

ALAN H. SOMMERSTEIN, *The Comedies of Aristophanes: Volume 11, Wealth*. Edited with translation and commentary, Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 2001, 321+xiv pp., ISBN 08-56687-39-1.

OLIMPIA IMPERIO, *Parabasi di Aristofane: Acarnesi, Cavalieri, Vespe, Ucceli* (Studi e Commenti 13), Bari: Adriatica Editrice, 2004, 448+xxxvii pp.

Wealth is the final translation in Sommerstein's exemplary Aris and Phillips series. The project to provide facing-page translations and commentaries on Aristophanes' eleven extant plays has spanned more than twenty years and has more recently been topped off with a highly useful volume of *Indexes* (the series' volume 12, published in 2002). In addition to the standard formula of introduction (1-36), bibliography (37-42), text and translation (43-133) and commentary (135-217), this edition of *Wealth* also contains a substantial 'Addenda to Previous Volumes' (219-321): an invaluable set of corrigenda, additional notes and bibliographical updates supplementing previous volumes in the series.

Sommerstein's introduction to the play is at once substantial and concise. It contains informative sections on more unusual topics such as Asclepius and the god Wealth as well as general background, including discussions on the first and second *Wealth* and the play's staging – all of which is well researched and highly readable. Nor does Sommerstein shy away from discussion of the contentious issues surrounding the play's interpretation. For instance, on the 'apparent incongruity' (14) that Chremylus' plan to restore Wealth's sight is conceived at times as having the effect of making the *virtuous* alone rich and at other times of making *everyone* rich he takes a characteristically common sense approach, claiming that the new world order will simply make *everyone virtuous* since everyone will behave virtuously (nor is this an original solution to the 'problem', as

he is eager to point out). Thus, Sommerstein dismisses at a single stroke the ‘subtle and far-reaching inferences’ (14) drawn from the play by scholars such as Konstan and Olson. A neat solution to the play’s interpretative difficulties, maybe, but is this common sense gone too far? Aristophanes’ plays are full of logical loose ends which present us with more or less soluble ‘problems’ – and in an important sense, the fact that some of these loose ends can be tied up is less interesting than the fact that Aristophanes leaves them dangling. In other words, Sommerstein’s common sense approach could be said to be as much of an ‘interpretation’ of the play as the approaches of Konstan and Olson. Perhaps this is nitpicking, however – and Sommerstein’s take on the issue certainly provides an interesting counterbalance to some of the more exotic interpretations of the play and is neatly argued.

As ever, Sommerstein’s translation is a *tour de force*: fluent, engaging and accurate. Occasionally words jump out at you for their youthful, slangy robustness: ‘real born saddo’ for ἄθλιος φύσει (118), or ‘Well, that’s me, innit!’, the striking colloquial nature of which serves neatly to underscore Carion’s repetition of the Sykophant’s οὔκουν ἐκεῖνος εἰμὶ ἐγώ... (918 and 929). Occasionally, too, words stand out for their slightly old-fashioned feel: ‘You’re such a born cheeky imp’ for ὡς μόθων εἶ καὶ φύσει κόββαλος (279, which somehow feels right in the mouth of the old chorus leader); ‘You’ve gone potty’ for μελαγχολάς (367, again in the mouth of the older Chremylus). What Sommerstein manages to achieve with his subtle use of language, not just here but throughout the series, is a stylish evocation of the registers of the Greek and a translation which is at once inventive and unshowy. In an effort to be both contemporary and performable, many modern translations of Aristophanes avoid being true to either the ‘letter’ or the ‘spirit’ of the Aristophanic play (to re-evoked that old dichotomy) – but the ultimate failure of such translations serves all the more to reveal just what talented translators scholars such as Arrowsmith, Halliwell and Sommerstein really are. Sommerstein is happy to use intrusive phrases or wording – such as ‘innit’, ‘potty’, or ‘half-pints’ (436) – but doesn’t *overuse* them, the result being that the reader isn’t sent scurrying to Greek as frequently as he/she is by Henderson’s

Loeb translations, for instance. Sommerstein's easy style helps to create an important bond of trust between reader and translator – a virtue often overlooked.

