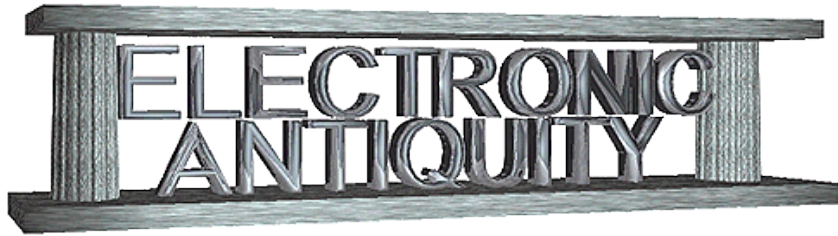


Electronic Antiquity 16.1 (November 2012)

**Review:**

**Dobrov, Gregory W. ed., *Brill's Companion to the Study of Greek Comedy*. Leiden/Boston, 2010. 579 pp. + xv.**

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*Brill's Companion to the Study of Greek Comedy* is an important collection of essays which easily surpasses the modest goal expressed by editor Gregory Dobrov "to set before the beginning and advanced student the main elements of the field in a clear and accessible format" (4). Thirteen essays are organized under three rubrics: Contexts, History, and Elements, although the difference between the first two seems a little artificial. As the quotation suggests, an important focus of the work is documentation. This is particularly appropriate for a time during which so much important work has been done, from the ongoing reexamination of the primary evidence for comedy in the form of vase paintings and archaeology, together with the fragmentary authors of Old, Middle, and New Comedy, and the testimonia that make reference to them—not to mention the extant comedies of Aristophanes and the (now substantial) remains of Menander. Literary approaches to comedy are represented but less prominent. Dobrov gives a summary of ancient and modern literary approaches to comedy, while Olson and Rosen focus on two interdependent methodological problems: the political orientation of the Aristophanes' plays and the trustworthiness of his pronouncements regarding art, politics, and personal animosities. Moreover, the contributors, all of whom have produced important works relevant to the study of Greek comedy, have interesting things to say about individual

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passages in the course of their presentations. Furthermore, the discussions are meticulous, very well annotated, and often overlapping. The result is a book that will be consulted frequently by students and scholars for the foreseeable future. I am not sure how useful it will be for beginners. More advanced Classics students and their teachers, however, will be very well served by these discussions. All of these potential users might well prefer to be owners of the book but this is not likely. The list price for this volume is currently equivalent to the bill for a night at the Ritz-Carleton Cancún. Thus, the destination for this book will be research libraries, where it will be nonetheless highly valued.

Dobrov leads off the “Contexts” section with a chapter called “Comedy and Her Critics,” where he traces ancient opinions about comedy. Many figures and texts that will appear in other essays are introduced here for the first time. This phenomenon is welcome, since it is instructive to see the differences between the contributors as each considers the same piece of evidence (to this end, however, it would have been nice to have more explicit cross-referencing between the essays themselves). In addition, with sub-sections on Plato and the Peripatetics, this chapter includes sustained discussion of philosophical responses to comedy, which are not directly addressed elsewhere. Dobrov also usefully extends his survey of responses to comedy to the present, supplementing the bibliography with contemporary literary approaches which will be of great aid in orienting readers toward further study.

S. Douglas Olson’s essay “Comedy, Politics, and Society” addresses the political orientation of Aristophanic comedy, beginning with ancient opinions and continuing with the many differing positions taken in more recent times. Working from the evident paradox of a genre that claims to give political advice, while at the same time exerting no particular influence over current affairs, Olson concludes argues that the plays of Aristophanes contain little in the way of positive political content, but offer to their audiences the flattering fiction that problems in the demos are not the fault of individual citizens but of their corrupt leaders.

In “The Material Evidence” J. Richard Green describes what he calls “souvenirs of performances” (71), artifacts that represent or somehow memorialize the characters, scenes, and plays of comedy. He begins with vases, both Attic and South Italian, but considers a full range of objects, such as figurines, reliefs, and masks. A particularly interesting aspect of the essay is Green’s discussion of mosaic representations of Menander *Synaristosai*, which begins with Dioskourides’ mosaic from the “Villa of Cicero” at Pompeii, and compares two later mosaics from the early

fourth and late third centuries. The former (from Mytilene) preserves the theatrical context of the original with masks, the play title and character names. The latter (from the city of Zeugma in Syria) presents the characters without masks, although it preserves the play title, perhaps in keeping with the desires of a customer whose experience of Menander's play was not primarily theatrical.

Eric Csapo's essay, "The Production and Performance of Comedy" condenses a vast amount of information about ancient play production into a relatively short chapter of thirty-nine pages. Overlapping sections on performance context, performers, performance space, and performance serve to organize the presentation. Interesting details emerge everywhere: for example Csapo notes the asymmetry between tragedy and comedy as it is reflected in their relative treatment of the chorus. From Aeschylus to Euripides there is a sharp drop in the frequency of choral lines in tragedy (due in part to Euripides' musical interests), while in comedy the first sign of the diminution of the chorus is found in the *Ecclesiazusae* of Aristophanes (393).

The section on "Contexts" concludes with an essay by Angus Bowie, "Myth and Ritual in Comedy." The myth section begins with the lament that mythological comedy is largely absent from the historical record, and a caveat about the uncertainty of conclusions drawn from the preserved titles and scanty fragments of plays. Nevertheless, comedies with prominent mythological elements constituted an important sub-genre in Old and Middle Comedy, with a wide range of literary applications, before declining in importance for the authors of New Comedy. Comedies based on ritual seem to be much less frequently performed, but civic festivals are well represented in Aristophanes, even in plays where the title would not lead one to suspect it. It is likely that the same is true for the work of other authors as well. Other aspects of ritual appear in Old Comedy: women's religious activity, cures like the one performed in Aristophanes' *Plutus*, ithyphallic gods, and opportunistic miracle-workers appear with some regularity, as well as many others. These, too, decline in popularity by the time of New Comedy.

