ARISTOPHANIC METATHEATRE

N. W. Slater: *Spectator Politics. Metatheatre and Performance in Aristophanes*. Pp. x + 363. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002. Cased, $59.95/£42. ISBN: 0-8122-3652-1.

Slater seeks to remedy the fact that, though Aristophanic metatheatre has received some attention, 'there has been little inclination . . . to look for a deeper or broader explanation of the comic poet's fascination with the theatrical process itself and his delight in exposing its working and its deceptions to an apparently fascinated audience' (p. 4). Further, 'a central contention of this book is that Aristophanes believes that teaching his audience to be aware of, and to think critically about, performance, both in the theatre and elsewhere . . . is a matter of vital importance' (p. 5). Eight plays are studied (not *Clouds*, *Lysistrata*, *Wealth*), but no reason is given for the exclusion of the other three.

S. begins with a survey of Aristophanes' metatheatrical techniques. This collection is a useful (if not especially novel) introduction. It could perhaps have been more comprehensive, to give a clearer sense of the areas Aristophanes particularly played with. It is a little sketchy at times, on the Chorus and props, for instance. It might have been interesting, too, to have considered the occasions where the Chorus takes on a ritual rôle and how this relates to metatheatre.

S. then considers the emergence of the comic and tragic actor, arguing that at the start of the fifth century 'actors as a category of public attention did not exist' (p. 39): poets were the main actors, the actors just like the performers in a dithyramb. Once acting skill became appreciated, poets ceded rôles to specialists, whose importance is reflected in the institution of prizes for comic actors in the middle of the century and in the increasing representations in art. The one problem with the chapter is that, interesting as it is, it is subsequently ignored and does not inform any of the later chapters.

S.'s method is to go through the plays trying to reproduce the experience of the first-time viewer. The plot is described and the metatheatrical aspects picked out. The range of functions ascribed to metatheatricality is notable. In *Acharnians*, 'the audience can learn from its deconstruction [a word Slater uses somewhat loosely] of the dangerous pretensions of Euripidean tragedy how to see through the even more dangerous stratagems of dishonest speakers in the assembly . . . and the lawcourts' (pp. 66–7). In *Wasps*, 'Philocleon must be weaned from pure spectatorship and made into a performer, but into a democratic performer, that is, into a rejuvenated choral performer' (p. 108); the dances at the end are used 'to prove that modern tragic performers are as out of date as Cronuses' (p. 109). In *Peace*, things change, and Aristophanes moves away from getting the audience to 'resist the seductions of illusion . . . to suggest that behind the grandiloquent characters and fantastic plots of Old Comedy lies a bedrock celebration of wine and song, which he identifies as the natural state of man in time of peace' (p. 131). Finally, on *Ecclesiazusae* (perhaps the best chapter), Aristophanes is a magician who shows how the tricks work but can entice us into a world where 'role-playing and theatrical manipulations demonstrate the power of the dramatic imagination to transform reality, to build a new, comic city in the shell of the old' (p. 232).

These conclusions are striking, but my main problem is that they do not always grow naturally out of the discussions. Imitating the first-time viewer is instructive, but S.'s viewer is one who notes each instance but does not then collect them together to see

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how they function as a set. One begins to wish that S. had winnowed out the metatheatrical points from the narration of the plot (which can be irksome if one knows the plays, however useful to the uninitiated), and then discussed them in a manner which led more clearly to the conclusions. The political points that S. is making would also have been clearer. For instance, there is a good deal of disguise and revelation of disguise in *Acharnians*, but each case is discussed separately (and some get very little treatment): the result is that it is hard to see how the points relate together. There is generally a problem of focus.

Focus is a problem in other ways. At times, the plays do not seem to be as fruitful in metatheatre as S. hoped, and the discussion can stray onto matters that are tangential to metatheatre; this is especially so with *Knights*. Even in the chapter on *Acharnians* we have a lengthy and highly speculative discussion of what happened to costumes after a play. In *Wasps* one sometimes feels that S. is straining to find material, e.g. the attempt to relate 492 *kulindetai* to the theatre's *ekkyklema* (p. 90); his remarks on the ending are interesting, however. By contrast, one might have expected more concentrated discussion of the metatheatrical *synkrisis* of tragedy and comedy in *Frogs* and *Thesmophoriazusae* (in these chapters one misses discussion of Silk's critique in *Comparative Criticism* 10 [1988], 3–37 of the idea of tragedy's primacy, which Slater seems to accept).

The book is generally very scholarly (there are some eighty pages of notes), but scholarly problems can be dealt with somewhat abruptly: ideas and solutions are suggested but not developed or justified. When Lamachus is stripped of his weapons, 'Dicaeopolis has revealed Lamachus as just one more poor bugger' (p. 58). The joke works in English, but what does it mean for the play? When the Chorus doff their cloaks for the parabasis, the garments 'are cast aside along with their pro-war views' (p. 59): this is chronologically true, but only for half of the Chorus, and no justification is given for equating cloak and militarism. Conclusions are often drawn from points that are far from fully established. S. argues strongly for a more optimistic reading of the ending of *Birds* than many recent writers, but does not really manage to explain away those points which the pessimists have relied on. The sustained criticism of the 'ironic' reading of *Ecclesiazusae* is, however, more compelling.

The book tantalizes. It is full of insights and revisions of standard views; its claims that metatheatre is a crucial weapon in Aristophanes' political armoury are challenging and novel. However, the insights are produced piecemeal, and the conclusions can seem drawn, rabbit-like, from a hat. The linear treatment of metatheatrical aspects works against a more cogent and coherent discussion of how exactly these features work together to justify S.'s conclusions. The result is that one is tempted both by S.'s suggestions and yet at the same time not certain that he has established that metatheatre is as important as he claims.

The Queen's College, Oxford A. M. BOWIE

GORGIAS

S. Consigny: *Gorgias, Sophist and Artist*. Pp. 242. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001. Cased, $39.95. ISBN: 1-57003-424-9.

Athens first met the orator Gorgias of Leontini in 427 B.C.E. when he spoke to the assembly on behalf of his city which was seeking an alliance with Athens against

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