Greece & Rome (2025), 72.1 126–191 © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Classical Association

SUBJECT REVIEWS

Greek literature

In my last review I discussed Mark Usher's *How to Care About Animals*, one of Princeton University Press' volumes of *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers*. The series' rapidly growing roster now includes Sarah Nooter's book *How To Be Queer: An Ancient Guide to Sexuality*.[1] Nooter selects, translates, and introduces a range of texts from Sappho and Plato (most heavily featured) to Homer, Pindar, Alcman, Anacreon, Theognis, and Theocritus (to name just a selection of the selection). There is an important 'nothing new under the sun' ethos to this volume, as is the case with many in the series. As Nooter puts it, 'The past decade has seen a revolution in sexuality… sexual fluidity is now mainstream… And yet the Greeks got there long ago.' (vii) The Greeks wrote about sexuality 'with little angst and much wit', and it is this that Stephen Fry picks up on in his endorsement of the book: 'our ancestors often had clearer, less guilt-ridden, confused, prurient, and prudish attitudes to the rainbow of sexualities we wrongly think unique to our age'.

Nooter leaves aside the angst that comes with trying to figure out exactly what was acceptable within Greek sexual and social mores, directing the reader to the standard scholarship on Greek sexuality. From there, she can offer a multifaceted picture of queer love in the ancient world. She gives the disclaimer that the use of the term queer is 'deliberately anachronistic', because 'the identities that we recognise today do not line up with those acknowledged in antiquity' – but she goes on to add that: 'In fact, the identities of the 2020s hardly line up with those of just a decade ago.' (x) Anachronism becomes a true reflection of the fluidity of sexual identity. The openness of queer love as the book's theme allows us to leave aside other angst that has become entrenched in our readings of ancient literature. Take, for instance, the love between Achilles and Patroclus. As Nooter's selection shows, the romantic/sexual nature of this relationship is brought out by Aeschylus in his *Myrmidons* and Plato in his *Symposium*, but not in Homer's *Iliad*, and rather than trying to decipher what is the 'right' reading we can instead embrace the ambiguity and complexity under a queer rubric.

All kinds of *eros* are included in the book: gods attracted to beautiful boys (Zeus and Ganymede in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*); women loving women (Sappho); women's desire for women triangulated through a male perspective (Anacreon); men desiring men (Xenophon); older men desiring younger men (Plato). The selection even flips the script on dynamics we thought we knew, for example, in the case of Plato's young Alcibiades whose desire for the older Socrates 'flips the conventional

[1] *How To Be Queer: An Ancient Guide to Sexuality: Sappho, Plato, and Other Lovers*. By Sarah Nooter. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2024. Pp. xi + 245. Hardback $17.95, ISBN: 978-0-691-24861-5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017383524000226 Published online by Cambridge University Press

man/boy, lover/beloved equation' (213). As Aristophanes' colourful origin story for love in Plato's *Symposium* tells us, 'heteronormative love [is] just one of several ways to feel devotion to one's "other half"' (131).

Alongside all these varied love affairs, there runs the current of unrequited love, balancing the celebration of love with an understanding of its cruelties. As Theocritus puts it in *Idyll* 12: 'If only Eros would breathe upon us both equally.' There will of course always be debate about what to select for such a volume, but given the suggestion of uncertainty in the selection of *Idylls* (the introduction to section 10 mentions *Idylls* 12, 13, 29, and 30, but, rightly, it is 12, 13, 28, and 29 that are presented), I take the opportunity to throw *Idyll* 23 into the mix. Another story of unrequited love between men, its final scene of a statue of Eros falling on and killing the man who rejects the protagonist's advances would be a great addition to the picture of the multifaceted experiences of love.

