

MARTIN REVERMANN

Introduction

Greek comedy: some basics

The only fully intact textual evidence from fifth-century and (very) early fourth-century comedy are the eleven completely preserved comedies by Aristophanes, who was born, in all likelihood, shortly after 450 BCE and died after 388 BCE.¹ This is, in fact, not as thin a basis as one might initially think. For not only is the number of completely preserved Aristophanic comedies actually quite high: it amounts, after all, to about a quarter of Aristophanes' total output of around forty comedies (contrast this with the seven plays we have by Sophocles and the six or seven we have by Aeschylus, both of whom wrote considerably more plays in total than Aristophanes). What is perhaps more is the fact that those eleven comedies are datable (in most cases very precisely), and that they happen to span the entire duration of Aristophanes' artistic career, from the earlier part (*Acharnians* [425], *Knights* [424], *Clouds* [423], *Wasps* [422] and *Peace* [421]) via mid-career plays (*Birds* [414], *Lysistrata* [411], *Women at the Thesmophoria* [411] and *Frogs* [405]) to the early fourth-century plays (*Assembly Women* [393, 392 or 391?] and *Wealth* [388]).

For the remainder of the fourth century, however, the textual evidence is largely fragmentary. There is one virtually complete comedy, preserved on papyrus, the *Dyscolus* by Menander (who lived from 342/1 BCE to 292/1 BCE or thereabouts). This comedy, which has been known only since the publication of the Bodmer papyrus codex in 1959, was performed in 316 BCE (when it won first prize in Athens at the Lenaeon festival). It is therefore quite an early Menandrian play. There are substantial parts of several other Menandrian comedies (*Aspis*, *Samia*, *Men at Arbitration* and

¹ On the life of Aristophanes and the chronology of his works see Gelzer (1971) 1391–1419 (the most detailed account); Easterling/Knox (1985) 775–7; Halliwell (1997) ix–xvii; von Möllendorff (2002) 58–62.

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Perikeiromenê), known from the Bodmer codex just mentioned and the Cairo Codex published in 1907.² A few more plays, notably *The Sicyonian(s)*, we have some idea of. Apart from the *Dyscolus*, however, none of the plays just mentioned is currently datable with any confidence. Given that Menander's total output is known to have exceeded 100 comedies, what we are left to work with is therefore a fairly meagre sample.

In addition, there is a large amount of fragmentary textual evidence from both fifth- and fourth-century comedy, collected in the landmark edition by Rudolf Kassel and one of the dedicatees of this volume, the late Colin Austin (eight volumes were published between 1983 and 2001; note that in this Companion all quotations of comic fragments are from this edition). This includes remains from Sicilian playwrights, especially Epicharmus, who wrote not in the Attic dialect (which all other comedy we have was composed in) but in their local Doric dialect. Produced in the very late sixth and early fifth centuries, Epicharmus' work pre-dates anything we have of Attic comedy by decades. Unfortunately, the fragments and play titles currently known offer only a few tantalizing glimpses. Even as basic a question as to whether Epicharmus' plays, and Sicilian comedy in general, had a chorus at all remains controversial. Last but certainly not least there is rich visual evidence, especially terracotta figurines and comedy-related vase paintings, although most of these vases are not from fifth-century Athens but from South Italy in the fourth century. Their systematic collection and, even more so, their rigorous use for the understanding of comedy is a more recent phenomenon in the study of Greek comedy (associated in particular with the names of Thomas Webster and Oliver Taplin). The evidence for comedy tends to be much easier to handle methodologically than artifacts related to tragedy, and provides invaluable information about costume, masks, props and plots in particular.

A Companion to Greek Comedy

At least two general conclusions present themselves as a result of this very brief survey. First, our views on fifth- and fourth-century comedy are by default somewhat 'Aristophanocentric' and 'Menandrocentric', respectively. This cannot change fundamentally without substantial new papyrus discoveries. Having said that, this Companion makes a serious and sustained effort to widen the scope of analysis beyond Aristophanes and Menander wherever possible (most overtly so in the chapter by Biles on the rivals of Aristophanes

² For the history of the Menander text and its restoration see Blume (2010) and Handley (2011).

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and Menander, and in Sidwell's discussion of fourth-century comedy before Menander).

