ΒΙΒΛΙΟΚΡΙΣΙΕΣ

REVISITING PARATRAGEDY

MATTHEW C. FARMER, *Tragedy on the Comic Stage*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780190492076.

MATTHEW FARMER'S monograph examines the presence of tragedy on the comic stage of classical Athens; in fact, the author's aim is to provide a systematic overview of the various modes in which tragic expressions or themes enter the world of comedy. The study evolves in a systematic way, not only because of the apposite classification of the subject matter that it adopts, but also since it includes evidence not merely from extant works, but equally from fragments; further, it does not refer exclusively to Old, but also embraces Middle Comedy. The first two chapters (Part I) can be considered as programmatic, since they contain analyses of what the author defines as "culture of tragedy" and "parody of tragedy", respectively — both being considered as distinct expressions of "paratragedy". By "culture of tragedy" he refers to quotations from, mentions or critique of tragedy: "a consistent, hilarious vision of tragedy's place in Athenian life" (p. 5). "Tragic parody", on the other hand, frequently occurs in a mythological context, while it may involve impersonation of "tragic" characters; it is, moreover, a subtler form of allusion that demands a higher level of familiarity with tragedy.

Chapter 1, entitled "Electra and the coal pan. Tragic culture in the comic fragments" discusses a number of fragments from comic plays of the fifth and fourth century B.C., in which we find instances of what Farmer designates as "culture of tragedy". We find, namely, fans of tragic poets, discussions about tragedy or references to the dramatic festivals. Through the discussion of fragments the author draws attention to the fact that "tragic culture" refers to a consistent set of tropes and dramaturgical devices shared by the poets of Old and Middle Comedy and not merely to a poetic mode monopolized by Aristophanes. There is indeed a key difference from previous

studies dealing with literary criticism in Greek comedy: Farmer concentrates on the dramaturgical context in which literary critical remarks are made, as well as their typology, rather than on possible inferences about the poet's views concerning rival genres or on the effect beyond the comic stage of the opinions expressed in comic plays. Farmer provides us thus with both an innovative and a practically useful angle of approach for the study of intertextual references relating comedy with tragedy. Both the lay reader and the philologist will profit much from the author's discussion of comic fragments — a still underdeveloped area of classical studies. For instance, Plato Comicus' play *Skeuai* is justly singled out as a prime example of a play in which tragedy (especially props and costumes, as we may infer from the title) is thematized (pp. 15-19). The ironic subversion of tragic innovation, through the hypothetical introduction of an Electra carrying a ...coal pan, instead of a water jug (fr. 142 K-A), targets Euripides, but more generally offers a comment on tragedy, on the métier of the tragic playwright, as well as his striving for innovation. Of particular import is also Farmer's discussion of the motifs connected with "tragic culture" in the fourth century (pp. 41-63). Again, the author lays appropriate emphasis on a period which is not often discussed in studies of Greek comedy; moreover, through his analyses he reveals how fourth-century poets rely on techniques similar to those of their predecessors. As he points out, a key way for characters in fourth-century plays to connect their circumstances with tragedy is via the quotation of tragic lines: as we know, this is a trope to be subsequently inherited by New Comedy (pp. 59-62).

The theme of Chapter 2 is the constellation of comic motifs termed as "tragic parody" ("Give me a bit of paratragedy. Tragic parody in the comic fragments"). Again, this chapter focuses on comic fragments in order to tease out relevant motifs and tropes: a key inference is that they mainly stem from mythological comedies and hence the extant Aristophanic plays ought not to be regarded as typical loci of such motifs. Instead of contemporary Athenians commenting on tragedy, here we find characters who start "living" within tragedy: typically their speech or heightened expression of emotions remind us of tragedy — frequently, of course, in comic contrast to the banal realities that shape the plot. Furthermore, through mythological plots "comedy signals that it is venturing into the world of tragedy itself, taking the actual plots and characters of tragedy and rendering them comic" (p. 69). Another characteristic of "tragic parody" is that we are dealing with a much subtler, artfully ironic form of engagement with tragedy, in comparison with the overt references to the rival genre that are labelled as "tragic culture".

