

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

Classics Faculty Works

Classics

---

11-1-2012

### Review Of "Aristophanes: Sex Und Spott Und Politik" By N. Holzberg

Jeremy B. Lefkowitz  
Swarthmore College, jlefkow1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-classics>



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Jeremy B. Lefkowitz. (2012). "Review Of "Aristophanes: Sex Und Spott Und Politik" By N. Holzberg". *Journal Of Hellenic Studies*. Volume 132, 188-189. DOI: 10.1017/S0075426912000262  
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-classics/3>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classics Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

In some cases, this reviewer would have welcomed more comparative material. A persuasive reading into the thematic relevance of the meaning of Menoeceus' name (88) as one who stays (μένει) in the house (οἶκος) would have been strengthened by reference to the common etymological name games in Euripidean drama more generally. That said, the discussion of Menoeceus' sacrifice is thought-provoking, especially the proposition that the strophe of the third stasimon prepares for the lamentation at his sacrifice through echo-mimetic words (93). Another interesting but more problematic suggestion is that the term δρώμενον could refer to an off-stage 'drama' as a kind of *mise en abîme* (103, 105). Since this is left wholly without parallel, the argument fails to convince. Throughout, Euripides' *Orestes* keeps springing to mind for its similar exploitation of numerous strands of mythical narrative and multiple dramatic devices. Nevertheless, there is much of value in the detail-orientated approach of this study, and it certainly achieves its aim of providing 'a deeper understanding of the internal narrative structure of the play' (195). Overall, it is clearly written and well researched, and will be an important resource on the *Phoenissae*.

ISABELLE TORRANCE  
University of Notre Dame  
itorranc@nd.edu

HOLZBERG (N.) **Aristophanes: Sex und Spott und Politik**. Munich: C.H. Beck, 2010. Pp. 240. €24.95. 9783406605925.  
doi:10.1017/S0075426912000262

This book offers the German-reading public a fresh and engrossing introduction to Aristophanic comedy. Holzberg is a well-known master of outreach (this is his ninth introductory monograph), and his treatment of Aristophanes is in keeping with the approach he has taken in other *Einführungen*: linear readings of the 11 surviving plays are presented in chronological order, with emphases on structural elements, obscenity and (above all) humour. Holzberg claims in the preface that his book is 'nothing more than an attempt to explain why the Athenian audience was amused by the jokes of Aristophanes' (9). Rejecting the influential Horatian (*Sat.* 1.4–5) description of Old Comedy poets as 'public prosecutors' (16), Holzberg claims that Aristophanes did not aim to influence the morals and political opinions of his audience – his aim was simply to make people

laugh. As Holzberg puts it (anticipating an anglophone readership?), Aristophanes was more 'Spitting Image' than 'Agitprop-Theater' (20).

But it would be an oversimplification to call Holzberg's Aristophanes apolitical. What Holzberg advocates is a reordering of critical priorities – appreciation of the political and cultural background to the plays remains essential in this book, but Holzberg insists such things must be subordinated to the loftier goal of helping readers of Aristophanes learn to laugh (*Lachhilfe*, 220). Holzberg identifies the six 'most important themes' for the project: stagecraft, mockery of named individuals, paratragedy, historical context, obscenity and plot structure. These topics surface in every chapter, often in appealing and playful terms: the structural principle of the 'comic idea' – the set-things-right scheme laid out by the beleaguered protagonists of several Aristophanic plays – is called the 'Big Plan', while comedy's rivalry with tragedy is represented as an attempt to keep up with 'Big Sister'. It is evidence of Holzberg's dogged commitment to linear reading that these thematic elements are shown to emerge organically from a direct progression through the plays themselves, as, for example, in the close reading of *Acharnians* with which the book begins: *Ach.* 1–8 (*Personenspott*); *Ach.* 9–16 (*Parodie der Tragödie*); *Ach.* 17–27 (*historischer Hintergrund*); *Ach.* 29–34 (*Obszönität*); *Ach.* 125–33 (*Bauelemente der Handlung*, i.e. Dikaiopolis' *Grosse Plan*). Aspects of performance and stagecraft (*Bühnenpraxis*) are treated more diffusely as they arise in the reading of *Acharnians* (for example, *Ach.* 204–07, 241, 407) and in subsequent chapters.