Another useful series of slim volumes is that of the Cambridge Elements, which offer concise and thought-provoking treatments of a particular theme, as well as handy online correlates with embedded hyperlinks to sources and resources. A new addition to the Elements is the Cambridge Greek and Roman Mythology series, and with *Disability and Healing in Greek and Roman Myth*, Christian Laes provides its first instalment.[2] This volume treats disabilities and diseases 'from head to toe', going from mental illness to mobility issues. It focuses on stories from antiquity that feature disability, disease, or difference, and Laes hopes that readers 'may find something in it to "live their myth"' (62): to relate and connect to the ancient material. Laes traces disability to the earliest Greek literature, including Hesiod's *Theogony* which features monstrous creatures such as the Hekatoncheires and the Cyclopes or wounded gods such as the castrated Ouranos (10). But later in the book he nuances his discussion of the monstrous, pointing out that they are not lacking in ability but rather are strong and powerful (35). He also traces reflections on *lack* of disability to this early poetry, in Hesiod's account of the golden race that live free from suffering or physical decline (12). Homeric epic also features heavily in, of course, the ambivalent, ambidextrous god Hephaistos. But from there the case studies are incredibly wide ranging, stretching to Christian texts in Chapter 5.

Laes deftly grapples with the difficulties of defining disability, being sensitive to the risk of anachronism. Mental illness poses particular challenges in its definitions: PTSD is a retrospective diagnosis, for example, and needs to be used with care when discussing Homer or Greek tragedy.[3] Where I think Laes might have taken a broader view is in his 'speech' category (27): muteness, voicelessness. He includes from Ovid the story of Io turned into a cow, and that of Lara whose speech is taken away by Jupiter, but this discussion might have been expanded to take a less literal view of voicelessness by looking at other Ovidian metamorphosed women such as Arachne, Daphne or Niobe – or women such as Syrinx, Echo, or Procne and Philomela whose stories revolve around the change to or abuse of their voices.

[2] *Disability and Healing in Greek and Roman Myth*. By Christian Laes. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. 72. Paperback £17, ISBN: 978-1-00-933553-9.

[3] See my last review on Emma Bridges' *Warriors' Wives*.

Inevitably there is not a lot of room for depth of analysis, but the accumulation of stories and experiences and exempla makes its own points, and Laes guides the reader with a set of overarching questions. First, for each deity or hero discussed he asks (14): what is the cause of impairment? Is the affliction depicted as a disability, or just a characteristic? Is the god worshipped with an emphasis on the disability (or again is it just a neutral characteristic)? Is a story told of their cure, restoration, or compensation? Then in the conclusion he asks (57): are ancient myths emancipatory stories for the disabled? Or are they stories pernicious to the disabled? Can we blame classical civilization for ableism? These are big questions, and Laes offers a very balanced answer. Rather than any kind of celebration of diversity or agenda against disability, he summarizes classical myth's overriding approach as: 'Coming to terms with the difficulty and challenges caused by an infirmity, trying to give it a sense, and making the best out of it' (58). Blindness is a case in point: many poets and seers in classical myth are blind, but they are poets and seers *in spite of* being blind rather than because of it. Stories of disability are often stories of overcoming adversity. Blindness is an example that is also approached from a comparative standpoint, and this is one of the most compelling aspects of the book. As well as offering a comprehensive overview of Greco-Roman mythology, Laes also dips into Norse, Indian, and Egyptian mythologies (amongst others), hinting at a broader, shared mythological and folkloric landscape. Interestingly, there are many blind gods in other traditions, but (almost) none in the Greco-Roman tradition (Ploutos is an ambiguous exception) – the motif is transferred to those poets and seers.

The Ancient Sea: The Utopian and Catastrophic in Classical Narratives and their Reception, edited by Hamish Williams and Ross Clare, brings together stories of the sea from mythical, historical, and philosophical narratives.[4] It presents the utopic and catastrophic as an 'archetypal topographic antithesis' (3) and reflects on its relevance to the spatial turn and environmental humanities. It is indeed of the utmost relevance to the recent surge in the Blue Humanities, and its case studies may prove foundational for further work in this area. The editors focus on 'the *sheer diversity in narrative representations* of the ancient sea as utopic and catastrophic' (8), and two consecutive chapters from the second section on 'Ancient Literature and Myth' both epitomize and nuance this antithesis.

