ARISTOPHANES' AUDIENCE AND THE PLAYS OF EURIPIDES

by Rosemary Harriott

Over a hundred quotations of Euripides in nine plays; nearly thirty references to characters or events; extensive paratragedy in *Acharnians* and *Peace*; two comedies largely concerned with Euripides. How could a mass audience understand it? Aristophanes must have been writing for his cultured friends.

This is the common-sense approach. But common-sense might also tell us that since Aristophanes was competing for a prize, and was indeed often victorious, he needed to win general approval. To provide occasional coarse humour and slapstick for the majority would merely have increased the insult of writing above their heads. Let us assume that his audience enjoyed his plays as wholes; they must then have known something about Euripides: how much? More important, and more surprising, they must have found tragedy an appropriate and enjoyable subject for comedy.

Some of the difficulties we feel in accepting the view I propose arise because we do not clearly realise the differences between a modern audience and fifth century Athenians, obvious though they may seem. All the people saw the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides as they appeared and the revivals of Aeschylus; the tragedians were fellow-citizens, contemporaries or nearly so, not 'classical writers'. Comedies, seen by all, had as their material the life of the Polis, in which all were active participants. Can we accept that audiences appreciated the *Oedipus Tyrannus*? If we grant them the intelligence, perception and concentration necessary for even the slightest understanding of tragedies, are we to refuse to credit the same people with the power to grasp literary material in comedy? If the audience could and did appreciate the tragedians, what are the likely consequences?

First, they did not go to the theatre for what we call entertainment, that is, a couple of hours of unthinkingly watching a stage. They would have failed to understand even our divisions of theatre into 'art' and 'entertainment'. Secondly, what they saw they will have talked about, as people do whose theatrical experiences are infrequent but shared. This fact itself accounts for a good deal of the knowledge they must have had. They will have remembered the titles and

authors of plays, and discussed the treatment of the myth, any striking scenes or innovations in staging, and startling or unconventional ideas, and used phrases which became current. Further, this sort of knowledge will have become not only widespread but traditional. This is in fact the sort of thing Aristophanes expects his audience to know.

There are two stumbling blocks in the way of accepting the audience's enjoyment of literary material in comedies: the first the sheer quantity of it, and the second the time-lag between, say, the production of the *Telephus* in 438, and parodies of it in the *Frogs*. How much in fact did they have to know about Euripides, and of his plays, and how did they acquire their knowledge? The bulk of Euripidean material is not so great as it first appears, partly because of repetition,[1] partly because much of it is merely stylistic. Under this heading I include vocabulary, idiom and metre. What the audience required here was not so much knowledge as a sensitive ear, and in this faculty I believe they were superior to the average modern audience.

Aural ability includes quick recognition of sounds and ease in memorizing them. People who do not read much are considerably more aware of words as sound and learn by heart more readily. Accounts of illiterates' powers of reciting long poems from memory are one aspect of this. The fact that Greek education, and indeed most education, as far as we know, until our own times, laid great stress on learning by heart, a skill acquired by practice, is another factor.

Secondly, the sound patterns of words were reinforced by metre, and in the case of lyric, by melody also. We know that mnemonics make use of rhythm as an aid, and that in recalling the words of something we know well, like a hymn, we do it by hearing in our minds tune and words simultaneously. It is this training of the aural memory which increases facility in recognition, and I think we can be sure that most of the audience would recognise a large number of tragic phrases and passages, and the literary style that was being quoted or parodied. Probably they could do much more.

Assuming that they were more perceptive than we are in matters of style, it is still apparent that Aristophanes reiterates stylistic parody of Euripides until it is fixed in his audience's minds. The repetitions of φροῦδος,[2] and of the coined words in -μα[3], are only two examples.