The way Eupolis' *Marikas* parodies Aeschylus' *Persians* offers a typical example (pp. 76-77); the same is true of Alexis' Euripidean parodies (pp. 79-81). Further, the discussion of mythological parody in the fifth century (pp. 83-95) centres on a number of fragments which have not been given due emphasis until now. Strattis' *Phoenician Women* (pp. 90-92, 95-103) offers a prime instance of spirited tragic parody of that era; significantly, the very term "paratragedy" is first attested in a fragment from that poet: *ἐγὼ γὰρ αὐτὸν παρατραγῳδῆσαί τι μοι* ("For I <asked> him to give me a little paratragedy...", fr. 50 K-A). Neither should we forget that Aristophanes wrote his own *Phoenician Women* (pp. 90-91). Farmer subsequently proceeds with a discussion of mythological parody in the fourth century, an era in which comic poets continued on the same key, using the now-canonical fifth-century tragic plays as targets of their parody (pp. 103-111).

The second half of the book (Part II) contains treatments of individual Aristophanic plays, in which the themes and motifs covered in Part I are identified and extensively discussed. The subject of Chapter 3 is Aristophanes' *Wasps*; Farmer's key innovation consists here in his emphasis on the depiction of Philocleon as a fan of tragedy who ends up *acting* as a tragic character when confronted with adverse circumstances in his life. His son, Bdelycleon, reacts by staging a metatheatrical play within the play, which is of course a "prerogative" of comedy. The characterization of Philocleon as *ἀνὴρ φιλῳδός* (269-270) is central to Farmer's analysis: the comic hero is indeed obsessed with song and particularly with *tragic* song (pp. 126-130). Furthermore, the author shows us how Philocleon's behaviour merges, in a sense, "tragic culture" with "tragic parody": the old man refers to tragedy, but also tends to imitate tragic characters. Aristophanes' rivalry with Cratinus and the implications of the term *τρυγῳδία* are further issues fruitfully discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 4 deals with *Women at the Thesmophoria*: what Farmer concentrates on is the notion of "belatedness" shared by both Euripides and Aristophanes; also, more importantly, on the idea of "secondariness" that informs Aristophanes' stance. The "secondariness" of comedy — its attitude of commenting on, looking back at tragedy — indeed emerges as its very power: "comedy's self-consciousness about its place in a multigeneric literary tradition is what makes it the superior genre" (p. 157). The fact that Euripides had staged *Helen* the year before is certainly not fortuitous: that play provides a perfect frame for the discussion of the generic interplay between comedy and tragedy. One may well surmise that the two poets were innovating within an increasingly shared tradition — more pointedly so than we may have

realized thus far. It is not for nothing that Cratinus had coined the term *εὐριπιδαριστοφανίζων* (fr. 342 K-A).

Chapter 5 deals with the fragmentary play *Gerytades*, in tandem with the extant *Wealth*, concentrating on the way in which Aristophanes comments on the identity of the genres performed at the Dionysiac festivals. *Gerytades* is a play which interestingly features three comic characters representing each a Dionysiac genre: Sannyrion the comedian, Meletus the tragedian and Cinesias the dithyrambist. Farmer's key point here is that, by including Sannyrion in his plot, Aristophanes reframes his usual portrayal of comedy and tragedy; namely, he appears to adopt a vantage point even beyond the boundaries of comedy. *Wealth*, on the other hand, featuring set-pieces drawing on comedy, tragedy, dithyramb, but also satyr play, offers a more subtle and muted "recreation" or "encapsulation" of the festive programme of the Dionysia (p. 228). We may sense here a different mode of tragic parody, more suited to the shifting, evolving attitudes of the Athenian audience at that time. In the Conclusion, that involves a reading of passages from Aristophanes' *Frogs*, the poet reframes his main inferences and establishes his points of innovation.

In sum, *Tragedy on the Comic Stage* is a particularly well-thought and well-written book; far from offering a mere rehearsal or reformulation of established theoretical approaches, it suggests a genuinely new mode of approach to paratragedy and its various modalities. Particularly constructive is the author's emphasis on the tragic fragments, on which he supplies nuanced and careful readings. Admittedly, one might have at times expected a more lucid exposition of particular arguments or conclusions; also a more thorough discussion would be welcome as to the extent that allusions are to be immediately detected by the audience or, on the other hand, to be uncovered by the *literati* after reading the script. However, these are clearly marginal points of criticism: Farmer's learned and original monograph undoubtedly deserves high praise.

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