In Chapter 6 'The Seas are Full of Monsters: Divine Utopia, Human Catastrophe', Georgia Irby makes a distinction between a divine utopic dimension that is emphatically *not* anthropocentric, and a sea that is catastrophic to mortals. She brings together literary, historiographic, epigraphic, and iconographic evidence to compile something of a catalogue of *kētē*: sea monsters, 'the materialized danger and violence that lurks beneath the surface of calm and choppy waters' (132). She argues that *kētē* 'actualize the human angst of the unknown and unknowable depths which are made all the less comprehensible during storms' (132), linking the natural disaster of sea storms with the sea monsters that seem to both be created by and to cause storms. The power of nature is palpable in these narratives, and it becomes 'actualised' in

[4] *The Ancient Sea: The Utopian and Catastrophic in Classical Narratives and their Reception*. Edited by Hamish Williams and Ross Clare. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2022. Pp. ix + 311. Hardback £95, ISBN: 978-1-80207-760-5, paperback £29.99, ISBN: 978-1-83553-795-4.

these creatures. The good thing about monsters is that, unlike storms, they can be defeated. 'As such, *kētē* serve as the ultimate avatars of raw (oceanic) nature through which gods, heroes and even regular folk could conquer and control the environment' (144). And yet, 'regular folk' ultimately cannot control the sea, as they are excluded from it and its utopic potential.

Irby's catalogue leaves us with a predominantly catastrophic view of the mythic sea, inhabited by all manner of monsters. The subsequent chapter by Ryan Denson 'Order among Disorder: Poseidon's Underwater Kingdom and Utopic Marine Environments' gives a more positive view by focusing on marine utopias and 'katapontic' journeys. His examples start from the *Iliad* and Poseidon's palace: rather than focusing on the *kētē* that populate it, as Irby does, Denson draws our attention to the palace as utopia, that is, an 'idealization of a human-like world… superior to the "normal" world' (148). Again there is a catalogic element to this chapter: from Poseidon to Nereus and the Nereids, Triton to Thetis, we are introduced to watery deities. But in Part 2 the focus shifts to mortals and their encounters with the sea. Theseus is said by Bacchylides to have been challenged by Minos to recover a ring he threw into the sea, in order to prove he is descended from Poseidon. Enalus is said by Anticleides of Athens (preserved by Athenaeus) to have plunged into the sea to rescue a maiden. Both come back with precious objects, adhering to a folkloric motif, but also making the point about the underwater utopia as somehow superior. What is particularly interesting here is that in both stories the underwater realms seem to operate out of synch with the 'real' world: when Theseus resurfaces, for instance, he comes back to the boat as if it had never moved, though it has been blown along by the wind. This fits the sci-fi definition of alternate dimensions (160), proposed by Daniel Ogden for the underworld.

Katapontic stories are rare in Greco-Roman myth, but they are significant. Marine and terrestrial utopias share a spatial distance and separation from the inhabited world. And katabatic and katapontic narratives share certain features, too. But Denson's argument is particularly compelling in its exploration of the crossing of boundaries that is central to these under-the-sea stories: they are 'a means of imagining and understanding the connection between the vertical and horizontal axes of the sea' (164). Greco-Roman narrative does not just scare us off with *kētē* but uses stories of marine environments to 'map' the sea in all its vastness and depth.

I now turn to a bumper crop of books about Ancient Greek Comedy, starting with a study of the most important bit of any comedy: the jokes. Naomi Scott's *Jokes in Greek Comedy* 'is a book about what jokes *in* poetry, and indeed jokes *as* poetry, can tell us *about* poetry' (2).[5] It is not about jokes as a source of humour – so you don't need to fear a step-by-step explanation of why Aristophanes is funny (Scott claims that 'the more we prise apart their many layers of meaning, the funnier [jokes] become', 16, but I'm not sure I buy this!). Rather, Scott offers an in-depth study of 'how comedians use jokes to play about with the major building blocks of their own poetic production: imagery, performance and plot' (14). The scope of the study goes beyond the usual Aristophanic focus, including also fragments, because jokes are by nature

