

N.J. Lowe, *Comedy (Greece & Rome. New Surveys in the Classics, No. 37)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Paperback, ISBN 978-0-521-70609-4, \$ 21.99.¹

In 2005 Gregor Maurach presented the first modern introductory essay on ancient comedy to embrace the whole historical and typological development of the genre from Aristophanes to Terence. An English equivalent of Maurach's admirable work has now been published by N.J. Lowe in the New Surveys series of the Classical Association. The book is a successor to the well known and thorough volumes of Arnott (*Menander, Plautus, Terence*, 1975) and Ussher (*Aristophanes*, 1979) in the same series. To portray the whole history of ancient comedy within a volume of just 132 pages is a difficult and ambitious enterprise. Nonetheless, Lowe has contributed without any doubt a highly valuable and meaningful overview.

The book begins with an introductory chapter mainly devoted to ancient and modern theories on comedy and the comic in general (1–20). A longer chapter on Aristophanes and Old Comedy (21–62) is followed by a much shorter one on Menander and his contemporaries (63–80). The Roman *palliata* is treated in three sections. One of these is devoted to the problem of the “barbarous versions” in general (81–96); the two others are dedicated to the work of Plautus (97–114) and Terence (115–132) in particular. Each chapter is concluded by bibliographical notes, which not only offer helpful suggestions for further detailed study, but also delineate important trends in recent scholarship.

Given Lowe's own scholarly background, it is not surprising that the chapters on Aristophanes and Menander are the most accomplished. They delineate carefully the content of Aristophanes' individual plays and the interpretative problems connected with them, they introduce their formal and theatrical structure, and they give considerable insight into the multiple dynamics that interlace comedy and its sister genre, tragedy, in classical Athens. These merits will enable even students completely inexperienced in comedy to grasp easily the specific characteristics of Aristophanes' art. All in all the same is true for the chapter on Menander. The origins, dramaturgy and ideological background of New Comedy receive short, but appropriate treatment. Introductions this concise necessitate even substantial omissions. Still, it is regrettable that Lowe does not draw the reader's attention to the concept of ἀγαθὴ τύχη, which is so central to Menander's and his contemporaries' understanding of the world in which they lived.

A judicious analyst of Greek Comedy, Lowe is also a reliable guide to Roman drama. Nonetheless, his short sketch of Plautus is not always completely convincing. Lowe correctly emphasizes that Plautus' plays are remarkably different from the extant comedies of Menander, but he is not very precise about the nature and origin of Plautine originality. In dealing with Plautus' dramatic style Lowe focuses mainly on certain technical aspects (cf. the discussion of the famous *Dis Exapaton* papyrus, pp. 89–90), and he does not really try to develop a clear and concise outline of the Roman's very particular treatment of dramatic unity, theatrical illusion and character

¹ I am grateful to Professor Timothy Moore for his help in improving the English text.

portrayal. The crucial reason for this oversight is without any doubt Lowe's reluctance to endorse the view, common since Fraenkel, that Plautus' dramatic art was heavily influenced by improvisatory Italian theatre genres such as mime and the Atellana. Instead, he tries to draw a relatively clear-cut distinction between Plautus' "poetry", with roots in Greek literary comedy, and the genres of low comedy and farce, which used subliterate techniques. Such a distinction, however, runs the risk of neglecting essential preconditions of early Roman drama, especially the expectations of the audience Plautus had to face. To read Molière, for example, without taking into account his debt to the *commedia dell'arte* would lead to a somewhat incomplete view on his oeuvre – and *mutatis mutandis* the same seems to be true for Plautus. It goes without saying that Terence fits much better Lowe's idea of early Roman drama, and therefore the concise account of the *dimidiatus Menander's* art shows the author at his best again.

With a keen eye for the essential on the one hand and the dispensable on the other Lowe has developed an insightful panorama of the ancient genre. The book will be primarily helpful to undergraduate students in English-speaking countries as a first access to the world of ancient comedy that mirrors recent trends of scholarship; but the advanced scholar may also profit from its use. The volume is to be recommended last but not least because of its extensive and carefully compiled bibliography, which shows only few notable omissions (e.g., Petersmann's useful commentary on the *Stichus* and Schaaf's indispensable monograph on the *Miles Gloriosus*). It is a considerable merit of the survey that Lowe does not limit himself to a more or less close reproduction of the scholarly *communis opinio*, but skillfully opens up here and there new perspectives on his topic. Precisely because of this the advanced reader may well feel a bit disappointed that the author did not choose to follow further a track Lowe laid himself in the introductory chapter. Lowe is right to emphasize there the troubling shortcomings of modern scholarship in dealing appropriately with comic structures in ancient comedy, given the many stimulating developments in general humour studies in the last few decades. In the following chapters, however, Lowe does not say very much about the comic in Aristophanes, Menander, Plautus and Terence. There are many handbooks on ancient comedy and many substantial bibliographies. An introduction to ancient comedy with special reference to the comic would have been a most interesting and unique enterprise, and Lowe, well informed about the topic as he is, would have been the author to write it.

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