Much of their enjoyment of Euripidean lyric then requires only recognition of style. The same is true of a good deal of the material in iambic and other spoken scenes, where Aristophanes sometimes even provides clues, as in the prologue of the *Knights*.[4] Sometimes it is enough that a passage should be 'tragic' in diction and metre, particularly when this contrasts with the subject-matter. Again a tragic quotation may end παρὰ προσδοκίαν: bathos would produce a laugh even if the quotation were not recognised. The amount of material becomes smaller also when we subtract what I call Euripidean reminiscence: that is, fragments of Euripides used by Aristophanes consciously, or otherwise, as part of his general poetic store, not as jokes or parody. In the nine plays, I can find only fifteen instances in which the humour can only be fully enjoyed by the spectator who knows both the exact words of the original and its context.[5] Even in these, some amusement is to be gained from the incongruity of styles unaccompanied by recognition. It will be seen that Aristophanes draws on those plays which are his most frequent sources of Euripidean material.

Acharnians	893	-	*Alcestis*	367
Knights	1251	-	*Alcestis*	181
Clouds	1415	-	*Alcestis*	691
Wasps	111	-	*Stheneboea*	fr.665 N^2
	1074	-	*Stheneboea*	fr.663 N^2
	1160	-	*Heracleidae*	1006
Peace	1192	-	*Aeolus*	fr.18 N^2
	528	-	*Telephus*	fr.727 N^2
Thesmophor.	275	-	*Hippolytus*	612
	910	-	*Helen*	564
	1022	-	*Andromeda*	fr.120 N^2
Frogs	105	-	*Andromeda*	fr.145 N^2
	844	-	*Cyclops*	424
	1475	-	*Aeolus*	fr.19 N^2
	1477	-	*Polyidus*	fr.638 N^2

I have suggested so far some limitations to the problem of the audience's appreciation of Aristophanes' treatment of Euripides, namely that the plays were widely seen and discussed, that the audience were quicker to recognise and remember than we are, and that detailed knowledge is in many cases unnecessary for enjoyment. Before considering the positive aspect of this question, the body of knowledge Aristophanes expected his audience to have, I shall summarize the means by which knowledge of tragedy may have been disseminated.

When we speak of knowing a play, we mean that we have studied it. Repeated reading requires easy access to the text, and it is difficult to believe that this was possible for the bulk of the audience. The ancient evidence for reading of tragedy is familiar: Dionysus admits to reading the *Andromeda* when off-duty on board ship, and the chorus reassures Aeschylus and Euripides that their audience will understand the literary contest since each has his book.[6] Unfortunately no-one knows what the book was, if indeed it existed, and guesses range from texts of the tragedies (or of the *Frogs* itself) to manuals of rhetoric. In any case, how many of the audience could read? If we accept the chorus' remark literally we have also to take into account the probable cost of a papyrus roll in the Peloponnesian War, surely too great for the ordinary spectator.[7] The successive entries of characters who read in the *Birds*[8] suggest that there is something topical and amusing about the possession of books, and this is all we can safely say about the chorus' remark in the *Frogs*. Most people had probably mastered the elements of reading (though not necessarily of writing) but are not likely to have used their skill for private study of tragedies.[9]

On a conservative estimate, Aristophanes quotes, parodies, or alludes to forty plays of Euripides. It is obvious that most of the audience of *Thesmophoriazusae* will have seen *Helen* and *Andromeda* the previous year, and we may suppose that about thirteen other plays had appeared not long before the relevant comedy. But even so, it is quite clear that a tragedy's age does not prevent Aristophanes from using its material, witness the popularity of the plays of 438. If the audience had seen these plays it would have been in repeat performances at Salamis or Piraeus, or in the demes, or, in the case of Aeschylus,[10] at the City Dionysia itself.

Aristophanes himself provides evidence for another way in which knowledge of tragic passages might be spread. Strepsiades[11] tells us that he asked his son to

sing at dinner, but Pheidippides first refused to sing, then scornfully rejected his father's request for a speech of Aeschylus and would do nothing but recite a scandalous speech of Euripides. Strepsiades speaks as if songs at dinner were customary (but perhaps he had acquired upper-class habits from his wife): are we to believe that the practice of reciting speeches was now being introduced? Sedgwick suggests that the actors and choreutae may have lent their scripts to friends so that famous passages could be learnt by heart. Even if this conjecture is not acceptable, it is hard to believe that the numerous men who had once been choreutae never again sang what they had learnt. Lyrics, at any rate, may have been taught at school: we cannot assume, because of our own practice, that nothing modern was included in the curriculum, nor that prejudice against some aspects of Euripides included all his lyric output. If speeches were learnt by young men, it is likely to have been as part of their rhetorical training, a purpose for which many of Euripides' speeches would have been valuable. In the *Knights*[12] Aristophanes tells us that the lyrics of Cratinus were once on everyone's lips: it is clear enough that such knowledge could be obtained, and that dramatic lyric at least was sung at symposia.

