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Laughter on the Fringes: The Reception of Old Comedy in the Imperial Greek World.

By ANNA PETERSON. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. [viii] + 230.

In recent years, scholarly interest in the reception of Greek comedy in the Second Sophistic has experienced a remarkable Renaissance; the main focus has usually been on New Comedy, especially Menander, because he is ostensibly praised and obviously imitated by 2nd and 3rd century authors from Plutarch to Alciphron. Aristophanes' reception in this period tends to be much less studied. Old Comedy's idiosyncratic, often coarse, language and political content is less easy to accommodate to the taste of the refined sophists priding themselves of their subtle use of Greek, centuries after Aristophanes' heyday. Peterson (P.) aims to close this gap. Among the authors studied in her book, Lucian is justly the main focus as the most likely heir to Aristophanes. P. expands her analysis further to contemporary and later authors, and looks at Aristophanes' agonistic comedy and self-referentiality in five case studies stretching all the way from Plutarch to Thomas More's *Utopia*.

Alongside some glances at Eupolis and Cratinus, P. concentrates on Aristophanes as the main representative of Old Comedy in her study and in the spotlight of the Second Sophistic. She treats any evidence for continued performance extremely cautiously, and ultimately remains agnostic about the possibility of reperformances. P. starts with the general observation that many direct references to Aristophanes in the Second Sophistic are negative and distancing, due to the rudeness of his language. P.'s focus is therefore not on the linguistically close or *verbatim* use of Old Comedy among the writers of the Second Sophistic. Instead, she argues that the authors she studies engage in a more conceptualised, subtle manner with two elements of Old Comedy, namely invective and authorial self-representation, which she shows were employed by some imperial Greek authors in creative and inventive ways. This innovative approach allows for some interesting results in P.'s case studies, and although Aristophanes was in the period mainly used by lexicographers (Pollux, Phrynichus) as a model for Attic Greek, the kind of undertaking that Lucian lampoons in his

Lexiphanes, P. teases out more creative uses of Aristophanic features in Lucian and others than hitherto noted by scholarship.

The attraction of Old Comedy for the authors in this study is more poetological than linguistic, and lies in its ability to permit them to use invective by critically engaging with Old Comedy as a literary inspiration. This allows for the redefinition of the genre of invective, e.g. based on Aristophanes' *Clouds* and its mockery of Socrates, which was influential not only on Plato but also on the imperial authors engaged with trends in Platonism and anxious to set their own satirical writings into a generic context. *Clouds* is alongside the *Symposium* the classical text most influential on the authors studied, increasingly allowing the definition of philosophy and comedy as contradictions in a period which focuses on invective and the universally exploitable use of rhetoric, humour and generic posturing.

Chapter 1 traces how Plutarch incorporates some Old Comedy into his writings. Plutarch, who claims he found Aristophanes' language too difficult and unsuitable, takes his lead from Plato. At first glance comedy is represented by Menander only, and this for Menander's ethical tendencies, in *How a Young Man Should Listen to Poetry*. P. however teases out a more subtle use of Old Comedy and specifically Aristophanes underneath Plutarch's ostentatious reticence. Plutarch is openly hostile to Old Comedy in *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, but P. focuses on the *Comparison between Aristophanes and Menander*, which is framed as a literary and stylistic comparison between the two comedians as well as an ethical one. P. sees the text's somewhat artificial construct of a rivalry between the two poets as a reception of Aristophanic poetics with its agonistic rivalry between poets of the same genre (p. 29), such as can be found in *Frogs*, or even Plato's *Symposium* (between Aristophanes and Agathon). This idea is very interesting, though a little problematic, as P. herself acknowledges, as the *Comparison* is epitomised. A close reading of the kind of agonistic language used here, and how it might echo Aristophanes' own, would have been worthwhile, especially as P. notes that Aristophanes in his plays invites antagonistic comparisons against other poets. This is the

case e.g. when he claims to have created 'lofty art' (*Peace* 739-64; p. 30), which emphasises Aristophanes' focus is on poetological issues, as he frames competitions on terms of sophistication and cleverness vs vulgarity. Plutarch's procedure of comparing two poets, with a possible syncretism missing, is framed in similar terms, and in his *Parallel Lives* he employs a comparable process of contrasting opposites, thus, P. concludes, taking his inspiration from Aristophanes. This is especially the case in his *Lives* of 5th century Greeks, where Plutarch quotes from Old Comedy as a historical source and evidence. Comedy is used as an eyewitness account, often negatively, and this happens despite an implicit warning against the use of Old Comedy as testimony, because of its devious nature.

In *Nicias*, Old Comedy is used in a more differentiated manner, in part because of the nature of the evidence, given the bounty of comedies contrasting Nicias and Cleon. The use of Old Comedy is determined by Plutarch's judgment of the subjects' character, and he may or may not tone down the invective depending on his view of his subjects' morality as well as the availability of evidence in Old Comedy for their lives. Overall, the analysis here is interesting and subtle, although I would have liked to see it placed into the wider context of Plutarch's works, to establish how rare this creative use of Old Comedy might be in his oeuvre overall.

