



October 1994

Review of A. M. Bowie, *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy*

Ralph M. Rosen

University of Pennsylvania, rosen@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers

Recommended Citation

Rosen, R. M. (1994). Review of A. M. Bowie, *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy*. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/20

Reprinted from *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, October 10, 1994. Publisher URL: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/1994/94.10.10.html>

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/20
For more information, please contact libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Review of A. M. Bowie, *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy*

Abstract

This year marks the eightieth anniversary of the first edition of Francis Cornford's *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, a book that sought the origins and essence of Old Comedy in "primitive" ritual, cult, and myth. The sub-title of Bowie's book on Aristophanes might lead one to expect that he is continuing the project begun by Cornford, and the fact that Cambridge has published both books, even if a mere coincidence, also invites comparison between the two. It is likewise noteworthy that Bowie's book appears at a time when Cornford's work, long repudiated and ridiculed by classicists, has undergone something of a rehabilitation in certain circles. Kenneth Reckford, for example, offered a judicious and generous reappraisal of Cornford's approach in his 1987 study of Aristophanes (*Aristophanes' Old-and-New Comedy*, Chapel Hill), and just last year Michigan reprinted Cornford's book, with a useful assessment of its reception in twentieth-century scholarship by Jeffrey Henderson.

Comments

Reprinted from *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, October 10, 1994. Publisher URL: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/1994/94.10.10.html>

A. M. Bowie, *Aristophanes, Myth, Ritual and Comedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. \$64.95. Pp. xiv + 328. ISBN 0-521-44012-2.

Reviewed by Ralph M. Rosen, University of Pennsylvania.

This year marks the eightieth anniversary of the first edition of Francis Cornford's *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, a book that sought the origins and essence of Old Comedy in "primitive" ritual, cult, and myth. The sub-title of Bowie's book on Aristophanes might lead one to expect that he is continuing the project begun by Cornford, and the fact that Cambridge has published both books, even if a mere coincidence, also invites comparison between the two. It is likewise noteworthy that Bowie's book appears at a time when Cornford's work, long repudiated and ridiculed by classicists, has undergone something of a rehabilitation in certain circles. Kenneth Reckford, for example, offered a judicious and generous reappraisal of Cornford's approach in his 1987 study of Aristophanes (*Aristophanes' Old-and-New Comedy*, Chapel Hill), and just last year Michigan reprinted Cornford's book, with a useful assessment of its reception in twentieth-century scholarship by Jeffrey Henderson.

In his Introduction (3-5), Bowie contrasts his own study of Aristophanes with Cornford's, and articulates the familiar and reasonable objections to his predecessor's approach. Cornford, in keeping with the orientation of the so-called Cambridge Ritualists, was fixated on discovering a single, unifying ritual structure from which Old Comedy evolved. Cornford's Aristophanes became a cosmic battleground between such antitheses as Good and Evil, Summer and Winter, Old and New, and his analyses were steeped in the discourse of magic and primitivism characteristic of nineteenth-century anthropology and folklore studies. The general problem classicists have had with Cornford's approach has always been that the extant plays of Aristophanes, in their details, at least, do not, in fact, conform well to his hypothetical schemata, and his efforts to make them do so often appear tendentious, if not simply quaint. Few scholars these days expect to isolate a singular hermeneutic "key" to any literary genre, as Cornford once did, but it is worth noting that Cornford's fundamental interest in what "deeper," often *unconscious*, elements lurked beneath the surface details of a literary work, is in line with more recent critical strategies from New Criticism to Cultural Studies. And as classics, too, gradually expands the range of questions it sets out to answer, Cornford's once radical approach seems increasingly more relevant to current interest in how such disparate cultural phenomena as myth, ritual, social praxeis, or political institutions, influence the formation of literary genres.

Although Bowie too, like Cornford, is concerned with myth and ritual in Old Comedy, he distances himself from Cornford's search for a unifying principle: "Rather than trying to reduce all the plays to a single schema this study tries to see what different structures inform and illuminate the different plays" (5). This statement, of course, calls to mind in its terminology as well as its goals, a "structuralist" approach to Old Comedy, which, indeed, Bowie then proceeds to articulate (5-6). Citing a number of French classicists with structuralist tendencies as his models, Bowie writes: "this method assumes that one can analyse a culture by looking for certain patterns of thought which are used to construct, order and talk about the world, and which will appear in a variety of cultural context such as myths, festivals, literature..." Later in the introduction, Bowie announces a second important methodological principle of the book, namely that it will be concerned "with audience reception rather than authorial intention. It cannot be stated too clearly that it is no part of its function to detect the 'views' of Aristophanes" (9). It is good to see that a healthy suspicion of the "intentional fallacy" has finally infiltrated the work of most classical scholars engaged in literary criticism, though Bowie's categorical formulation of this position already has begun to seem old-fashioned ("authorial intention," discussed with caution, at any rate, has been quietly regaining respectability in current theoretical discussions).

