

ALEXANDRE G. MITCHELL: *Greek Vase-Painting and the Origins of Visual Humour*. Cambridge University Press, New York 2009. ISBN 978-0-521-51370-8 (hb), XXIV, 371 pp., 48 b/w ill. 108 fig. GBP 55, USD 95.

Until recently, the study of ancient humour has been based on literary evidence: the technical writings of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, who theorize on meanings, causes, and functions of humour, along with a number of humorous passages in less conceptual works provide some information about the mechanisms of laughter in ancient society. However, material evidence too may reveal interesting insights into the use of humour, as Clarke and Mitchell have superbly shown in their latest publications. While Clarke analyses examples of humorous artefacts in Roman society (Clarke, J. R. 2007. *Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture 100 B.C. – A.D. 250*. Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press), Mitchell's book is the first comprehensive study of visual humour in ancient Greece.

As a work intended for a wide range of readers interested in visual humour, the book usefully contains a short glossary of technical words and Greek terms, mini-biographies of mythological heroes, and a number of tables that help the reader to easily follow the author's argumentations. The book also contains a rich number of figures representing comic vases; most of them are in the form of vectorised drawings, which are much clearer than photographs. However, the drawings cannot have the immediacy of photographic reproductions which allow the viewer to see the whole context (painted scene and shape of the vase) and perhaps to imagine what a viewer would have perceived of the whole scene when she/he handled the vessel. Moreover, many vases discussed in the book are not accompanied by any type of illustration (either photograph or vectorised drawing), which makes it difficult to follow the author's descriptions.

The Introduction in Chapter One discusses a number of topics under two main headings: theoretical approaches and Greek vases. In the first part, Mitchell presents a quick review of the various approaches to humour (terminology, general theories of humour) and the specific principles relevant to the study of visual humour in his book. The author acknowledges the lack of elaboration of a general theory of humour since his main goal is to understand the techniques of humour in ancient Greek visual art and its social functions. The second part contains basic notions about Greek vases (connoisseurship, provenance, and chronology), past scholarship on Greek visual humour, methodology, and visual humour categories. In the discussion of comic vases, Mitchell rejects the traditional method of explaining irregularities or eccentricities in vase-paintings by turning for an explanation to literary evidence. He rightly argues that images need to be compared to images, because pictures often show their comic effect through comparison to and contrast with the more "usual" pictures. Mitchell's argument is convincing: after all, literary works are the product of the elite class, while vessels were produced for a wider number of buyers from different social classes. However, it would be interesting to compare the comic scenes on the vases with the ones described in more "popular" works, such as Aristophanes' comedies. The comparison between artistic and literary products of the same society and time could suggest whether the comic elements were stock motifs used for a variety of artistic media or were rather specific to pottery iconography.

In Chapter Two, Mitchell analyses examples of visual mockery of the world of men, women, and animals in many aspects of their everyday life, while in Chapter Three he focuses on visual examples of mocked heroes and gods.

In the longer Chapter Four, Mitchell examines the satyr and his central role in Greek visual humour after a brief, introductory incursion into South-Italian humorous iconography. The funny image of the satyr is discussed in a number of scenes selected by theme: gluttony, sexual exaggeration, plays with misused objects, mockery of citizens' duties and leisure and of heroes and gods.

The similarly hilarious image of the dwarf is analysed in Chapter Five, which is mainly devoted to caricature in Athens and at the Kabirion sanctuary in Boeotia. Mitchell interestingly rejects the traditional interpretation of the scenes painted on more than 300 vessels found at the Kabirion sanctuary as mysterious ritualistic representations. The author convincingly argues that the men and women represented on the Kabirion vases do not wear masks, which leads most scholars to identify them as initiates of a mysterious Kabirion cult: they are rather caricatured figures whose facial and body features "are exaggerated to such an extent that their appearance can hardly be taken seriously" (p. 255). Mitchell continues on discussing a selection of daily-life activities and mythological scenes parodied on the Kabirion vases.

