

[BMCR 2016.11.21](#) on the BMCR blog

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2016.11.21

Malika Bastin-Hammou, Charalampos Orfanos (ed.),
Carnaval et comédie: Actes du colloque international organisé par l'équipe PLH-CRATA, 9–10 décembre 2009, Université de Toulouse Le Mirail. Institut des sciences et techniques de l'Antiquité. Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2015. Pp. 210. ISBN 9782848675404. €25.00 (pb).

Reviewed by Simone Beta, Università di Siena (beta@unisi.it)

The conference whose proceedings are here under review was dedicated to the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of *Le carnaval et la politique: Une introduction à la comédie grecque suivie d'un choix de fragments* (Carnival and Politics: An Introduction to Greek Comedy Followed by a Selection of Fragments), a book written by the French scholar Jean-Claude Carrière and published in 1979 by Les Belles Lettres in the series *Annales littéraires de l'université de Besançon*.

In years when both scholars and students interested in the fragments of Greek comedy had still to rely on the text edited by Kock between 1880 and 1888 (the first book of the opus magnum of Rudolf Kassel and Colin Austin did not appear until 1983) and no modern translation of the comic fragments of Cratinus & co. was at hand (apart from the unreliable English version published by Edmonds between 1957 and 1961)¹, the second part of Carrière's book, with its accurate selection of fragments all endowed with a detailed commentary and a modern translation, was a great help, surely for students—I can say this with full knowledge, because it was in those years that I began working on comic fragments for my BA dissertation—but also for scholars.

The first part of Carrière's book, as one of the editors points out in her detailed introduction, was extremely interesting and original, as well. In *Le 'Carnaval' trente ans après* ("The 'Carnival' thirty years later"), Malika Bastin-Hammou, Professor of Greek language and literature at the University of Grenoble Alpes, an expert herself in the field of Greek comedy, runs through the history of Carrière's book by highlighting its methodological assumptions (the ground-breaking anthropological works of Jean-Pierre Vernant, Marcel Detienne and Pierre Vidal-Naquet) and its influence on the 'carnival' subject (the comedy as an upside-down world),

a topic still debated among the scholars.

The Toulouse proceedings are divided into four sections that correspond fairly closely to some of the main topics discussed by Carrière in the first part of his book (the origins of comedy, together with its religious and popular dimension; comic utopia; Greek comedy and politics; Old and New comedy) together with other significant themes (comic plots, the comic hero, obscene language, Aristophanes' political opinions).

The section *Aux origines, encore* ("Back to the Origins, Again!") contains only one item, Ralph Rosen's interesting discussion of the real sources of the obscene language so peculiar to Greek comedy (*Aischrology in Old Comedy and the Question of 'Ritual Obscenity'*). Rosen challenges the inclination to explain the conspicuous use of shameful speech in comedy through the bawdy and comic features of certain Dionysian rituals, by distinguishing the narratology of *aischrologia* in comic plays from the narratology of ritual *aischrologia*, because the starting point of the former finds itself and remains in the realm of the secular. Through the analysis of a passage from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Iambe's mocking reaction to the goddess' sorrow for the vanishing of her daughter Persephone) and the parodos of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Rosen concludes his attractive essay by stating that the origins of both ritual and comic mockery were probably quite old, but that it is not possible to prove that ritual *aischrology* had developed before comic *aischrology* so as to influence it.

In the section *Utopie? Le corps et le langage comiques comme outils d'autonomie et d'ancrage de la comédie* ("Utopia? Comic Body and Comic Speech as Instruments of Autonomy and Dependence in Comedy"), Ian Ruffell and Pierre Judet de la Combe deal with the influence of Bakhtin's theory on Carrière's book. Through the study of the complex relationship between comic body and humour (*The Grotesque Comic Body between the Real and the Unreal*), Ruffell argues in the longest essay of the book that the undoubtedly grotesque figures of Old Comedy, as shown by the Apulian bell-craters studied by Oliver Taplin, are firmly rooted in the material world.² Through a thorough analysis of a few passages of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Judet de la Combe demonstrates that the play's Aristophanic language not only has a strong relationship with the material life of the protagonists of the comedy, but is also able to create a structure that prevails over the comic characters themselves with the same strength that *tyche* (fate, destiny) shows towards the tragic characters (*La réfèrentialité comique. Métaphore et métamorphose dans Les Nuées*).

In the four essays of the section *Comédie et tragédie: dialogisme et fonction critique* ("Comedy and Tragedy: 'Dialogism' and Criticism"), the connection with Carrière's book is somewhat less close. After a short preamble dedicated to Platter's essay on the 'carnival of genres',³ Rossella Saetta-Cottone (*Le monde à l'envers. Renversement paratragique et mimésis dans les Thesmophories d'Aristophane*) discusses the paratragic (i.e. carnival-like) reversal of the figure of the tragic poet Euripides in the comedies of Aristophanes, stating that the charges made against the tragic