We are led to expect from the introduction, therefore, a study that will attempt a "structuralist" analysis of myth and ritual in Aristophanes, in order to illuminate the cultural context in which the plays were produced, rather than to focus on a self-contained interpretation of individual plays. In the end, however, the book does not really succeed at fulfilling these expectations, since most of the methodological principles that Bowie sets forth in the Introduction fall by the wayside in favor of a more familiar, "traditional" approach. It soon turns out, for example, that when Bowie speaks of "myth" and "ritual" in Aristophanes, he essentially means the explicit myths and rituals that actually appear or are alluded to in the texts we have. To be sure, there is plenty of material to confront here, and Bowie has a shrewd eye, as I note below, for how myths and/or rituals can be thematized within a plot, or exploited for organizational purposes, but more often than not the "structures" that Bowie discusses are barely subcutaneous, and he frequently gives the impression (inadvertently, I assume) that his analysis really makes the most sense when seen as part of a poetic plan ascribable to an authorial consciousness. It is possible that some of the methodological confusion in the book could have been avoided by a much more detailed engagement with literary theory at the outset; a clearer and more fully developed general discussion of what exactly his analysis of myth and ritual in Aristophanes might tell us about either the poet, his chosen genre, or his culture; or, who or what exactly is responsible for the "use" of myth and ritual in a given play, if the author's intention is to be banished entirely from consideration. But even if Bowie had dilated more on such issues, one gets the impression that he is simply not entirely comfortable with some of the implications of his professed approach. Consider, for example, the following quotation from the very first page of Chapter 2:

[Discussing the prologue of *Acharnians*] "Aristophanes no doubt holds back the mention of peace because he does not wish to let the cat of his comic idea out of the play's bag too soon, but the subjects with which Dicaeopolis begins are not therefore to be ignored. By

concentrating on this one aspect of the play, however, there is a danger that its other structural concerns will be obscured. A reconsideration of the function of mythological and ritual reference in the play will show that it is in fact dealing with a much greater range of questions of central importance to the city, in particular the relationships between state and individual, between city and deme, and between city and country" (18). In many ways this unassuming passage is programmatic of the whole work, and reveals much more about Bowie's project than the theoretical introduction immediately preceding it. As far as I can tell, Bowie *is* here interested in Aristophanes' reasons for a particular dramaturgical play; he *is* making an assumption about the poet's intention, and the notion of a play's "other structural concerns" seems to me like an oblique way of addressing what a poet might have been trying to express in his work. But more revealing still, I think, is the last sentence, which speaks of the "*function* of mythological and ritual reference *in the play*." Generally speaking, a structuralist analysis of a literary work emphasizes precisely those elements that operate independently, sometimes even in spite of, the particular way they may "function" within that given work. In a sense, "classic" structuralism is closer to what Cornford was attempting to do than what Bowie seems to be doing, in that the earlier scholar addresses questions less controlled by the specificity of a given text. Bowie, like many others, clearly prefers never to lose sight of a real play, with real characters, and a real audience. This is probably why Bowie shows little interest in bringing in comparative evidence from other mythological systems, a central strategy of many structuralist studies. Bowie does manage to avoid the excesses of Cornford's proto-structuralism, but if the result is perhaps more immediately palatable, it is also more predictable and less innovative.

The very organization of Bowie's book reflects in a way this basic predictability: each chapter after the introduction is devoted systematically to a single play in chronological order, *Acharnians* through *Plutus*, followed by a two-page conclusion. There is ample reference throughout to other plays at appropriate moments, but almost always with a focus on interpreting the individual play under discussion. There is little explicit attempt to isolate mythic structures from their immediate contexts and relate them to one another as unconscious or psychological structures. Bowie is aware, I think, that such an approach can be productive, but he prefers a more tried-and-true critical path. Indeed, he refers to his book in the opening sentence of his conclusion as a "*tour d'horizon* of what the structural study of Greek myths and rituals can tell us about the interpretation of Aristophanic comedy" (292). We may note the avowed focus on "the interpretation of Aristophanic comedy," as opposed to, say, "comedy" in general, or "Greek comedy as a whole," or "Athenian corporate psychology," etc. that is, the kinds of questions that a more rigorous structural analysis might seek to address. It is clear that this sort of approach, in Bowie's mind, can easily lead to visions of "unifying structures" à la Cornford, which he wants to avoid at all costs: "The most crucial [point] perhaps is the importance of not trying to impose or deduce a single structure for the reading of these plays, either individually or as a group. Although there may be certain broad structures ... which can be detected in a number of plays, on closer inspection each play is different from the others, and will itself admit of discussion in terms of a number of different structures" (292). Aside from the fact that few people to begin with would argue with the basic observation that comedy is a highly diverse literary form (indeed, variety,

