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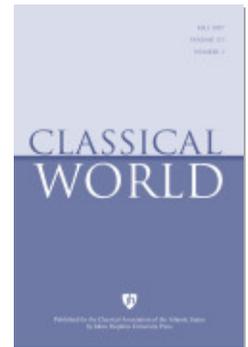
Tragedy on the Comic Stage by Matthew C. Farmer (review)

Claire Catenaccio

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and food shortages, Hannestad on art and imperial policy, Treggiari on marriage, Millar on the “Greek” Roman Empire, and so on.

The book is remarkable finally for its arrogance. Part of Harris’s project is to appeal to those who want to learn about Rome’s Empire but know little about it at the outset. Such readers will be forgiven if they leave the book thinking that contemporary Roman history is a contact sport whose protagonists’ prime objective is to draw blood from as many rivals as possible. The text abounds in polemic, the footnotes are frequently scathing of those judged erroneous, and when approval is registered—and the debt to others is immense—it is mostly with carping qualification. Harris does not hesitate to speak of his own originality (that supreme Oxonian virtue) and although allowing that much of Rome’s history cannot be known, he creates the impression that what is knowable is known to him alone. An illiberal, aggressive tone contrasts strongly with the personal political claims of his final pages. Altogether, therefore, a bravura performance on the constituents of Roman power that demands vigorous applause; but not, regrettably, a standing ovation.

K. R. BRADLEY
University of Notre Dame
University of Victoria

Matthew C. Farmer. *Tragedy on the Comic Stage*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xi, 267. \$74.00. ISBN 978-0-19-049207-6.

Farmer’s first book offers a detailed and nuanced examination of the relationship between comic and tragic drama in Athens. Though Aristophanes’ engagement with tragedy has been an object of critical interest since the scholiasts, there exists no study that attempts a systematic analysis of the comic fragments. Farmer sets out to remedy this lack. Collecting and collating a diverse body of material with admirable skill, Farmer elucidates the phenomenon of what he calls “paratragedy” in the comic poets. The term itself comes from a tantalizingly short fragment of Strattis’ *Phoenician Women*, where an anonymous character asks for “a little bit of paratragedy” (παρατραγωδησαί τι). In Farmer’s work, the term “paratragedy” denotes the set of tropes and techniques by which the comic poets portray tragic poetry, tragic playwrights, and tragic audiences in their own plays. Farmer’s book represents a valuable contribution to our understanding of ancient theater, and demonstrates the benefit of reading Aristophanes in conjunction with the comic fragments.

Farmer’s book is divided into two parts: the first focuses on the comic fragments, the second on four plays of Aristophanes. The introduction is brief—six and a half pages, two of which reproduce a long quotation from Aristophanes’ *Frogs*—and one wishes for a more thorough explanation of methodology and a more detailed preview of Farmer’s conclusions. In part 1, Farmer discusses the “culture of tragedy” in the fragments of Old and Middle Comedy. Curating fragments from Platon, Pherecrates, Callias, Teleclides, Phrynichus, Sannyrion, Axionicus, and Cratinus (among others), Farmer explores the ways in which the

comic poets depict tragedy as part of the everyday life of contemporary Athens. Evidently the whole city was mad for tragedy. In fragment after fragment, comic poets show the citizens of Athens as rabid tragedy fans; cast tragic poets, both living and dead, as characters; and compose conversations about the festivals of Dionysus and the relative merits of plays and playwrights. The comic poets also engage in tragic parody, appropriating elevated language and mythological themes for humorous ends.

Out of miscellaneous and fragmentary material, Farmer crafts a lively narrative. For example, he traces a series of increasingly elaborate jokes at the expense of the tragic actor Hegelochus, whose faulty delivery of a line in Euripides' *Orestes* cost him his career. Where Euripides wrote "calm" (γαλήν'), Hegelochus pronounced "weasel" (γαλήν). This slip of the tongue became what we would today call a "meme," a cultural unit that replicates, mutates, and spreads through human creativity. Farmer demonstrates how the unfortunate actor and his familiar weasel are mocked in the *Danae* of Sannyrion, in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, and in an unknown play by Strattis. Here we see the comic poets reacting not only to tragedy, but also to other practitioners of their own genre. Comedy works by a process of accretion, where every previous iteration of a joke becomes part of the repertoire, a "running gag."

Farmer's task in part 2 is more straightforward. In a series of three chapters, he moves through four plays of Aristophanes, examining in each case how the play situates itself within the comic "culture of tragedy" described in part 1. In *Wasps*, Philocleon is depicted as a tragedy fan whose obsession with the plays of Phrynichus leads him into tragic madness; the play as a whole stages an agonistic confrontation between comedy and tragedy. In *Women at the Thesmophoria*, an overtly metatheatrical play, Aristophanes uses the character of Euripides to poke fun at comedy's supposed inferiority to tragedy. In the fragmentary *Gerytades* and in *Wealth*, Aristophanes positions comedy not only against tragedy but against dithyramb as well, setting his own work as the greatest of all the dramatic offerings of the City Dionysia. Farmer's readings in part 2 are sophisticated and thoughtful, but their originality emerges primarily in relation to the conclusions of part 1. After considering both the complete plays and the fragments, Farmer proposes that one of comedy's greatest strengths is its capacity for self-reflection. Comic poets are conscious of their place in a rich literary tradition that offers inexhaustible fodder for both imitation and innovation.

Farmer claims that tragedy was a feature of the everyday lives of "many, perhaps all Athenians" (27). This strikes me as too broad. From the evidence presented, I am convinced that tragedy loomed large in the imagination of a certain set of literate and literary male citizens. A consideration of the size and composition of theater audiences, which is relegated to a footnote, might have strengthened Farmer's claims about the various levels of humor created by tragic imitation and tragic parody. The writing is generally clear and effective. That said, Farmer's main points are sometimes difficult to deduce from his close readings. A few more paragraphs along the way that summarize his conclusions would be welcome. But this is to quibble with an excellent book, supported throughout by the author's own lively sense of humor.

CLAIRE CATENACCIO
Duke University