Aristophanes assumes that his audience cares about Euripides; next, since he is a supremely skilful dramatist, he presents his material in such a way as to afford the maximum enjoyment to even the dullest spectator. His methods are simplification and repetition, and he produces a comic Euripides, a familiar butt of ridicule. We see the process at work in *Acharnians*. Euripides is immediately revealed as the physically lazy intellectual. He speaks his own language. By using a variation of the 'comic list' technique, Aristophanes makes his main point, that Euripides wrote plays about talkative beggars and cripples. Dicaeopolis gets all he wants and sets about provoking Euripides. He succeeds with a jibe at Euripides' greengrocer mother.[13]

In this scene mockery of Euripides is incidental: it is one of several dramatic devices to get the audience in a receptive mood for Dicaeopolis' home truths, and all the *Telephus*-material is a tribute to Euripides' power of evoking sympathy, not merely a jibe at his ragged heroes. *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs*, unlike *Acharnians*, are what they seem, treatments of the poet and his poetry. In these three plays the audience needed little knowledge, since Euripides is on the stage, and can speak and act as the author wishes: the necessary information is built in. Retaining the audience's interest is another matter, particularly in the long contest of *Frogs*. I summarize the information given us about Euripides and his tragedies to form a background for the more difficult problem presented by quotation, parody and the like in the other plays.

In *Thesmophoriazusae* Aristophanes shows a Euripides who is skilled in sophistic talk, whose kinsman, like many of his heroes, is lame, who is friendly with Agathon. He reveals that the women are plotting against him because he abuses them. They later develop this theme, and his atheism.[14] The baby-snatching scene recalls the *Telephus*, and Mnesilochus' second device comes from the *Palamedes*, which he calls a failure.[15] Two successive scenes are based on the 'new' *Helen*, and the *Andromeda*'s innovations in theatrical technique. Finally Euripides promises not to abuse women again if the chorus let Mnesilochus return to him.

In the *Frogs*, Dionysus first owns to a longing for Euripides, the only poet who is γόνιμος.[16] Aeacus informs us that the poet, arrived in Hades, won the support of various rogues by skilful and dishonest arguments. Aeschylus' criticism of his rival first recalls his wordiness and his ragged heroes; he calls

him hated of the gods. He brings evil men on to the stage, particularly cowards and street-corner politicians, and women like Stheneboea. If such people exist, the poet should not portray them, since his function is didactic. His characters' appeals to pity have been successfully copied by shirkers of public service. Young men have neglected physical training, and 'other ranks' have learnt to argue with their officers, using his techniques of speaking. In short, the people have been deceived by demagogues and lost their athletic skill, because of the examples he has set before them.

The language of the chorus is often ambiguous, but they clearly consider Euripides to be an associate of Socrates.[17] Dionysus is sometimes acting the fool, and always foolish, and tells us little about either dramatist. Euripides announces his religious belief, but his defence against Aeschylus is largely counter-attack. It is he, however, who proudly claims that poets make men better citizens.

Such is the comic image of Euripides, and it is plays, scenes, and sayings that illustrate these criticisms that Aristophanes draws on most. His favourite play is the *Telephus*; *Alcestis* follows some way behind. Was the former play memorable as the first to introduce a ragged hero pleading in his own defence, and the latter the first use of children to melt the audience's heart?[18] Each of these devices, so common in his later plays, is borrowed, or ridiculed, by Aristophanes as he pleases. But in fact the *Alcestis* is chiefly used as a treasury of striking phrases.