unpredictability and idiosyncrasy are commonly acknowledged hallmarks of Old Comedy), the fear of making connections among superficially different phenomena with the methodological tools of anthropology and comparative studies suggests that Bowie's concerns are not really what he claims that they are.

The lack of a clearly articulated theoretical stance is especially frustrating because Bowie is in fact trying to engage himself openly in current critical discourse. But the peculiar amalgamation of various positions can be confusing: on one page of the Conclusion, for example, Bowie speaks of a mythic reference as "deconstructing" a certain aspect of a play (292); on the next page, in arguing against a search for "the message" of a play, he makes the rather startling statement that: "... it [i.e. 'the message'] has to be worked out by the reader attentive to all aspects of the plays: nothing is there 'for its own sake'" (293). Bowie's use of the term "deconstruction" here and elsewhere (e.g. pp. 133, 151) turns out to describe little more than what could otherwise be called "undermining," "analyzing" or "problematizing" a given passage (concepts familiar from more traditional interpretive approaches), and bears little resemblance to its radical, iconoclastic origins. And the very un-deconstructive notion that no aspect of the text exists "for its own sake" prompts a whole series of questions about why, then, these aspects do appear in a play, and how they "got in" the text in the first place.

Although my discussion so far has concentrated on what I regard as real methodological problems in the book, there are, in fact, many important discussions of various issues throughout the book, focused mostly on individual plays. Bowie's chapter on *Knights* offers a good treatment of how various rituals and myths seem to have informed the structure of the plot and the characterization of the main players. Bowie argues in particular that the Sausage-Seller's development from vulgar reprobate to political savior conforms to the patterns of various ephebic rituals. The play, then, traces the Sausage-Seller's transition from being a marginalized youth, a kind of outlaw, in fact, to his ultimate status as "Agoracritus," the adult citizen fully-integrated into the polis. Bowie notes a fascinating array of parallels between known ephebic rituals and details of the Sausage-Seller's portrayal (52-58). Some are less convincing than others, but together they add up to a persuasive argument that the Sausage-Seller does play out a role that one might characterize as "ephebic."

Even more successful is Bowie's argument that mythological succession-myths informed the Sausage-Seller's transformation (58-65). Bowie claims that *Knights* "depicts a parody of a succession myth" (58), begging a series of questions about what he means by parody in the first place, and what the point of such a device might be in this context, but he leaves little doubt that the overarching plot movement of *Knights* can be profitably considered as a kind of gigantomachy. Bowie is nervous, as I noted earlier, about ascribing such a phenomenon to the poet's intentions, but the passage from the parabasis that Bowie cites as part of his argument (510f), leads one to suspect that Aristophanes indeed was playing with gigantomachic discourse throughout. On page 60, Bowie even produces a table that compares scenes of *Knights* with analogues in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Bolstering this comparison is Bowie's excellent discussion of the parabasis on pp. 63-66, which argues that the thumbnail "history of comedy" section casts Aristophanes' rivals

"in the role of the defeated figures of succession myths: they are similar to Paphlagon and to creatures like Typhoeus" (64).

The chapter on *Knights* ends with an attempt to view the Sausage-Seller's victory "in terms reminiscent of the foundation myth of the city and the rituals, celebrated at the turn of the year" (66). The myth of the contest between Athena and Poseidon for the role of patron of Athens is well known to have permeated many aspects of Athenian ideology. Bowie relates the complex of rituals associated with this myth at the Athenian new year to the struggle between the Sausage-Seller and the Paphlagonian in *Knights*, and in the end makes a persuasive case that the Sausage-Seller is aligned with Athena in her mythical role as patron and savior of Athens, and the Paphlagonian with Poseidon.