Secondly, and as a corollary to the first point, the study of Greek comedy is bound to have an Athenocentric bias. Again, this Companion counteracts this inbuilt feature of studying Greek comedy as much as possible by dedicating a separate chapter to Sicilian comedy (Bosher) and by featuring three chapters which discuss the ways in which Greek comedy was received and appropriated in antiquity (Hunter, Nervegna, Fontaine). But unlike the 'author-centrism' on Aristophanes and Menander, this 'city-centrism' is not the result of chance and the vicissitudes of textual transmission. Sicilian comedy set aside, Greek comedy of the fifth and fourth century does have Athens at its centre, linguistically (by being written in the Attic dialect) as well as conceptually and thematically.

The agenda, then, for this Companion to Greek Comedy is this: what happens if we look at the Greek comic tradition as a *continuum*, spanning the fifth and fourth centuries (and beyond)? What, from a diachronic perspective, remains similar and what turns out to be different? Where are discontinuities? How about if we try to abandon, or at least try to shift (as far as the evidence permits), some of the traditional focal points – which means putting Aristophanes and Menander at the very centre – in favour of a more integrated approach which views Aristophanes and Menander, the playwrights who are by far the best documented, as part of a much broader competitive field of rival playwrights working in an organic, ever-evolving art form? And is there a way of putting into perspective the Athenocentrism of our evidence, especially by looking at Sicily and its vibrant comic theatre? Last but certainly not least, what happens if we look at Menander exclusively from the perspective of the Greek comic tradition that he was shaped by and which, in turn, he himself helped shape, as opposed to having his impact on Roman comedy always at the back of our minds somehow (which happens very regularly)?

All contributors were given this overarching agenda at the very start of the project, and they have all been pursuing it in one way or another. Their accounts, of course, differ widely, and each contributor has chosen some specific emphasis. But it is important for the reader to bear in mind this agenda which each contributor chose to respond to in his or her own way. The result is a Companion which adopts a broad and integrative approach (historical, textual, theatrical, socio-linguistic, theoretical, archaeological, iconographic), covering themes of literary, linguistic, social, political, cultural and legal history. Like every Companion, this one aims to provide informed as well as inspiring and thought-provoking discussions, written by an international team of specialists, of central aspects that are accessible

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to students of Greek literature (at all levels) as well as the non-specialist reader. Its twenty-three chapters are arranged in five parts, an organization which provides the user with a wide range of possible reading experiences (on which see more below). While some chapters deal with topics that have received a significant amount of scholarly attention in recent decades, others tackle areas for which there is comparatively little existing research (comedy and the law, for instance, or even comedy and religious practice). Moreover, space was, quite deliberately, made for some themes that have not been addressed systematically in a while (one example is heroism in comedy, or the question of what social historians can and cannot make of the evidence provided by comedy). It should also be mentioned at this point that some pieces adopt positions that are not necessarily considered orthodox in the field at this very moment (on fourth-century comedy before Menander, for example, or on the relationship between Greek and Roman comedy). This too is intentional: if the chapters of this Companion – individually, in clusters or as a whole – were to stimulate fruitful controversy and further research, a prime objective of this project would have been achieved.

Ways of reading this Companion

The target audience of the Companion genre is notoriously diverse, encompassing specialists in the field, Classicists at all levels with various degree of proximity to the field, non-Classicalists at all levels with interest in the field, and finally that most elusive target audience of all, the ‘general reader’. Like all specimens of this genre, this Companion too attempts to integrate the needs and interests of all those groups without alienating and losing any of them. While each of the parts can be read as one entity, the numerous interconnections (some of which I will be trying to point out in what follows) invite ‘cross-reading’ of this Companion. Last but not least, the index at the end has been designed to enable thematic readings across the whole volume.

Purpose and structure of the Introduction

The purpose of this Introduction is not only to present, in a compressed manner, the chief arguments of each chapter, but also to try to embed those chapters within this Companion as a whole (and, to a much lesser extent given the space constraints, within the study of Greek comedy in general). Most of all, the Introduction should be an appetizer of sorts, making its readers want to explore for themselves the richness and complexities of each

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chapter and section (which cannot possibly be conveyed by the Introduction). The approach taken is a sequential one, proceeding section by section, with frequent sign-posting of connections across sections. Authors' names are highlighted in bold upon their first (significant) mention, a technique which may also serve as an inbuilt mini-index for quick orientation within the Introduction.

The individual parts

In its first part, **SETTING THE STAGE (IN ATHENS AND BEYOND)**, this Companion contains five chapters which open up the field in a variety of dimensions: conceptually, by attempting the placement of *kômôidia* within some topography of 'genre' (Konstan); socio-dynamically, by exploring the position of the two main surviving playwrights, Aristophanes and Menander, within the wider dynamics of state-organized dramatic festivals and competitive poetics with their many rivals (Biles); chronologically, by embarking on the (difficult) attempt to construct a plausible continuous narrative of the development of the genre in the fourth century between the two strongholds of documentation, Aristophanes and Menander (Sidwell); geographically, by avoiding the limitations of Athenocentrism and expanding the field of vision to include comedy in Sicily (Bosher); and materially, by giving proper discussion to the large amount of visual evidence (especially theatre-related vase paintings) which invaluable complements and expands the surviving textual evidence (Csapo). It is within this multi-dimensional panorama thus created in the first five chapters that this volume as a whole is to be seen.

