arrogant soothsayer whose pretentiousness is comically deflated as he fails to perceive the transcendent vision which is evident to his donkey. Trygaeus, on the other hand, represents the typical Aristophanic *ponēros*, the cunning hero who successfully imposes his own extravagant vision on reality. Balaam would be a better match for other Aristophanic *alazones*, such as the soothsayer Hierocles of the *Peace* or the oracle-monger of the *Birds*, who similarly lay claim to transcendent knowledge but are exposed as incompetent charlatans.

In the following chapters, the examples are better chosen and highlight important aspects of comic characterization and structure. Peisetaerus in the *Birds* and Samson in *Judges* 13–16 represent the same character type, which is called “the Comic Egoist” by Lazarus. An alternative name might be “the great (comic) vitalist”, to echo Harold Bloom’s term for comparable humorous figures, such as Falstaff or the Wife of Bath. Samson and Peisetaerus are charismatic, larger-than-life personalities, endowed with extraordinary powers of muscle or speech, who transgress the boundaries between human, animal, and divine, to fulfil an essentially selfish course of personal advancement and pleasure. In addition, while the general similarity between Samson and Heracles is a *topos* of mythological research, Lazarus aptly connects the Hebrew hero with Heracles’ comic persona in particular, emphasizing the raw vitality and proneness to comic slapstick which characterize both figures. This issue deserves further exploration under a broader perspective. The Biblical Samson should be confronted with all the various portrayals of the comic Heracles, not only in Aristophanes but also in Doric farce, fourth-century myth travesties, and satyr plays.

Jonah and the Dionysus of the *Frogs* exemplify another comic prototype, the “Comic Failure” (Lazarus’ term) or “comic anti-hero”, as he might be called in contrast to the heroic Aristophanic protagonists discussed by Cedric Whitman (*Aristophanes and the Comic Hero*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964). This kind of character becomes laughable by constantly failing to live up to the expectations of his role. The buffoonish Dionysus proves unable to judge poetry correctly and even to impersonate Heracles competently, despite his celebrated associations with the theater. Jonah cannot meet the requirements of his prophetic mission and repeatedly fails to recognize the will of Yahweh. There are

additional analogies in the two story patterns, as both anti-heroes experience a *katabasis* into the world of death (the belly of the fish in *Jonah* is expressly likened to Sheol), but return without real improvement. Both Dionysus and Jonah are parodies of serious models, respectively Heracles' dark journey to Hades and Elijah's prophetic career. Their incompetence is underlined by figures of lower status, such as Dionysus' slave Xanthias or the Gentile Ninevites, who successfully perform the very tasks which these comic anti-heroes ridiculously mismanage. In this case, Lazarus has traced an important satirical structure, probably as old as the *Margites* and applicable to many other comic figures, from Master Ford to Iznogoud.

The final chapter brings together *Wealth* and *Tobit*, two works revolving around an ordinary protagonist, a "Comic Everyman". Both works are set in a world of mundane suffering and injustice and use a domestic, down-to-earth kind of humor as a means of relief from the difficulties of life. In this connection, another line of enquiry would be worth pursuing. *Tobit*, a character at once ridiculous for his rigidity and sympathetic for his sufferings, and thus evoking a complex response from the audience, is closer to the personages of Menander than to Aristophanes' Chremylus. Like Menandrian heroes, the characters of *Tobit* have a limited understanding of the universe, and their apparent tragedy is eventually turned into comedy by a supernatural force which approximates the workings of Menander's Tyche. The shift towards domestic, low-key humor is common to New Comedy and *Tobit*, which is also, significantly, a Hellenistic product.

The volume is generally well produced, although sadly many works cited in abbreviated form in the footnotes are missing from the bibliography. In conclusion, this monograph will prove useful to scholars working in a wide range of fields: classical comedy, Old Testament studies, comparative literature, and the humorous traditions of the ancient world. Lazarus' triad of archetypal comic figures (the Egoist, the Failure, and the Everyman) is an interesting addition to the hitherto proposed typological classifications of Aristophanic characters, such as those of Whitman (see above) or Kenneth McLeish (*The Theatre of Aristophanes*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1980, 53–62). It may also provide a useful tool for further comparative researches into the personages and techniques of comedy, both ancient and modern.

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