As Sommerstein himself comments (42) there has been no comprehensive commentary on the *Wealth* in nearly 100 years, making this edition all the more valuable – but the fact that it is inevitably brief (80 pages) a shame. Once more, scholarly standards are high in the commentary and well judged comments abound. The addenda are highly welcome, too – the smatterings of problems with the Greek font detracting in no way at all from the value of the content. All in all, this is a conscientiously prepared and entertaining volume marking a suitable end to a notable series.

Parabasi di Aristofane is very much a book of two (unequal) halves, with a general introduction to the *parabasis* of Old Comedy giving way to highly detailed commentaries on the four *parabases*: *Acharnians* 626–718, *Knights* 498–610, *Wasps* 1009–121 and *Birds* 676–800. These four *parabases* are chosen by Imperio since they are 'complete', containing as they do the seven canonical parts as listed in the scholia: *kommation*, anapaests, *pnigos* and epirrhematic *syzygy*.

The introduction, spanning some hundred pages, comprises sections on 'Struttura e Terminologia' (4–11), 'Storia ed Evoluzione della Parabasi' (11–22), 'I Contenuti' (22–99) and 'Il Linguaggio Metaforico delle Parabasi' (99–104) (the longest section, 'I Contenuti', is further divided into sections on 'The poet's self-eulogy and *apologia*', 'the chorus' self-praising', '*captatio benevolentiae*', '*psogos* and *onamasti komoidein*' and 'the invocation of the muse and other gods'). In these pages, as throughout the book, Imperio's high level of scholarship is clear: she works her way painstakingly through the ancient evidence and cites numerous modern discussions to provide a thorough discussion of the topics in hand (perhaps with the exception of 'metaphorical language', whose treatment is somewhat cursory, especially in comparison with the lengthy sections which precede). But Imperio's thoroughness can also be said to be her downfall in the Introduction, perhaps, since with it she sacrifices

any prospect of a concise and easily comprehensible overview of her topic. Her extensive discussions are drawn out all the more by long footnotes (a good number last over half a page), tangential discussions presented in-text in small print and an excessive number of quotations from secondary literature. The effect of all this erudition is dizzying but does not entirely mask what is perhaps the most disappointing element of the Introduction, namely that Imperio's approach to the *parabasis* is somewhat traditional. Sections on 'structures', 'history and evolution' and 'contents' may well be necessary evils in an introductory essay on the *parabasis*, but these could have usefully been joined by more outward looking discussions. Her one attempt in this direction – her section on metaphorical language – is confined to a paltry five pages and amounts to little more than a list. Certainly, it would have been interesting to see Imperio attempt discussions on broader issues, such as the interaction of the *parabasis* with the rest of the play or its staging, but instead she chooses to tread well-worn and less controversial ground.

Imperio's work may be conservative in nature, but her painstaking approach certainly pays dividends in the sections of the book where she provides detailed commentaries on the four *parabases*, with high standards of philological scholarship more than apparent. Her work benefits from, supplements and builds on that of other scholars, and particular use is made of the commentaries of Olson (*Acharnians*) and Dunbar (*Birds*) and the metrical analyses of Zimmerman. When Imperio encounters contentious issues she generally chooses to spell these out carefully, giving a balanced view of the argument rather than offering solutions of her own – an approach which, if nothing else, has the clear benefit of allowing the reader to make informed judgements of his or her own.

Clearly, *Parabasi di Aristofane* provides no new, exciting framework by which to judge Aristophanes' plays: its ambitions lie elsewhere. It is equally clear, however, that this book is the work of a highly capable philologist and its commentaries, which make up three-quarters of the book's length, will no doubt prove indispensable to serious scholars of Aristophanes. Imperio's talents lie in the conscientious collection and examination of difficult and

diffuse evidence. What is more, despite – or perhaps because of – its conservative nature, this work will serve well any scholar aiming to develop more ambitious, overarching work on the Aristophanic *parabasis*.

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