[5] *Jokes in Greek Comedy: From Puns to Poetics*. By Naomi Scott. London, Bloomsbury, 2023. Pp. x + 181. Hardback £85, ISBN: 978-1-350-24848-9, paperback £28.99, ISBN: 978-1-350-24849-6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017383524000226 Published online by Cambridge University Press

suited to be excerpted (13). Her argument hinges on the contention that jokes and poetry have a lot in common. They are two utterances that set out to flout the rules of ordinary language. They are modes of language which prioritize form. Neither is straightforwardly communicative. Both depend on or manipulate the ambiguities of language: they are characterized by a high degree of interpretative openness (also facilitating their excerpting and reuse). So we see 'contiguities' between jokes and poetic language. Jokes then *exploit* their overlap with poetic language in order to undermine it: to show its cracks, to 'reveal the fundamental ridiculousness of treating make-believe as a serious endeavour' (3). This goes beyond intergeneric parody (which is well-trodden ground in studies of Greek Comedy), operating at multiple levels including poetics and plot.

Scott argues that jokes 'draw attention to the gap between the world and our ability to represent it in thought and word' (10). And this is nowhere more clear than in her first chapter on metaphor and ekphrasis. Again, we have crossovers. Both metaphor and jokes are forms of indirect representation. Both involve mapping two clashing conceptual categories onto one another. And both involve a degree of absurdity. However, where metaphor can't be *too* defamiliarizing, jokes can – and it is in this greater gap that jokes find their humour. Metaphor and ekphrasis are then related in terms of their shared play between the verbal and the visual. Scott draws our attention to examples of 'disobedient' ekphrasis in other genres (41, term from Andrew Laird) in which the thing described cannot be easily imagined (Achilles' Shield is a prime example). This is amplified in comedy to the level of 'defiantly disobedient' ekphrasis: the Golden Age where Zeus showers us with raisins; a warm pancake gives out dawn's dew; the rivers run with porridge and soup; and sausages sizzle on the riverbanks. This is not just political nostalgia or celebratory agrarian poetics; it is a way of exposing the *falseness* of ekphrasis (42). Both comic metaphor and ekphrasis, then, focus in on the gap between world and word. Where other poetic genres might use these forms to *bridge* the gap, jokes use them to magnify it.

Michael Ewans in *A Cultural of History of Comedy in Antiquity* picks up on puns as 'a nightmare for the translator' (5), and indeed they are.[6] Sometimes we just aren't in on the joke. Yet the series, of which this edited volume is part, starts from the premise that comedy can give us a way in to context. Historical texts provide insights into sociocultural contexts, and comic texts can go deeper 'by virtue of being built upon a generic presumption of insider status' (x). As Umberto Eco put it, comedy assumes a conspiratorial status towards its society. In studying ancient comedy we get to a deeper level of understanding of antiquity – even if we don't always get the joke. The joke, in this volume, is not just verbal (Scott's main focus): rather 'the visual element was at least as important as the verbal' (5). So we are treated to all manner of comic elements including slapstick, dress-up and – as Classics for All reviewer Colin Leach notes – an abundance of *phalli* that 'would have benefited from some editorial pruning'.[7] This is volume 1 of 6 that move chronologically from Antiquity (1) to the Modern Age (6). All six volumes are organized in the same way, with a general introduction followed by the eight themes: Form, Theory, Praxis, Identities, The

[6] *A Cultural History of Comedy in Antiquity*. Edited by Michael Ewans. London, Bloomsbury, 2022. Pp. xiv + 227. 10 illustrations. Hardback $77, ISBN: 978-1-350-00071-1, paperback £25.99, ISBN: 978-1-350-44069-2.

[7] https://classicsforall.org.uk/reading-room/book-reviews/cultural-history-comedy-antiquity

Body, Politics and Power, Laughter, and Ethics. Many of the thematic chapters in this volume unfold diachronically: from Greek Old to Middle to New Comedy and then to Roman Comedy. It's a schematic and introductory venture that provides a handy way in to ancient comedy as well as comedy across time.

Stephen Halliwell's new verse translation of *Aristophanes: Wasps and Other Plays*, for the extremely affordable Oxford World's Classics series, features the same cover image as *A Cultural of History of Comedy in Antiquity* – the sixth/fifth-century black-figure 'Knights' amphora from the Berlin painter.[8] This book completes Halliwell's three-volume set covering all eleven surviving plays of Aristophanes (collected here are *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Wasps*, and *Peace*). The general introduction stretches to eighty-five pages, covering topics from Aristophanes' career to performance context to satire, and the translations are accompanied by incisive individual introductions. Fuller notes (sometimes explaining the joke) are given than the series usually provides, because 'Reading Aristophanes requires a constant imaginative effort, but one informed by historical understanding' (v). To bring this into dialogue with the project of the *Cultural of History of Comedy* series, we might say that comedy both presupposes and advances historical understanding. This is a complex dual manoeuvre, and we are lucky to have scholars such as Halliwell to guide us through it.