First, David **KONSTAN** explores how the concept of 'genre' helps to understand fundamental features of fifth- and fourth-century Greek comedy. This task is complicated, on a theoretical level, by the fact that 'genre' is not an unproblematic concept and best treated as a moving target than a fixed category of analysis. Also, the limited quantity and nature of evidence currently available imposes serious challenges and limitations. Bearing all of this in mind, Konstan's overall argument is that while the playwrights and their audiences had a clear sense that the performance occasioned by *kômôidia* was demarcated from that of *tragôidia*, those boundaries nevertheless remained fluid, and even lent themselves to being transgressed in what Konstan calls an 'evolutionary dance' of *kômôidia* and *tragôidia* (which has probably already begun in the fifth century). Drawing on Frye's notion of archetypes and Todorov's critical discussion of them, Konstan embarks on a nuanced exploration of genre-specific poetic practices that operated not as rules but as artistic challenges for both the creators and the consumers

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of *kômôidia*. Konstan gives special attention to New Comedy's focus on domestic situations and greater affinity to tragedy, with a particular focus on the generically different treatment of *erôs*.

Despite the necessarily 'Aristophanocentric' and 'Menandrocentric' bias which characterizes the study of Greek comedy, there are nonetheless openings for a broader assessment of genre-related issues beyond those two comic playwrights. The exemplary edition of the fragmentary evidence by Austin and Kassel has, over the past fifteen or so years, enabled a significant amount of fresh research on the rivals of Aristophanes and Menander. This work has considerably expanded the field of vision and deepened our understanding of Aristophanes and Menander, on the one hand, and the fragmentary playwrights, on the other. It includes monographs devoted entirely to Cratinus and Eupolis, respectively, as well as works on the practice and poetics of comedy as a competitive business. As Zachary BILES points out early on in his contribution on the rivals of Aristophanes and Menander, competition had to be particularly fierce (and overt) among comic poets, since tragedy, by generic convention, could not frame its competitiveness (which surely existed) within the same rhetorical frameworks that comedy had at its disposal, possibly from the earliest stages of its development onwards. Especially the so-called parabasis, a metrically and discursively distinct section delivered by the comic chorus, is comedy's showcase for articulating, via the choral persona, its competitive poetics. It is these poetics which constitute Biles' core interest. But the spirit of aggressive poetics pervades Aristophanic comedy beyond the confines of the parabasis: it extends to choice and presentation of characters (Pericles, Cleon or Socrates, for example), and to the appropriation of metre and dramatic techniques. Comic poets, however, do not only take on other comic poets. In addition, there is rivalry with comedy's glorified and beautiful sister art, tragedy, as part of its ongoing quest for generic self-assertion, self-definition and self-elevation. This, in fact, was an area of competitive poetics that Aristophanes was interested in to a high, perhaps even exceptional, degree.

Biles discusses in detail a particularly fascinating case study, the likely interaction between Aristophanes' *Knights*, performed at the Lenaea in 424, and Cratinus' *Wine Flask* (*Pytinê*) a bit more than a year later. There is a compelling case for assuming that Cratinus' whole play is a response to the way in which Cratinus was represented in the parabasis of the Aristophanic *Knights*. In other words, Cratinus went all out when getting right back at Aristophanes, and with consummate skill in the art of comedy-making. The success was overwhelming, and dealt a big blow to Aristophanes: Cratinus' play won first prize at the Great Dionysia in 423, a competition where Aristophanes' own *Clouds* finished 'only' third. Aristophanes' subsequent

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indignation is more than palpable in the revised parabasis of *Clouds*, which was written in response to this humiliating defeat. In our evidence, this instance marks a highlight both for its intensity and its creativity, and it falls within the period which saw the most engaged and colourful competitive poetics, the last decades of the fifth century. Afterwards, there is a notable downscaling in frequency, flamboyance and dynamics, a tendency that can already be observed in the two early fourth-century Aristophanic comedies *Assembly Women* and *Wealth*. By the time of Menander, the tendency, pre-figured in tragedy, of prioritizing plot integrity and realism (of sorts) would largely forestall the kind of dramatic rupture and discontinuity that overt competitive poetics needs to thrive. Victory over rivals remains much-coveted among comic playwrights, but the discourse of competition becomes largely a static add-on at the closure of a performance rather than the colourful *tour de force* it had been a century earlier.

