

Stephanie Nelson, *Aristophanes and His Tragic Muse: Comedy, Tragedy and the Polis in 5th Century Athens*. Mnemosyne Supplementum 390. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016. ISBN 978-90-04-31090-2. 384pp.

Genre and the interrelation of tragedy and comedy have been popular issues in recent work on Aristophanes, starting with Michael Silk's *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy* (Oxford UP 2000), followed by Charles Platter's *Aristophanes and the Carnival of Genres* (Johns Hopkins UP 2007), which takes a Bakhtinian approach, and the collection of essays edited by Emmanuela Bakola, Lucia Prauscello, & Mario Telò, *Greek Comedy and the Discourse of Genres* (Cambridge UP 2013). Now, we have in close succession Nelson's book, Matthew Farmer's *Tragedy on the Comic Stage* (Oxford UP 2017), and Donald Sells' *Great Expectations: The Generic and Social Subtexts of Greek Old Comedy* (forthcoming with Bloomsbury). The disadvantage of having three books on the same basic theme coming out concurrently is that they do not absorb or engage with each others' contributions to the question. Farmer's work is strong in examining the comic fragments for evidence of engagement with tragedy. Sells' book focuses on parody, making extensive use of iconographical evidence and moving beyond tragedy to examine generic parody more holistically. Nelson's, in contrast, is less about the intertextual dimensions of tragic appropriation in comedy than an extended meditation on the complementarity and mutual embeddedness of the two genres.

In short, Nelson's thesis is that the genres of Tragedy and Comedy are at once antagonistic and symbiotic: as different as they are, they could not do without each other. Comedy stresses human freedom, Tragedy the bonds of necessity. The first chapter is in many ways the most interesting and would make useful reading for every graduate student struggling to understand why Athens united these two genres in the same festival. Nelson credits Aristotle's thesis that Tragedy had its origins in the *mikroi mythoi* of dithyramb, and was thus like its predecessor in featuring a strong narrative focus. The *kômos* from which Comedy arose, on the other hand, is choral and invective, but in no way narrative. This genealogy may explain Comedy's centrifugal and polyphonic nature, veering away from the continuous plot line Aristotle admired in tragedies like *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Grounded in the narrative unity and emotional intensity of dithyramb, Tragedy is pervaded by Necessity, whereas Comedy hits us out of left field with the arbitrary and unexpected. Change is ingrained in Comedy, but deeply destabilizing in Tragedy.

She also finds a significant difference in Comedy's attention to the chorus, with its extravagant costumes and parabolic preening. She regards costume as of little importance to tragic performance, but central to Comedy, where it is frequently changed by the same character as he undergoes various transformations, most self-referentially in the mutual impersonation of Dionysus *qua* Heracles and his slave Xanthias in *Frogs*.

The second chapter examines the relationship of Comedy to Satyr drama. Drawing from iconographical evidence, she believes that satyrs are depicted more realistically than comic characters, with their grotesque padding and phallus. Satyr drama is also different from Comedy in her view, inasmuch as the satyrs engage with serious, “tragic” characters, albeit from the satyrs’ distinctively silly perspective. Is this really so different from the many comedies of the Old Comic and especially Middle Comic periods that engage in mythological burlesque, such as *Frogs* and *Wealth*? She argues that entrapment, slavery, and escape are also distinctively satyric themes that Comedy sometimes appropriates; by combining both compulsion and freedom in an unstable dialectic, satyr drama mediates between Tragedy and Comedy. Some caution is in order here: since we know so little of early 5th century satyr drama and comedy before its introduction into the City Dionysia, it is hard to be sure which genre influenced the other. The chapter also features a useful survey of how satyr plays were integrated with the themes of their accompanying tragic trilogy, although I find Nelson’s exposition of *Sisyphus*, connected to Euripides’ Trojan trilogy of 415, less persuasive. Comedy’s relation to satyr drama is also explored by a chapter in Sells’ book, and even more importantly, in Carl Shaw’s *Satyric Play: The Evolution of Greek Comedy and Satyr Drama* (Oxford UP 2014), which she lists in her bibliography, but cites in only a single footnote as one of several works. I would like to have seen more engagement with this important book.

The remaining chapters each focus on one to three plays, sometimes combining comedies with tragedies exploring the same theme. On the whole, I find these chapters less profitable, and do not come away from them with a sense that I now read any of these plays differently. Nevertheless, one does occasionally find interesting insights: she views *Acharnians* as playing on themes of confinement within the walls of the city (= tragic necessity), very much an issue for all Athenians in 425 BCE, with Dicaeopolis imaginatively erasing the city walls through free trade with foreigners, thereby escaping the noisome confinement that beleaguered his fellow citizens (= comic freedom). The final chapter examines *Thesmophoriazousae* and *Frogs*, the two plays that most directly give us Aristophanes’ view of Tragedy and its interdependence with Comedy. She notes that of the plans to rescue Athens at the end of *Frogs*, only Euripides’ absurd proposal to drop vinegar-bombs on the eyes of the enemy actually focuses on Athens’ enemies. Athens itself was the problem, and Aristophanes needed the medium of Tragedy to remind citizens about the need for self-sacrifice. Dionysus chooses Aeschylus to rescue Athens, because he appeals to emotion, whereas Euripides appeals to analysis, of which there has been enough.

Other contentions may be more debatable. The chapter that pairs *Knights* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* argues that the motif of Paphlagon’s oracles is a comic inversion of the kind of oracles that pervade tragedies like *OT*, and only secondarily a reference to Cleon’s historical manipulation of oracles for political purposes. Critics may disagree over the contention (pp. 141–42) that comic characters have no inner self or inner conflict. Dionysus certainly seems conflicted at the end of *Frogs*, and we see

Philocleon and Strepsiades both coming to recognize the futility of their previous pursuits. Could we not call Philocleon's fanaticism and vital energy, whether in zealous pursuit of convicting defendants or in himself committing indefensible crimes of assault, an "inner self?" Critics might also disagree with the observation that Trygaeus and Lysistrata are the only comic heroes who do not elicit a mixed response from the audience (pp. 174–75). Members of the original Athenian audience who favored continuing a war policy might respond to them very differently than Nelson assumes. Others might find Trygaeus gross or Lysistrata coldly inhuman. Despite my disagreements here, these are deep and interesting questions which merit discussion.

The bibliography and footnotes are generally quite thorough and up-to-date, but I do find troubling the tendency to ignore key works which precede her conclusions, such as the non-engagement of the satyr play chapter with a 2014 book that focuses on the interrelations of Comedy and Satyr drama. On p. 9, the author criticizes previous scholarship for neglecting the self-reflexivity of the parabasis. Some of us have not.

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