Robert Tordoff's Bloomsbury Ancient Comedy Companion on Aristophanes' *Cavalry* provides a further addition to this gathering of guides to Comedy.[9] The *Cavalry* is of course the *Knights* (the 'Knights' amphora doesn't make it onto the cover this time but does feature as Figure 3 in the volume): Tordoff includes a note on the play's title and his aim of capturing the military character of the chorus. MacDowell in his 1995 *Aristophanes and Athens* argued for *Horsemen*; Tordoff's version avoids potentially apocalyptic undertones. This book is pitched as the first student introduction to 'Aristophanes' most explosive political satire'. It begins with an introduction to the play's performance context, followed by a discussion of Athenian political and military leader Cleon (appearing in the play as the tanner Paphlagon). The bulk of the book (Chapters 3–8) then explores the play sequentially, as key scenes are picked out, explained, and set in a wider context. The strength of the book is certainly in this sequential reading, as I could see this being a useful running 'Companion' for a student reader of the play. Less useful are the too-brief concluding sections. Following the bibliography proper, there is a section on 'Further Reading' (157: it includes Halliwell's translation): this is just one page long and would arguably be more helpful for students if it could have included more extensive annotation on the various avenues of exploration. More concerning is that Chapter 9 'Modern Reception and Performance' stretches to only two pages. There is a pragmatic reason for this: as Tordoff notes, despite the play's original success, 'in more recent times the play has not found much favour or many stages' (133). And yet, the volume conforms to the worrying pattern of relegating reception to little more than an afterword.

For our last book we zoom back out to the wider landscape of Ancient Greek Comedy, this time not only to its jokes but to its use of language play more broadly.

[8] *Aristophanes: Wasps and Other Plays*. By Stephen Halliwell. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. cv +359. Paperback £8.99, ISBN: 978-0-19-890022-1.

[9] *Aristophanes Cavalry*. By Robert Tordoff. London, Bloomsbury, 2024. Pp. xi + 171. 4 illustrations. Hardback £70, ISBN: 978-1-350-06567-3, paperback £22.99, ISBN: 978-1-350-06568-0.

The Play of Language in Ancient Greek Comedy, edited by Kostas Apostolakis and Ioannis Konstantakos, is a broad-ranging volume yet one that has at its heart 'practical criticism, textual readings and "micro-philological" approaches' (38).[10] It 'is not a book of linguistic theory or a manifesto of new methodologies' (38), but rather the devil is in its 'micro-philological' detail. The volume's eleven chapters span quite the array of linguistic features, from metaphors and similes (resonating with Chapter 1 of Scott's book) to fantasy and parody. The drive of many of the chapters is classificatory: Georgios Triantafyllou gives us a typology of animal similes; and S. Douglas Olson one of sexual metaphors and *double entendres*; Simone Beta classifies comedy's invented compound words and Dimitrios Kanellakis gives a full catalogue of the rhymes found in extant Greek tragedies and comedies, before providing a classification of rhyme in comedy. These catalogues and typologies make the volume excel as a reference work, and its publication also as a freely obtainable e-book makes it importantly an *accessible* point of reference. Further, the introduction by editor Konstantakos provides an extensive (if necessarily selective) 'research survey': an annotated bibliography that will be very useful to refer to.

In his introduction, Konstantakos begins by positing a dichotomy between performance-oriented, 'theatrocentric' scholarship that has focused on the *staging* of Ancient Greek Comedy, and scholarship that centres on comedy's *linguistic* features. He initially advocates for the latter, allying this volume with studies that prize words over performance. But his perspective shifts when he finds a middle ground in 'the scenic materialisation of metaphors and figures of speech' (8–9), and to me this is the strongest aspect of the volume. Both Konstantakos and Bernhard Zimmerman in their chapters consider this materialization of language, providing a bridge between the two 'schools' and showing that comic language does not operate in a vacuum, and should not be approached as such. 'Comic language is not an opponent of performance' (9). I wonder, then, if 'new methodologies' might have fruitfully contributed to this volume, particularly methodologies coming under the umbrella of the material turn that seek to balance out language and materiality and give both due weight.