Although each chapter stands more or less on its own as a discussion of the individual plays, and Bowie explicitly does not attempt to find any overarching unity among them, there are a few types of ritual that seem to recur in several plays as a controlling themes. One in particular, the *ephebeia*, figures importantly, according to Bowie, in at least three of the plays. In addition to *Knights*, where he finds that the entire plot centers on rites of passage, he also finds significant ephebic elements in the plots of *Wasps* and *Clouds*. In both cases however, Bowie has to broaden the concept somewhat, in arguing for a "reversed" *ephebeia* for Philocleon and Strepsiades, i.e. a process in which each character tries to return to a *youthful* state. In each of these cases, of course, the play makes it fairly explicit that these characters are being made to "act young," and the fact that each attempt ends up a failure is a revealing commentary on issues confronted in each play. But Bowie has made a real contribution here, I think, in analyzing what sort of cultural practices seem to underlie the way in which Aristophanes marks these transitions from "old" to "young," demonstrating that the details of actual ephebic ritual and discourse can be correlated with the portrayal of Philocleon and Strepsiades.

There do remain, I find, lingering questions about how significant an analysis of such rituals, or metaphors derived from ritual, are for an interpretation of the plays. Bowie's view of both Bdelycleon and Philocleon as troubling and problematic figures in *Wasps*, for example, is generally very compelling, as is his discussion of the tension between public democratic and private aristocratic ideology throughout, but it does not seem to depend especially on his analysis of the *ephebeia* in the play. Furthermore, in both *Wasps* and *Clouds*, the emphasis on an ephebic schema obscures somewhat the fact that the kind of "youth" to which Philocleon and Strepsiades aspire is just as important as the process of rejuvenation itself. Each character is trying to transform himself into one of the current younger generation, not trying to recover his own lost youth (which a true ephebic reversal might imply). In this sense, the theme of a (failed) rejuvenation emphasizes the strong generational polarities at that time in matters of politics, social custom and morality.

Elsewhere in the book, too, there is sometimes discontinuity between Bowie's analysis of myth and ritual in the plays and his broader interpretations of them. In one case, his chapter on *Frogs*, I find that the focus on ritual elements makes it particularly difficult to ascertain in the end just what his views are on a number of central issues. He does

articulate provocatively how "in the first part of the play ... the Eleusinian Mysteries are evoked as a way of thinking about participation in and ordering of the state" (244), and the connections he makes between Eleusinian discourse and the portrait of Aeschylus in particular are intriguing. But when it comes finally to piecing it all together, to address the inevitable questions about why Dionysus ultimately chooses Aeschylus over Euripides as the savior of Athens, we are left with little sense of Bowie's position. After a summary of the various Eleusinian elements organizing the plot of the play (*prorrhesis*, *gephyrismos*, *pannuchis* and *thronesis*), we read this conclusion: "Aristophanes thus offers both the taste of the dances, ceremonies and benefits of the festival, and also the prospect of the city's salvation through a great poet. It is not therefore only the politicians like Alcibiades who can revive the Mysteries, which were, a gift of poets like Orpheus and Musaeus in the first place (1032). The Mysteries have acted as a model for a stable life in a *polis*: they are open to slave and free alike..." (252). Although in the preceding pages Bowie acknowledges that Dionysus' choice is "unexpected" within the play, and therefore problematic, in the end he seems content to sweep aside Euripides' challenge to an Aeschylean *Weltanschauung*, as if to suggest that any tension or ambivalence building up throughout the play is somehow resolved at the end in a flash of Eleusinian enlightenment. In the treatment of other plays as well, I sometimes felt that the specific analyses of myth and ritual were not especially necessary for Bowie's interpretive strategies. Despite, for example, an interesting discussion of the mythical and ritual background of *Thesmophoriazusae* and its relevance to the portrait of Euripides and "Mnesilochus" (cf. pp. 216-17), the second part of the chapter (217-27), in which Bowie suggests that the play ultimately highlights the superiority of comedy over tragedy, could easily stand without the detailed information about the Thesmophoria set out at the beginning.

Bowie makes the modest claim for his study in his Preface that he hopes simply to open up "new questions in the study of Aristophanes," and he is the first to admit that his book is not an exhaustive treatment of myth and ritual in Aristophanes. Despite my intermittent frustrations with certain aspects of the work, especially methodological ones, Bowie has in fact offered the first sustained attempt to view the comedies from this particular vantage point, and has shown that it can be a productive line of inquiry. Future studies of myth and ritual in Aristophanes and other poets of Old Comedy, will surely be indebted to Bowie's important first steps.