
Stephanie Nelson describes Aristophanes and His Tragic Muse as a study that is both comparative and developmental. Much of the volume is in fact devoted to comparison through detailed and insightful examinations of the different ways in which Athenian tragedy and comedy explore the complex interrelation of the individual, the city, and the divine. Nelson, rightly observing that comedy and tragedy cannot be understood as separate and distinct phenomena, aims to situate the comparisons she draws in the context of the two genres’ intertwined development. Growing out of satyr drama, comedy emerged after tragedy had taken the basic form which survives for us today. Nelson thus contends that comedy defined itself in opposition to tragedy. Though the book, as its title suggests, sets out first and foremost to advance our understanding of Aristophanes, Nelson also and more controversially claims that tragedy became fully tragic only in response to the development of comedy.

Nelson’s developmental claims are most prominent in Chapter 1, which engages with elements of tragedy and comedy from masks to language to the role of the chorus, and Chapter 2, which considers the place of satyr drama in the development of both genres. The central chapters of the book work in a predominantly comparative manner, each juxtaposing one or more Aristophanic comedies with one or more tragedies. In this vein, Chapter 3 reads The Acharnians alongside The Oresteia and The Bacchae, exploring comedy’s treatment of the polis as a fictional creation of humans and tragedy’s contrasting understanding of the city as implicated in forces far beyond the merely human. Along related lines, Chapter 4 puts the startling freedom and achievements of the Aristophanic hero (in this case Philocleon of Wasps) in the context of the pathos-inducing suffering of Ajax and Medea in the face
of necessity. Chapters 5 explores the different tragic and comic portrayal of oracles in *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Knights*. Chapter 6 offers a particularly fascinating reading of freedom and necessity during wartime in *Persians, Peace*, and *Birds*. Finally, Chapter 7, departing from a cross-genre comparative approach, considers Aristophanes’ direct engagement with tragedy’s role in the polis in *Women at the Thesmophoria* and *Frogs*.

Importantly, Nelson’s conclusion from Aristophanes’ metatheatrical engagement with tragedy in Chapter 7 is neither that Aristophanes expresses nostalgia for Aeschylus (as seems to be the case on the surface of *Frogs*) nor that he means to elevate comedy over tragedy (as is sometimes taken to be the point of *Women at the Thesmophoria*, with its parodies of Euripides). Instead, Nelson gives us an Aristophanes who needs both comedy and tragedy, who sees both as essential to the polis. Athenian drama, and perhaps by extension the Athenian polis itself, is in this way necessarily multivocal. In an excellent conclusion, Nelson delineates and emphasizes the place of this multivocality at the core of the City Dionysia. Tragedy and comedy, of course, have their own internal multivoicals, and Nelson’s work is at its best exploring these, particularly with regard to comedy.

In a book that takes on a subject that is at once so expansive and so central to our understanding of Ancient thought, particular readers will no doubt want fuller treatments of particular themes. At the outset, Nelson offers a list of topics she does not address fully. Gender, rhetoric, and philosophy stand out here and are marked in the text by the absence of any discussion of *Lysistrata* or *Clouds*. One can certainly appreciate such choices as necessary to render the work manageable, even while noticing the consequences of not taking up these topics and these plays when fundamental issues of the relation of the individual to the polis are on the table.

Nelson also limits her study to the 5th century and so does not include *Ecclesiazusae* or *Plutus*. This is a fairly conventional choice in the literature on Aristophanes. Still, Nelson does insist that see sees these two 4th century plays as ‘wonderful’ and (contrary to readings that take them as marking a move away from Old Comedy) as ‘thoroughly Aristophanic’. Given this, and more generally given that the book presents itself first and foremost as deploying its comparative and developmental analysis as a way better to understand Aristophanes (and his tragic muse), I am not fully convinced that using the deaths of Sophocles and Euripides in 405 works as a justification for the temporal limits of the work. In the end, though, any lingering reader dissatisfaction with the inclusion of some plays and the exclusion of others and with the treatment of some topics and themes and the setting aside of others perhaps simply reflects the ambiguity and multivocality of Aristophanic comedy.