poet in *The Women at the Thesmophoria* in 411 BCE are an intertextual allusion to the charges Aristophanes had made against himself in the contest of the *Acharnians*, staged in 425. Angela Maria Andrisano (*Le chœur des grenouilles. Aristophane, Grenouilles, 209–268*) enumerates and discusses the many esthetic, historical and philological elements that demonstrate that the secondary chorus of Aristophanes' *Frogs* was not invisible to the audience, because the dance of the green batrachians was probably meant as a parody of the music of the poets of the so-called 'new dithyramb' or (in a true carnival-like disposition) as a parody of the dances of other tragic choruses such as those of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*. The essay by Ghislaine Jay-Robert (*L'œil et sa mise en scène chez Aristophane*) takes its start from the consideration that the use of words connected with looking ('eyes' and the like) is quite rare in Aristophanes and concludes with the remark that, in the language of Greek comedy, the eye does not see but is seen, because, exactly like a mask, it has the function of mirroring the images of the spectators, who can therefore see, reflected in the comic characters, their own grotesque image.⁴ Contrary to the carnival-like idea that would become popular in Rome, where, during the holidays of the Saturnalia (the antecedent of our 'carnival'), the slaves were masters and the masters were slaves, making the Bakhtinian upside-down world real (at least for six winter days), Suzanne Saïd (*Les figures du barbare dans les comédies conservées d'Aristophane*) shows that nothing similar was possible in the world of Greek comedy, where, differently from what happened in some Euripidean tragedies, barbarians were always portrayed as bad and abusive.

The last section, *La politique vu d'ailleurs. Carnaval et politique dans la comédie antique après Aristophane* ("Seeing Politics from Another Viewpoint. Carnival and Politics in Greek Comedy after Aristophanes"), deals with the presence of political themes in comedies written and performed in times and places other than fifth century Athens. Through the analysis of the extant fragments of Menander's *Sicyonians*, Christophe Cusset (*Ménandre: une comédie sans carnaval ni politique?*) demonstrates that political issues might play a relevant role even in New Comedies, as proved by the opposition between the oligarchic Smikrines and the democratic Kichesias, whose confrontation influences the sentimental plot of the comedy. The last essay brings us to Rome: instead of dealing with the supposed political allusions discernible in the comedies of Plautus and Terence, Marie-Hélène Garelli (*Liberté de parole et scène comique à Rome au I^{er} siècle avant J.-C.*) rereads the well-known story of Decimus Laberius, the man of equestrian rank who liked to write mimes: the political side of the performance did not lie in the text uttered by Laberius on the stage (known to us thanks to Macrobius' *Saturnalia*), but in the peculiar context of the performance, and precisely in the polemical exchange between the actor (in this case, Laberius himself) and the 'master of revels' (Julius Caesar), who had forced Laberius to act.

Born as a recognition of the success of a study that has left a solid trace in the history of classical scholarship, the Toulouse proceedings have added some further interesting material to the discussion initiated by the

publication of Carrière's book.

This review is also an affectionate memento of the other editor of the proceedings, Charalambos Orfanos (for his friends: Babis), Professor of Greek language and literature at the University of Lille, author of the book *Les sauvages d'Athènes ou La didactique du rire chez Aristophane* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2006), who passed away last June at the age of 42 after a long illness.

Table of Contents

Malika Bastin-Hammou – Introduction, le « Carnaval », trente ans après.

I. Aux origines, encore

Ralph Rosen – Aischrology in Old Comedy and the Question of "Ritual Obscenity."

II. Utopie ? Le corps et langage comiques comme outils d'autonomie et d'ancrage de la comédie

Ian Ruffell – The Grotesque Comic Body between the Real and the Unreal.

Pierre Judet de la Combe – La référentialité comique. Métaphore et métamorphose dans les Nuées.

III. Comédie et tragédie : dialogisme et fonction critique

Rossella Saetta-Cottone – Le monde à l'envers. Renversement paratragique et mimèsis dans les Thesmophories d'Aristophane.

Maria Angela Andrisano – Le chant des grenouilles (Aristophane, Grenouilles, 209–268).

Ghislaine Jay-Robert – L'œil et sa mise en scène chez Aristophane.

Suzanne Saïd – Les figures du barbare dans les comédies conservées d'Aristophane.

IV. Le politique vu d'ailleurs : le carnaval et la politique dans la comédie antique après Aristophane

Christophe Cusset – Ménandre, une comédie sans carnaval ni politique ?

Marie-Hélène Garelli – Liberté de parole et scène comique à Rome au I^{er} siècle av. J.-C.

Notes:

[1.](#) *Poetae Comici Graeci, vol. 4: Aristophon–Crobilus*, ediderunt R. Kassel et C. Austin, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1983; *Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta*, edidit Theodorus Kock, Leipzig: Teubner, 1880–1888 (3 vols.); *The Fragments of Attic Comedy after Meineke, Bergk and Kock*, augmented, newly edited with their contexts, annotated and completely translated into English verse by John Maxwell Edmonds, Leiden: Brill, 1957–1961 (4 vols.).

[2.](#) Oliver Taplin, *Comic Angels and Other Approaches to Attic Drama Through Vase-Painting*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

[3.](#) Charles Platter, *Aristophanes and the Carnival of Genres*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.

[4.](#) See also G. Jay-Robert, “La vision comme moyen d'accéder à la connaissance et au pouvoir: manipulation du regard chez Aristophane”, in

AA.VV., *Vision et regard dans la comédie antique*, *Cahiers des études anciennes* 51, 2014, 21–44.

[Read comments on this review or add a comment](#) on the **BMCR blog**

[Home](#) [Read Latest](#) [Archives](#) [BMCR Blog](#) [About BMCR](#) [Review for BMCR](#) [Commentaries](#) [Support BMCR](#)

BMCR, Bryn Mawr College, 101 N. Merion Ave., Bryn Mawr, PA 19010