While Biles had already been dealing a fair amount with fragmentary evidence (and reflected on the methodological implications of using it), the problems, and the fascination, of such evidence are compounded in the area discussed by Keith SIDWELL, namely fourth-century comedy before Menander. Problematic as this whole field may be, it is nonetheless far from being the ‘desert’ that Gilbert Norwood, in 1931, had made it out to be. Sidwell in fact starts by reminding us of the scope and diversity of what we *do* have after all: two early fourth-century comedies by Aristophanes (*Assembly Women* and *Wealth*), complete save for their choral songs; a substantial and diverse body of material evidence, consisting of theatre-related vase paintings, terracotta figurines and masks, reliefs and, last but not least, the archaeological remains of actual theatres (most notably Epidaurus); inscriptions, containing precious evidence concerning, for instance, the plays and playwrights who competed in dramatic festivals along with their sponsors (the *chorêgoi*); and a series of later sources, dating up to the Byzantine period: Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophists*, Pollux’s *Onomasticon*, Stobaeus, the *Suda* lexicon and a number of *Prolegomena on Comedy*. None of these items is unproblematic, and each source needs to be used carefully and with circumspection. But as Sidwell demonstrates, when put together, the evidence allows for better and bigger insights than one might initially think possible.

Taking his cues from two crucial passages in Aristotle (from the *Poetics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, respectively) Sidwell endorses a model which challenges the orthodox assumption of a single, linear development from fifth-century ‘old’ via (early and mid-) fourth-century ‘middle’ to late fourth-century ‘new’ comedy. Instead, Sidwell proposes, we are looking at ‘two separate highways’: satirical comedy, on the one hand, and plot-based

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comedy, on the other. The former, with its vitriolic (though increasingly disguised) invectives against individuals, is gradually being 'regulated out of existence', because it is being perceived by the social and political elite as a threat to stability and their own claims to power. In particular, Sidwell wonders whether the mythological and paratragic plays that appear to have been so popular in the period between 380 and 350 have to be understood as satirical, using myth and paratragedy as code and camouflage for invectives against known individuals. But while satirical comedy peters out, it is the other 'highway', that of plot-based comedy, which actually leads somewhere as the fourth century progresses, culminating in Menandrian comedy. One fascinating consequence of the model developed by Sidwell is that Menander is firmly situated within Greek comedy of the fourth century, since Sidwell argues that much that is characteristic of Menandrian comedy is pre-figured in comedy of the 350s and earlier.

The chapter by Kathryn **BOSHER** breaks the Athenocentric mould that has dominated the study not just of Greek comedy but of Greek drama more broadly (and many other areas of fifth- and fourth-century Greek literature). She introduces us to the intriguing and important, though fragmentary and much under-documented, world of Sicilian comedy (which was written in the Doric dialect, unlike Athenian comedy which was composed in Attic Greek). One of the distinct (and novel) features of her work is its top-down approach to the study of theatre in the West: especially the powerful Syracusan tyrants Gelon, Hieron and, in the fourth century, Dionysius I emerge as 'prime movers', and principal beneficiaries, of the mass medium theatre (note at this point that Boshers's approach to Sicilian comedy via cultural politics is complemented by the socio-linguistic analysis pursued in the later chapter by Willi on the language of comedy).

Boshers argues that by lending support to an indigenous dramatic talent like Epicharmus or recruiting a star poet like Aeschylus from Athens, the Sicilian tyrants appropriated, instrumentalized and ultimately re-shaped the local theatre to suit ideological and political agendas that are fundamentally different from those which Aristophanes, Menander and their respective rivals interacted with in Athens (which, for the most part of the fifth and fourth century, is under democratic rule). Also noteworthy is the fact that there is no evidence of indigenous Sicilian tragedy, even if strong interest in tragedy from Athens is implied by the successful attempt of the Syracusan tyrant Hieron (who ruled from 478 to 467 BCE) to draw Aeschylus to his court. Without an indigenous stage rival, Sicilian comedy, certainly during the lifetime of Epicharmus in the late sixth and early fifth centuries, appears to have been operating in a cultural economy quite different from that of the fifth- and fourth-century playwrights composing Athenian comedy,

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who were constantly exposed to both stimulus and pressure from Attic tragedy.

