BOOK REVIEW

Aristophanes and the Cloak of Comedy: Affect, Aesthetics, and the Canon. By MARIO TELÒ. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. xi + 237. Hardcover, $53.00. ISBN 978-0-226-30969-9.

This book proposes that Aristophanes constructs a complex and coherent narrative of "proto-canonical" discourse in his comedies *Wasps* (422 BCE) and *Clouds* (419–417) in reaction to the defeat of his first (and now lost) *Clouds* (423) by Cratinus' Pytinê. Mario Telò argues that Aristophanes' metanarrative of poetic superiority ultimately influenced the later reception of the genre by Hellenistic critics, who inherited the hierarchy and terms promoted by Aristophanes himself. While Telò's conception of proto-canonical discourse and intertextual readings are thought-provoking and sometimes valuable, his arguments often rest on extremely thin evidence and will not convince everyone.

Chapter One introduces methodology. Telò reads Aristophanes' explicit statements on his work and his rivals' in the parabases, i.e., the extended songs in which the chorus sometimes speaks for the poet, within the action of the plot. His comedy assures certain benefits (e.g. "dignity, self-control, health, paternal authority," 3) to the dysfunctional and self-destructive audience that earlier rejected him. This promise is materialized repeatedly onstage as a woven garment, a *chlaina* or *himation*, which represents intelligence over ignorance, sanity over madness, and "paternal stability" over "infantile caprice." Worn, stolen, frayed, rejected, and repurposed, the cloak conveys the psychic health of the Aristophanic brand in contrast to the rougher, shabbier *tribôn* representative of the inferior Cratinus and Eupolis. The challenge of this thesis is that the world of comedy is chock full of physical properties, most of which are introduced and removed without any discernible significance.

How this extremely sophisticated allegory is achieved in practice is explored in Chapter Two. Behind Wasps' intergenerational conflict between the aristocratic "paternal son" Bdelycleon and his mentally ill, reprobate father, Philocleon, is a continuation of Aristophanes' dispute with Cratinus. In the chorus' claim that the poet battled "shivers" and "fevers" that strangled fathers and grandfathers in the previous year (1037–1045) Telò identifies a "therapeutic" program of Bdelycleon, whose attempt to dress his father in a *chlaina* and remove his old *tribôn* (1131–

1134; cf. 736–738) reflects Aristophanes' didactic aims. However, as an earlier reader has already pointed out,[1] the identification of an allusion to the first *Cloud*s here is difficult because those responsible for the strangling are sycophants. More likely the parabasis alludes to an altogether different comedy of the previous year, perhaps from the Lenaea.

While he follows other treatments in identifying resemblances between the alcoholic Cratinus and the incorrigible Philocleon, Telò's discussion of a pseudo-tragic Cratinean "affect" of *Wasps* in Chapter Three is a significant departure. Cratinus is made to represent the pernicious effects of tragedy, the "violent unleashing of dangerous emotions … a channel of physical and psychological enervation for the audience" (8), through Euripides' *Phaedra* and *Bellerophontes* and Aeschylus' fragmentary *Niobe*. This produces some extremely interesting readings, specifically the identification of Bdelycleon's position on the roof in the opening scene with that of tragedy's divine figures (59).

In a larger treatment of *Wasps'* closure, Chapter Four's comparison of the drunken and torch-wielding Philocleon emerging from the symposium to a tragic fury is interesting. But these observations are developed in less plausible directions on shaky evidence, sometimes just a few echoes in diction. The reader unwilling to accept these readings is probably not going to be convinced by claims in Chapter Four, e.g., that Philocleon's assault of his son (1385-1386) symbolizes Clouds' defeat (102). Moreover, scholarship that might undermine some of Telò's readings is occasionally ignored, for example his argument (from one paratragic quotation) that Philocleon channels the melancholia and madness of the eponymous hero of *Bellerophontes*.[2] His reading of the "infantile mourning" of Philocleon's paratragic monody (317-333) misses the more obvious model of Danae's imprisonment.[3]

Chapter Five sees the extant and curiously tragic *Cloud*s borrowing from Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Telò's characterization of Strepsiades as a comic Agamemnon because he removes his shoes when entering the *Phrontistêrion* and confronts the cloud chorus—which implicitly threatens his castration?—is a bit hard to swallow given the "busyness" of comic heroes. It is argued that Socrates' theft of Strepsiades' *himation* (497) dramatizes Eupolis' plagiarism of *Knights* as alleged in the parabasis. This model allows Telò to invest stock generic comic interactions with the

[1] A. H. Sommerstein in *BMCR* 2016.8.36.

[2] See D. Dixon (2014), "Reconsidering Euripides' *Bellerophon*", *CQ* 64: 493-506, for the possibility that the hero's ill-advised flight was undertaken in ignorance.

[3] R. Seaford (1990), "The Imprisonment of Women in Greek Tragedy", *JHS* 110: 76-90. Danae is the model tentatively suggested in the recent Oxford commentary of Biles and Olson (2015).

significance of gender and status (i.e. fathers and mothers) they might otherwise lack. It is confusing that the buffoonish Strepsiades initially represents the audience of the first *Clouds*, hoodwinked by the inferior comedy of Eupolis (represented by both Pheidippides and Socrates), but later Aristophanes himself in the violent conclusion (156).

In closing, I mention the author's early warning that it is "dangerous to establish hierarchies of interpretive likelihood" using "historically contingent notions of theatrical perceptibility" (12). While defining the poetic competence of audiences too rigidly risks curtailing the full range of potentially valid interpretations, failing to establish reasonable parameters for audience understanding altogether leads to another excess: no form of allusion or intertextuality is too subtle for a play's various audiences. While Telò occasionally offers new and interesting readings of Aristophanic comedy, he frequently goes to that extreme.

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