The language of Ancient Greek Comedy is often very much of its time, linked to context and culture and sociolinguistic practices. And yet in many ways it is strikingly resonant and relatable – and not just in its timeless sexual innuendoes and references to slapstick. As Konstantakos notes, 'The ridiculous personage whose essence consists in his peculiar language' (8) is Aristophanes' Scythian guard or Doric-speaking doctor, but also the German tourist in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. A key feature of the construction of a fantasy world – the 'invention of languages spoken by the inhabitants of that world' (39) – is quintessential to fantasy such as that of Tolkien or Martin, or More and Swift, but we can also see it in Homer with the language of the gods, or in the comedy of Pherecrates, who seems to have invented a language of the Underworld. A sustained study of reception would be outside the remit of this extremely focused volume, yet the contributors give us these and other glimpses of resonant linguistic practices. This can help us connect the dots between Ancient

[10] *The Play of Language in Ancient Greek Comedy: Comic Discourse and Linguistic Artifices of Humour, From Aristophanes to Menander*. Edited by Kostas E. Apostolakis and Ioannis M. Konstantakos. Berlin, De Gruyter, 2024. Pp. viii + 437. 3 tables. Hardback £118.50, ISBN: 978-3-11-129449-0.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017383524000226 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Greek Comedy and its more familiar successors, adding to our appreciation of the genre – even if we don't always get the joke.

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doi:10.1017/S0017383524000226

Latin literature

When thinking about the current state of the study of Latin literature and about where the field might be heading next, the obvious place to start for this review is Roy Gibson and Christopher Whitton's *Cambridge Critical Guide to Latin Literature*.[1] At more than 900 pages, it is a very substantial and exciting read. In fifteen chapters, plus an introduction by the editors and an envoi by Mary Beard, the contributors – all well-known and established experts in their areas of research – discuss the canons (Peirano) and periodizations (Kelly) of Latin literature, some of its key questions and methodological tools ('author and identity', Sharrock; intertextuality, O'Rourke/Pelttari), as well as its relationship with adjacent fields: medieval Latin (Stover), Neo-Latin (Haskell), reception (Uden), linguistics (Clackson), material culture (Squire/Elsner), philosophy (Volk), political thought (Lowrie), Roman history (Lavan), Greek (Goldhill), as well as the national traditions that shape the discipline (Fuhrer) and, one of its key tasks, the editing of Latin texts (Huskey/Kaster). As the editors themselves admit in their introduction, the topics covered in the volume are by necessity selective and could very well have included others that are now only touched upon in individual chapters, such as questions of gender, rhetoric, religion, education, science, or law.

One of the volume's key calls to action is that, going forward, Latinists should open up more in their work with Latin texts – towards historical, linguistic, and philosophical approaches, to new perspectives offered by 'distant reading', to a 'global Classics' approach, opening the canon of texts they discuss to include marginal and 'minor' texts in a new 'ethics of the periphery' (86), looking beyond the sphere of the elite, as well as studying Latin literature well beyond the second century AD, taking more of a *longue durée* approach to Latin literature, which in fact spans more than two millennia, including medieval and neo-Latin texts. The individual contributions are all very intriguing. To give but a few examples: Michael Squire and Ján Elsner offer an exciting exploration of the dynamics between texts and material objects, reminding us that texts too, first and foremost, come to us as material objects, e.g. in manuscripts or on stones, just like there is an 'inherent textuality' to the Roman visual environment (618); and the papers by Michèle Lowrie and Myles Lavan work very well together as explorations of the political and power dynamics that can be traced within

[1] *The Cambridge Critical Guide to Latin Literature*. Edited by Roy Gibson and Christopher Whitton. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. xviii + 927. 35 figures and tables. Hardback £150.00, ISBN: 978-1-10-8-42108-9.