One of the many virtues of the book under review is the author's remarkable ability to bring the Greekless reader close to the experience of an encounter with Aristophanes in the original. Having recently translated a number of Aristophanic plays into German (for example, *Lysistrata*, *Frogs*, *Ecclesiazusae*, *Thesmophoriazusa*, *Frogs*) for the *Reclam Universalbibliothek* series, Holzberg shares a wealth of insight on the process of translating this famously difficult and scandalous poet. Historically Germans have been poorly served in this arena (*cf.* M. Holtermann, *Der deutsche Aristophanes* (Göttingen, 2004)), and those many readers still dependent on classic 19th-century translations will be appropriately shocked when κινεῖν εαυτάς (*Ecc.* 468), translated by Droysen (1835–1838) as 'Sie zu beschlafen!', is rendered (more accurately) 'Sie zu ficken' (194), and when καὶ λαικάζει (*Thesm.* 57), translated by

Seeger (1844–1848) as ‘*geht in’s Bordell*’, becomes ‘*lutsch auch manchem den Schwanz*’ (157). Aristophanes has found a German translator prepared to call an *Arsch an Arsch* (35, 68, 75, 110, 142, 154, 193). But more impressive than the liberal deployment of obscenity is Holzberg’s attention to formal dimensions of Aristophanic poetry in a book for non-specialists, including (as appendices) a useful glossary covering technical and metrical terminology and a helpful chart outlining structural conventions. Holzberg draws attention to connections between metre and content throughout the book, and, whenever possible, mimics Greek metres in his translations, as in these anapaests (accentual stress for syllabic quantity in the German) from *Thesmophoriazusae* 55–56: *er schmiedet Sentenzen, er nennt Dinge um, / macht aus Wachs ein Modell und rundet es ab* (157).

It ought to go without saying that some thorny and intractable problems are sidestepped here. Most specialists will not, once and for all, be persuaded that laughter precludes political intent; but this book was not written for them. And while explaining why and how comedy is in fact ‘funny’ is a daunting, potentially soul-crushing task, Holzberg succeeds in pulling it off with a light touch. The book will surely complement rather than supplant B. Zimmermann’s introductory *Die griechische Komödie* (Frankfurt 2006), which covers Old, Middle and New comedy, and treats more thoroughly issues relating to manuscripts, ancient stagecraft, and the social and intellectual background to Greek comedy. I note that Zimmermann’s book has a chapter entitled ‘*Spott, Kritik, und Politik*’ (84–106), which Holzberg’s title has recast by dropping ‘*Kritik*’, adding ‘*Sex*’ and tweaking the order of things.

JEREMY B. LEFKOWITZ  
Swarthmore College  
jlefkow1@swarthmore.edu

KURKE (L.) **Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose.** Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011. Pp. xxi + 495. \$75/£52 (hbk); \$29.95/£19.95 (pbk). 9780691144573 (hbk); 9780691144580 (pbk).

doi:10.1017/S0075426912000274

This is a massive and serious book on a good topic, or rather two good topics, obviously inter-related. The first is the figure of Aesop as it

appears in the texts we have, with attention to the inferences one can make concerning informal oral traditions about him. The second is what Kurke calls the ‘Aesopic strand’ in the ancient mentality, particularly as it appears in the developing prose of the fifth and fourth centuries BC. These two topics are treated in the two main sections of the book, after an extensive introduction in which Kurke reviews the relevant literature and explains her relation to it. The whole well represents Kurke’s characteristic talent for exploring the ‘big-question’ implications of material previously treated by rather narrow scholarship.

The first major section focuses on the relation of Aesop to the Seven Sages and to Delphi: he appears in the tradition in the company of the Sages but not among their number, and his relations with Delphi are adversarial and ultimately fatal to him. He thus subverts Delphic authority and proposes an alternative to the mainstream tradition of *sophia* – not the alternative represented by such magical and miracle-working figures as Pherecydes and Epimenides (already by the third century BC included on some lists of the Seven), but rather an alternative, as it were, from below, associated with the ancient peasant art of story-telling.

The second section focuses mainly on the Platonic Socratic dialogues, with some attention to Xenophon, and on Herodotus. Kurke draws our attention to the frequent shifts of register in this early prose, with fable often employed in the ‘low’ range.

In each section the project encounters certain difficulties. Aesop is unquestionably an established figure by the Classical period; Herodotus (1.134), who refers to him only in a brief digression, already knows him as a slave, as a story-teller and as the victim of the Delphians. However the main text discussed by Kurke, the so-called ‘Vita G’, while insecurely dated, can hardly be placed earlier than the late third or early second century BC. Unquestionably, as Kurke insists, this document draws on much older narratives that were transmitted with the fluidity characteristic of traditional stories. The problem is that the document itself provides no guide to the antiquity or recentness of this or that element. Such a document provides the analyst with a special application of Michael Jameson’s rule: ‘When you don’t want to use it you call it late. When you want to use it, you say: “It’s not *that* late”’. But the ‘Vita G’ cannot be made a reliable