Chapter 2 focuses on Aelius Aristides, who is quite conflicted about Old Comedy, as he admires it on its own, but certainly disapproves of its performance. Despite writing what can be seen as autobiographical material in *Hieroi Logoi*, he does not focus on the possibilities offered by Aristophanes' plays, but instead views him from the angle of his own interest in religion, philosophy, and how individual behaviour fits into both. Aristides seems to be fond of Aristophanes, given the amount of references to him in Behr's edition that much surpass those to Menander, an unusual preference given contemporary tastes, and not really addressed by P.¹ To Aristides, Aristophanes is not so much a witness to classical Athens, but a rich source of invective (p. 53). As a religious man, Aristides struggles with the employment of Old Comedy for literary purposes, and argues strongly

for its unsuitability for performance, despite its original performance context at religious festivals. He follows Plutarch's concerns about the genre's vulgarity, and Aristides claims to be reluctant to cite Old Comedy (p. 55) in his speeches refuting Plato's criticism of rhetoric in *Gorgias*, and contrasts the restrictions put on Old Comedy invective by law with Plato's unrestrained use of it in *Gorgias*.

In *Or.* 3.51 he quotes from Old Comedy to characterise Pericles, and, P. observes acutely, in scenarios reminiscent of Eupolis' *Demoi*. This characterisation presupposes Aristides' readers' likely knowledge of the contexts of these quotations, and P. shows persuasively that his knowledge of the play is more extensive than hitherto assumed. He seems to expect the same from his readers, with a focus on *ad hominem* attacks. In *Or.* 28, he similarly turns to *Demoi* and uses the form of the *parabasis* to defend his own *ex tempore* remarks made in previous speeches, thus using comic invective for his own defense of his own writing style. Again the plot of *Demoi* here is used imaginatively as part of the argument, and the form of the *parabasis* is appropriated for the purpose of self-defense. P. lists some plays cited by Aristides in which the playwright seems to stray into discussing their own poetology (Cratinus F 255 in 28.92, p. 66f., *Wasps* 1030-1046 in 28.93f.), and Aristides repurposes these in his own defense of the self-praise for which he had been criticised.

In *Or.* 29 (*Against Comedy*) Aristides argues against performing Old Comedy as well as new comedies written in the style of Old Comedy during the Smyranean City Dionysia. It is debatable whether this is a real or imagined situation, as the speech is a declamation. Interestingly, Smyrna's 'new' Old Comedy apparently lacks a *parabasis*, and P. is inclined to accept the idea that Aristides discusses real performances of plays similar to Old Comedy but lacking this crucial element. She goes through possible evidence for performances of revived and newly composed Old Comedies, tentative as it is, and it is good to see the possibilities discussed (p. 74f.). The nature of these plays remains elusive and is by no means unproblematic, and P. assumes that they are close in form to Old Comedy in slanderous content, and that Aristides is happy to utilise his knowledge of classic Athenian Old Comedy to criticise the Smyranean plays. Either way, such comedies should not be performed during

religious festivals, Aristides argues, because of their uncouth nature. Educated people can only enjoy religious festivals if the rudeness is removed, as it is inappropriate in the celebration of the gods.

This echoes Platonic restrictions on comedy performances in the *Republic* as well as his dislike of comedy, which are seen as signs of education. Here I would have liked to see P. explore the contrast between Aristides' obvious wide usage of Old Comedy and his prohibition of performance a little more, but her discussion of Aristides' creative use of Aristophanes and Eupolis is thought provoking and interesting.

Chapter 3 shows that Lucian's mock trials appropriate Aristophanic *agones* as part of Lucian's programme to use the Greek past to define his own present, and his own satirical writing style.

Lucian's *Fisherman* and *Double Indictment* are among his texts that are most readily associated with Old Comedy. They reference a whole gamut of comedy writers, their language and plot lines. Again Lucian evokes Plato's philosopher under attack, and uses comedy as a defence strategy, echoing the *Apology* and *Clouds*. Comedy becomes the opponent of and means to attack philosophical pretensions. P. takes most of her examples here again from Eupolis' *Demoi* and Aristophanes' *Acharnians*.