Bosher's discussion of Epicharmus in particular, in conjunction with the material evidence (theatre buildings and theatre-related vase paintings) and what can be gathered about the tyrant's cultural politics, demonstrates that there is good evidence for a continuous comic tradition in the West from the late sixth through the fifth century (and possibly longer). There is also strong reason to believe that the Western theatre, like its Athenian counterpart, had a competitive element, with the adjudication of prizes by judges. This tradition, which must have been rich and diverse, is in no way 'marginal' or 'peripheral'. On the contrary, it could be trend-setting: after all, no lesser a source than Aristotle (in chapter 5 of the *Poetics*, a passage discussed in the chapter by Sidwell on fourth-century comedy before Menander) attributes the introduction of plot-based comedy in Athens to the Western comic tradition.

Yet very significant gaps in our knowledge of the Western comic tradition remain (and are unlikely to be filled without the discovery of new textual evidence). A glaring one is the chorus. On the basis of Athenian drama one would expect the chorus to be a crucial component of Greek stage art, but whether or not Epicharmus' comedies even had a chorus continues to be disputed. Nor is the precise nature of the 'mimes' written by Sophron at the end of the fifth century currently determinable with certainty. And to what extent had the Sicilian and the Attic tradition of comedy converged by the fourth century? How many of the plays underlying the quite numerous fourth-century comedy-related vase paintings from Sicily and South Italy are Western Greek plays written in Doric rather than Athenian comedies written in Attic? Does this distinction even make sense in the fourth century, or would by that time Sicilian playwrights, for instance, compose not in their local dialect but in Attic, the dialect of the increasingly canonical fifth-century Athenian playwrights (comic and tragic) who by the fourth century at the latest had become pan-Hellenic cultural icons?

The kind of material evidence just mentioned, theatre-related vase paintings, is a central concern of the chapter on the iconography of comedy by Eric CSAPO. It is one of the striking characteristics of the study of Greek comedy that, for all the gaps in our knowledge, there is a substantial amount of visual evidence in a variety of media (vase paintings, terracotta masks and figurines, reliefs, mosaics) – evidence which scholars working in other areas of theatre history (Shakespearean theatre, for instance) would love to have! With standard catalogues listing over 4,500 items and with the number of known comedy-related vase paintings hitting the 600 mark (and counting), Csapo seems justified in saying that 'one could claim that Greek comedy is

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as well represented in the remains of ancient art as in the remains of ancient texts'. Using visual evidence is not unproblematic, in part because the shift of medium, from the ephemerally performative to the materially fixed, entails crucial shifts in agendas, conventions and contextualizations. Moreover, the difficulties that arise very much depend on the kind of question that is put to the evidence: a fourth-century South Italian vase painting, for instance, may tell us very little about how a particular play was actually staged (in South Italy or elsewhere) but nonetheless provide us with an excellent impression of, say, costuming conventions, theatrical gestures, stock characters or themes that were popular with fourth-century audiences.

In his chronologically arranged and richly illustrated select survey Csapo takes us from archaic Greece to late antiquity, impressively documenting how great the impact of Greek comic performance on visual culture continued to be, even at times when there were apparently very few or no more live performances. It becomes more than obvious that, despite the difficulties involved, this evidence cannot possibly be ignored but, like the textual evidence (which of course comes with its own sets of problems as well) has to be an integral part of any attempt to understand the nature and continuous impact of Greek comedy (note that several other chapters, especially those by Sidwell on fourth-century comedy before Menander, Ruffell on character types, Revermann on divinity and religious practice, Foley on gender and Nervegna on contexts of reception, draw extensively on the visual evidence).

COMIC THEATRE, the second major section of this Companion, examines central features of comic dramaturgy: structure and dramatic technique, characterization, theatricality, the nature and dynamics of performance, audience relationship and, last but certainly not least, comic language. Using Aristophanes' *Birds* and *Wasps* as focus plays, C. W. **MARSHALL** introduces the reader to standard structures and structural devices, notably the parabasis, which shaped the creation of fifth-century comedies. Other fundamental aspects of comic production like the dramatic festivals or the nature and availability of certain theatrical resources (especially actors and stage space) are also being discussed. Menander operates within a similar framework of comic production, even if the nature of comic playwriting changes, clearly under the increasing influence of (Euripidean) tragedy. Marshall also demonstrates some of the methodological difficulties that arise when trying to reconstruct comic performances from what we have to work with, namely texts which lack stage directions (ancient playwrights appear not to have written stage directions at all, even when they knew that they would not be supervising the production(s) of their own plays).

The design of character(s) is at the heart of comic theatre and crucially informs its effect. As Ian **RUFFELL**'s discussion of 'character types'