Part Two, "History," begins with Ian Storey on "Origins and Fifth-Century Comedy." Storey begins with a summary of the fragmentary evidence for comic origins, which he clearly regards as insufficient for establishing firm conclusions. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to a sequential consideration of the major comic writers of the fifth century, beginning with the quasi-legendary Susarion and proceeding quickly to

Magnes, Cratinus, and the other writers of Old Comedy, with the exception of Aristophanes, who is treated at length in the next chapter. Storey's essay also contains a discussion of typical Old Comedy themes: the Golden Age, the burlesque of myth, comedy of ideas, political comedy, and domestic comedy, concluding with a brief section on personal invective.

Aristophanes gets his own succinctly-titled chapter written by Ralph Rosen. Rosen begins with a discussion of the complexities involved in assessing the autobiographical character of Aristophanic comedy, including much-discussed topics like the putative feud with Cleon and the question of Aristophanes' feuds/relationships/collaboration with his rivals, both topics which have provided much material for Aristophanes' would-be biographers, but which, Rosen argues, need to be treated with considerable skepticism. He concludes with a triad of typical Aristophanic themes, which can be read as a supplement to the list of Old Comedy themes in Storey (see above): the question of who ought to rule, ending the Peloponnesian War, and the conflict between generations.

W.G. Arnott contributes a chapter, "Middle Comedy," which attempts to extract from the mass of fragments a coherent account of the comedy that developed in the course of the fourth century. Much condensation is needed, of course (for example, Alexis, the subject of Arnott's own magisterial commentary, gets only a page). Arnott begins with a survey of Middle Comedy authors. He continues with an examination of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazousae* and *Plutus* as plays on the cusp between Old and Middle Comedy, a description of typical themes (mythological burlesque, mockery of philosophy and politics), an analysis of play titles, and an examination of three exemplary character types of Middle Comedy: cooks, parasites, and soldiers.

The "History" section of the book concludes with Stanley Ireland on "New Comedy." Ireland begins with a survey of New Comedy writers, concluding with Menander, the best known representative of the genre. The Menander section begins with the consideration of a number of interesting issues, including the life of Menander, his extraordinary ancient reputation, and his rediscovery in the twentieth century, as well as his literary technique and influences on his work. Ireland then provides detailed discussions of the best-preserved plays, before concluding with the Roman adaptation of New Comedy.

The "Elements" section begins with Alan Sommerstein's essay, "The History of the Text of Aristophanes." Sommerstein's account of the textual tradition is impressively concise, a mere twenty-three pages,

producing a very readable narrative, with most of the technical details moved to the footnotes. He begins by treating the text of Aristophanes not so much as a finished text in circulation but as “working script” which might be subject to further change, a conception of the text which could account for a variety of apparent irregularities within the Aristophanic corpus. He continues with a reconstruction of the history of the text in the fourth century, when Aristophanes’ work was presumably in the care of his sons, then surveys the Hellenistic period, the papyri, and Medieval activity leading to the first printed edition of Aristophanes, down to the most recent generation of scholarship.

The fragments of Greek comedy have already had a major place in this volume, particularly in the contributions of Storey, Rosen, Arnott, and Ireland. However, they have not been addressed as a subject in themselves, with their own methodological issues to be addressed. Heinz Günter-Nesselrath’s essay, “Comic Fragments: Transmission and Textual Criticism,” attempts to look at the fragments from two diachronic perspectives, as they represent the different phases of comedy in differing ways, and as they have been transmitted to us. The section on textual criticism is particularly interesting, as Nesselrath shows how conflicting readings can be used to reconstruct the manuscript traditions of different comic fragments.

Bernard Zimmermann’s “Structure and Meter” falls into two parts. First, he discusses the constituent structures of Old Comedy, particularly the complex of forms related to the parabasis (kommation, anapests, epirrhematic syzygy), as well as the epirrhematic agon and the less exotic structures. The section on meter is very brief. Thousands of pages have already been written on the subject, as Zimmermann indicates in the notes, and like Sommerstein (see above) he clearly chooses to write a narrative intelligible to non-specialists, while pointing experienced scholars in the direction of more nuanced treatments. One result of this choice is that he is able to devote more space to illustrating the importance of meter in Aristophanes as something more than a virtuoso effect, but as an essential part of the way that character (particularly that of the chorus) is shaped.

Andreas Willi’s “The Language of Old Comedy” completes the collection. Willi begins by discussing a range of topics necessary for the construction of a comprehensive portrait of the dialect of Old Comedy: language stratum, phonology, morphology, syntax, word formation, colloquialism, foreign words and dialects, and parody. He then discusses ten authors whose work is especially interesting from a linguistic

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perspective. This latter material is particularly rich, in that it corrects a number of common assumptions about the stylistic differences between the authors, to the extent that confident conclusions can be drawn from the fragments. In the case of Cratinus, for instance, the fragments do not support his reputation for invective. Moreover, it is interesting that for all of Aristophanes' fondness for parody, the parody of epic appears relatively more frequently in Cratinus.

To sum up: this is an important collection of essays that repays careful reading. The editor and contributors have all performed a great service in bringing together many of the results of the last few decades in a single location. There is considerable overlap among the contributors but the result is richness rather than surfeit. Production standards are also very good. I only noticed one typo.