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A CULTURAL HISTORY OF COMEDY
IN ANTIQUITY

Edited by Michael Ewans



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In this suite of eight essays by nine scholars, editor Michael Ewans questions the purposes and functions of Greek and Roman comedy written and performed in the period from 500 BCE to 1000 CE. It is the first in a series that spans a discussion of comedy and the comic form from classical to modern times and is expertly prepared and edited.

General editors Andrew McConnell Stott and Eric Weitz assert that the volumes in the series are accessible to “more than a strictly academic readership” (xi), but all the authors selected by Ewans are respected classical scholars, although not all write in the same lively style as Ewans himself. This particular collection is likely to have a mixed impact on readers, with specialist scholars of humour finding interest in the chapters on theory and laughter, theatre-lovers and practitioners going straight to the sections on praxis and body, and contemporary current affairs readers turning to the discussion of politics and ethics.

Ewans’ introductory essay set out the proviso that because of the fragmentary nature of the source material available, genuine textual analysis is only possible in the case of Aristophanes, Menander (to a degree) Plautus and Terence, whose plays are extant (1).

He also gives an overview of the evolution of stage comedy from the first competitive comedy at the Dionysia festival in 486 BCE (3). Inevitably, in a multi-authored work, his references to the gradual abandoning of the chorus, the increasing domesticity of subject matter, the emergence of stock characters and their influence on later European drama are repeated in subsequent chapters.

The eight following chapters are devoted respectively to Form, Theory, Praxis, Identities, The Body, Politics and Power, Laughter and Ethics.

In Chapter 1, *Form*, Gesine Manuwald, looks at the various forms of comedy in roughly chronological order, canvassing ancient views that comedy, unlike tragedy, deals with characters of lower status through fictional stories (21). She argues that changes from Old to Middle and New Comedy were more likely to have been gradual (24) and notes that the plays of Hellenistic Greece were not exactly realistic but rather “theatrical constructs” involving situations relevant to their audiences (26). Turning to Rome, she notes the debts to Greek plays (28) but also the introduction of localised characters like craftsmen and hairdressers (31), added to the familiar stock characters of earlier comedy. Her descriptions of other Roman forms, including mime, *fabula togata* and *fabula Atellana* are perceptive and she traces the decline of comedy in Imperial and Christian Rome (34-5).

In Chapter 2, *Theory*, Caleb MC Dance moves away from the stage comedies into reflections on the moral desirability or otherwise of comedy. Looking at concepts of comedy as articulated by ancient commentators like Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Cicero, Julius Cesar Strabo and Horace, he focuses on the question of whether comedy involves pain and whether if proven, this is an argument for banning performances. Drawing analogies from Aristotle theories of tragedy, (44) he quotes the document *Tractatus Coislinianus* which proposes a definition of Comedy to parallel Aristotle’s famous catharsis theory, and concludes that that “Comedy... harnesses the laughable ... to edify its audience, exercise their emotions and provoke laughter and pleasure” (57).

Chapter 3, *Praxis* by Ewans, brings the subject of comedy back to the practical side of the theatre. Stage directions being scant, the play texts of Aristophanes, Menander, Plautus and Terence are his main sources. He contrasts the *teatron* (seeing place) of Greece and *auditorium* (hearing place) of Rome and brings the reader up to detail with current views about Greek staging techniques (62-3) and actor-audience relationships (64-5). Ewans’ predilection for Old Comedy is evident when he contrasts the perceived durability of Aristophanes into modern times with the fact that Terence, and through him, Menander, have been superseded by forms like Rom-com and soap opera (77).

In Chapter 4, *Identities*, Natalia Tsoumpra’s analysis of class, nationhood, and language comic typology make for lively reading (79). She opens by looking at accents identifying characters as lower-class, rural yokels or foreigners, then challenges the idea that stock characters began with Middle and New Comedy, tracing several of them back to Old Comedy (89). In her treatment of pederasty, homosexuality, crossdressing and rape, she admits that modern perspectives are hard to avoid (94-96).

In Chapter 5, *Body*, Louise Peacock looks at the way the way the body of the actor is used to generate physical comedy. Noting that costumes and masks are used as a source of comedy, she looks at padding on natural bodies, the use of artificial phalluses, the ludicrous exaggeration of breasts and the emphasis on grotesqueness and carnality in Old Comedy, seen in illustrations of statuettes from Crete, Greece and Rome. While Aristophanes and Plautus focus on sex as a source of comedy (109), most of the plays under consideration feature bullying, whipping, pushing, punching, mistaken identity and eavesdropping with “a remarkable consistency” in techniques which are also used by playwrights and screenwriters today (117).

In Chapter 6, *Politics and Power*, Isabel Ruffell argues that the institutionalisation of comedy first expressed civic pride and democratic assertion (120). But in Aristophanes’ plays, unflattering portraits of real-life personalities like Cleon and Socrates may have undermined that. Plato claimed Aristophanes’ caricature of Socrates in “The Clouds” prejudiced the philosopher’s trial (125) but, while Ruffell looks for evidence that Aristophanes was right-leaning, she cannot find it. She also believes evidence is scant for the belief that Middle Comedy shifts away from political comedy (128-9). Noting that no permanent theatre was built in Rome until 55 BCE, well after the great playwrights, she suggests that theatre was always suspected, as it still is, of “the danger of becoming a focus for the expression of public opinion” (136).

In Chapter 7, *Laughter*, Marcel Lysgaard Lech uses the textual evidence of two Greek words, *gelan* (to laugh) and *meidian* (to smile) to speculate on whether laughter was elicited or not (139), especially in Menander’s comedies, where one critic found “smiles rather than laughter” (144). After looking at Roman words for laughter, including *ridere* (to laugh) and its noun *risus*, he returns to Plato’s argument that the laughter elicited in satirical comedies can cause pain, a position rejected by Aristotle. I was less comfortable with the writer’s search for evidence in the scripts of “the pure, physical and sonic laugh” (151) written as “(Ha)hahae”, words used to show character, but not, he believes, as a cue for the audience to laugh (155).

The book concludes on an unmistakably contemporary note with Chapter 8, *Ethics*. Opening with an essay on Greek comedy, Valeria Cinaglia argues that some fundamental ethical themes remain consistent throughout Greek comedy. But in the new comedy of Menander, she perceives a specific interest in the ethical progression of the characters (164). Turning to Roman comedy, Serena S. Witzke, looks at the way Plautus and Terence, both of them “noncitizen outsiders” (165), went beyond slapstick to scrutinise the world of the Roman citizen elite. Plautus put slaves and non-citizens in dominant positions, but allowed his critique to be “comfortably veiled” by riotous comedy, whereas Terence’s plays, with their forced marriages and cruel fathers, represented a darker world with no truly happy endings (166). But the fact that their shared concerns with slavery, torture, and rape and

sexual exploitation are not necessary to the plots, she argues, indicates the clear intention to highlight the failings of Roman society.

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Helen Musa is an arts and cultural journalist. Trained in the history of theatre and drama at the University of New South Wales and the National Institute of Dramatic Art, she spent many years teaching in colleges and universities in Australia and in Malaysia, where she lectured at the Science University of Malaysia and directed eight plays for the University Theatre, all in the Malay language. During her years as an arts journalist, first as Editor of Canberra's monthly cultural magazine *Muse* from 1990 to 1996 and then as Arts Editor of *The Canberra Times* from 1996 to 2007, she expanded her focus from theatre to the visual arts, including the art of Southeast Asia. She is now Arts Editor for *Citynews* in Canberra, Convener of the Canberra Critics' Circle and continues to critique drama and opera.