In the Conclusion (Chapter Six), a number of discussions are regrouped under two main headings: vases and humour. The first part contains a discussion of comic vases in terms of shape, painters, distribution, and iconography with the support of tables that allow the reader to easily look at and to get an overall picture of pottery production and comic themes in ancient Greece. In this part, Mitchell also suggests a new methodology for analysing visual humour for which he coins the term "visual immediacy", that is "the fact that everything in the picture is happening at the same time and consequently painted in such a way that the viewer must 'read' the picture in an all-encompassing fashion" (p. 298). The author rightly argues that it is the insertion of unusual or subtle details into the normal iconography of conventional themes that makes the scene funny: in order not to miss important details and consequently, the comic effect of the scene, the viewer needs to create a mental picture of the whole narrative. The second part discusses the social function of laughter and humour as a means of social cohesion. Following Bergson's theory on humour, Mitchell states that mocking people behaving improperly (e.g., women gossiping at the fountain, men dressed as women and foreigners) or ridiculing the gods by bringing them down to the level of ordinary mortals serves to curb the fear of the unknown and of exclusion and to reinforce the group's social norms. The theory of social cohesion is a useful comprehensive system of concepts on which other theories of humour are based: the principles of subversion and revelation, of comic relief, and of the feeling of superiority, which are appropriately used throughout the book for explaining the comic characters and effects of the Greek vases. However, the author does not go into the viewer's social status and gender role, which may have influence on the mechanisms of laughter. The difficulty of reconstructing the context of discovery of most vases, as Mitchell correctly points out (p. 22), should not restrain us modern scholars from enquiring about the users of this type of archaeological object. In fact, comic vases were sold in the market to a wide range of buyers (p. 23), may they be aristocrats or less wealthy citizen, men or women. Even if Mitchell is right when he argues that vases were produced for a male-driven society with a very few possible exceptions of certain shapes intended for female use (p. 23 and n. 34), women would have anyway handled the "male" vases for washing or storing them, looked at the scenes depicted on them, and responded to them as a result of their specific gendered gaze and status. Did comic scenes arouse the same feelings in the rich and in the poor? Did female viewers feel a sense of superiority and relief as male viewers did, when they looked at their companions painted behaving improperly?

At the very conclusion of his work, Mitchell states: "It is unlikely that so many and varied comic representations could have been produced under other circumstances than in democratic Athens. It is unlikely to be tolerated in a 'totalitarian' regime or simply a more militaristic one such as Sparta, where power and obedience take precedence." (p. 313). I find this not very convincing argument. Humour cannot be considered a by-product of democracy: as Clarke's study on Roman visual humour shows, the production of comic scenes was possible in an imperial society, too. Humour is such a universal phenomenon across time and space that its visual expression cannot be restricted to democratic regimes alone. As Clarke and Mitchell himself superbly show, we need to reconsider the "serious" interpretations of some ancient images and to see their potentially comical effect: the eye-cups, for example, which are traditionally interpreted as having an apotropaic function, may rather been seen as comical, when they are accompanied by visual puns (pp. 36–46). To ascertain the comic character of some images is a difficult task, as the production and perception of humour are also influenced by the personal, cultural, and social factors of a specific culture. But even members of the same cultural system may not agree with ideas on what is humorous. For example, despite our shared identity as scholars of classical art and archaeology in postmodern times, I find some of the vases discussed by Mitchell not humorous at all: for instance, the scene with Diomedes (pp. 96-8), the image of the greedy Iris (pp. 140–43), or the Nicosthenic amphora (p. 166). Similarly, the apparent lack of visual humour in the totalitarian society of Sparta may be due to our difficulties in recognizing the comic effects of some scenes.

In all, this is a pioneering, challenging, and provocative book that gives interesting insights into ancient Greek society.

*Margherita Carucci*

*The Parthenon and Its Sculptures*. Edited by MICHAEL B. COSMOPOULOS. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004. ISBN 978-0-521-83673-9. XVI, 214 p. GBP 50, USD 88.

This book consists of the non-Elginian papers read in the conference "The Parthenon and Its Sculptures in the Twenty-First Century", and organized in 2002 at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Parthenon specialists were presented an opportunity to get together and evaluate the state and future of Parthenon studies. The ten writers highlight the Parthenon from four main view points, the traditional formal analysis of the pictorial decoration, the historical and socio-political background, new technology, and the later destiny of the building.

Symeonoglou, by going beyond compositional and iconographical similarities, analyses carving details or execution of ten blocks. Three masters, A, B, and C, each with his own crew, seemed to have worked in close collaboration. The masters could apparently deviate from the master design, having also individual specialized skills, such as carving of drapery and animals, or male bodies and dramatic representation. The third master with his singularly innovative and brilliant command of anatomy, drapery, perspective, movement, etc., was possibly the leading master, and none other than Pheidias, who also carved the three gods of the east frieze. Younger, in contrast to Symeonoglou, democratizes the sculpting process. He gets away from the limiting notion of a master sculptor responsible for the general design and argues for