In the *Fisherman*, Lucian takes on the role of defender of philosophy, and its dialogue form echoes and recalls Old Comedy performance. Yet again, the use of Old Comedy is problematic due to its slanderous nature. The *Fisherman* problematises the nostalgia for the past already present in *Demoi* and *Acharnians* (the name of Lucian's protagonist, Parrhesiades, readily echoes those of comedy, and becomes one of many Lucianic avatars). Lucian transports it, or rather adapts it for his own time, in generic form that is not quite like Old Comedy but heavily indebted to it. *Double Indictment* echoes Old Comedy in the sense that its hero (another Lucianic avatar echoing comic protagonists) must stand trial like comic protagonists. The comparandum is the philosopher on trial, which again echoes Plato's *Apology*. A period in which Old Comedy is seen through the eyes of Plato, especially the *Apology*, will always need to address the friction between Old Comedy and philosophy, an issue

that does not arise in Menander's plays. Lucian marches a group of philosophers to trial one after the other, ending with himself (as the Syrian), on trial by Rhetoric and Dialogue, which allows him to discuss his own role in satire in terms more reminiscent of Old Comedy with its personifications. Again, Old Comedy is utilised as a type of literature that allows competitive comparison. This self-reflexivity explains Lucian's interest in the genre beyond his mere enjoyment of comedy's language. P.'s examples show that Lucian is quite sympathetic to Old Comedy, a genre exploitable for its self-reflexivity since it is close to his own satirical purposes.

In chapter 4, Lucian's *prolaliae* are characterised as his very own *parabaseis*, with agonistic self-representation at its base. P. argues that the *prolaliae* define the speaker against his sophistic rivals and are intended to influence the audience, and echo Aristophanes' personal viewpoint as presented in the parabasis of *Wasps* and *Clouds*. This new and bold claim is in need of careful exposition: the similarities P. explores are the competitive situation and personal rivalries; indeed, a couple of allusions to Old Comedy in *You Are a Literary Prometheus* seem to invite thinking along these lines, though the allusions are not very specific, as far we can see, to the *parabaseis* of Old Comedy. The parallels P. establishes between these two plays and *Zeuxis* are rather based on thematic similarities. Similarly, the links between *Heracles* and Cratinus' *Pytine* and Aristophanes' *Knights* and *Wasps* could do with more specific elements of comparison. As the struggle between old and new poets is somewhat of a stereotype and a general concern in the Second Sophistic, a closer look at the texts to establish any links beyond mere general thematic similarity, which may or may not derive from comedy, would have been welcome.

Chapter 4a forms an intermezzo with a study of Alciphron's letters as an appropriation of Old Comedy beyond Menander. Alciphron is generally more in tune with the Second Sophistic interest in Menander and New Comedy, so this fresh perspective is very welcome. Here P. shows again how Old Comedy continues to be exploited for literary allusions: P. argues for the reception of *Clouds* in Alciphron, which adds an Aristophanic flavour to the Menandrian father-son conflict acted out in the

letters, albeit with gaps in the story: 2.11 does not receive a reply, which invites the readers to fill the gap from their knowledge of *Clouds*.

Chapter 5 jumps forward in time to Libanius, again an author better known for the use of New Comedy in his declamations. P. argues that Aristophanes becomes more popular during the 4th century, but this is the period during which many Old Comedy texts are lost. Libanius' autobiography mentions his experience of a lightning strike while he was reading *Acharnians*. P. argues that Aristophanes' influence here is not merely incidental and linguistic, but also extends to the motif of autobiography, and she compares Aristophanes' description of Pericles' 'thunder' (*Ach.* 530f.) with Libanius' turn towards rhetoric. She however rightly concedes that Aristides had used the same passage of *Acharnians* already and was known to Libanius, so it would have been good to see more evidence here on how pervasive the use of Old Comedy is throughout the speech: the fact that Libanius was reading Aristophanes in a formative moment does not necessarily mean that he expects his readers to read much of the play into his own biography. The examples P. finds of Libanius' use of *Acharnians* and *Clouds* in his other works are much more straightforward. P. rightly points out that if Libanius' *Life* features Old Comedy elements for purposes of self-representation, and that this might be one of the reasons why Eunapius in his ambivalent biography of Libanius compares his style to Old Comedy.

The epilogue completes the book with an even further jump ahead in time to 16th century Humanism, by looking at Thomas More's *Utopia*. The case studies in this book are very selective, though on the whole interesting and informative. P.'s book covers many centuries and texts of disparate genres while finding comparable thematic uses of Old Comedy in these texts. It might have been good to see more focus on material from the imperial period, especially in the Lucian chapters, as not all of the chosen authors' works are considered by themselves or in their own context. This would have helped readers assess whether the selected texts were the exception to the rule, or whether the inventive uses of Old Comedy P. delineates were an essential element of

Second Sophistic poetology that had been overlooked so far despite its obvious importance. A more rounded picture of the importance of Old Comedy for the period might have evolved in due course. P.'s book is a welcome push to get this stone rolling, and she shows clearly and persuasively that work on the imperial authors' reception of Old Comedy must step beyond a mere search for verbal reminiscences and learned quotes.

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¹ See the notes and index entries in Charles A. Behr: *P. Aelius Aristides: The Complete Works*.

Translated into English by Charles A. Behr. 2 vols. Brill: Leiden 1981/1986.