Euripides' studies of women are a favourite source for comedy. Of the dozen most-quoted plays, six have an eponymous female character (Medea and Stheneboea could hardly be called heroines). Melanippe, though not wicked, is clever, and parts of her story are not edifying. Even the plays named after men are not free from immoral women; the *Aeolus* tells of the incestuous relationship of Macareus and Canace, the *Meleager* introduces a fierce Atalanta, and the *Hippolytus* probably most often referred to is the first, which portrayed 'wanton Phaedra'.

The impiety theme is found most often in references to Bellerophon, and more widely in Euripides' obsession with Air and Tongue, but this play was most useful to Aristophanes for its scene where Bellerophon rides up to heaven. Again and again it is visual effects which Aristophanes recalls, knowing that for an audience a play is a thing done in their presence. Bellerophon and Pegasus,[19] Mnesilochus and the baby-cum-wine jar,[20] Andromeda-Mnesilochus, a message carved on an oar[21] - these are striking examples, but spoken parody, too, and quotation, are set in an appropriate visual context. Husband and wife confronting each other recall Medea and Jason,[22] father and son, Pheres and Admetus.[23] And conversely, memory of the scene often points the joke, as when Cleon takes leave of his wreath in the words Alcestis addressed to her couch,[24] and Dicaeopolis hails Boeotian eels as dear to him even in death, as Alcestis will be to Admetus.[25]

In appreciation of these quotations then, knowledge of context is desirable, as well as recognition that the phrase is, in fact, a 'quotation': that 'to be, or not to be' is spoken by Hamlet, and in specific circumstances. For other quotations, such knowledge is immaterial.[26] How then does Aristophanes select these quotations? He himself no doubt knew by heart much of the tragedians, and probably had texts to hand, but the material he uses is usually startling and therefore memorable. What is striking may be thought, or metaphor: 'my tongue swore, not my mind'[27]; 'Aither, Zeus' residence'[28], 'don't make your home in my mind'[29], or it may have occurred at a particularly dramatic moment: Hecuba summoning Polyxena to her doom;[30] or, as often, it may be striking for all three reasons. Since the bulk of our material comes from lost plays, we cannot prove these points, and

we are similarly hampered in considering another point: from what parts of plays does Aristophanes pick quotations?

A broad answer seems to be: long speeches and vivid stichomuthia, the former preponderating. There is of course no shortage of long speeches in Euripides, but we can be a little more accurate. Speeches (and stichomuthia) for information can be excluded (except for parody of Euripides' fondness for genealogies),[31] and self-justifying speeches are most important. Telephus, Admetus, Pheres, Hippolytus, Medea, all defend their actions memorably. And of these, and other speeches, first lines are best-known, then last lines, or in a very long speech, opening sections. (In lyric too first-line parodies are commonest.) It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in rehearsal and ordinary discussion alike, people referred to speeches and songs by first lines, as we do for opera, and that Euripides scores heavily from his skill in creating striking first and 'exit' lines.

A more general point in conclusion. The plays that seemed most important to Aristophanes and his audience are not those which selection and chance have preserved for us: we have three (plus one version of the Hippolytus story) of his twelve favourite tragedies. The plays most popular with fourth-century vase-painters are all among his twelve 'favourites'. Seven other extant plays receive a passing mention or afford one quotation, perhaps only for a lekuthion line in the *Frogs*. We must assume, I think, a swift appraisal of a new Euripides play, and a rapid application to it of some critical label. *Look Back in Anger* has two popular associations - angry young men, and kitchen sink drama - both known by those who never visit a theatre but have learnt them from the press and television comedy. Some such process was at work in Athens. It was both speedier and more thorough, for the community was smaller, it cared about tragedy, and it was apt to learn.

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TABLE OF QUOTATIONS

Play	Date	Quotations	Dates	References	Dates	Scenes
Telephus	438	17	425-05	3	425-05	*Ach.*
Helen	412	15	411	1	411	
Alcestis	438	10	425-11			
Medea	431	7	423-05			
Theseus	pre-422	6	422-05			
Hercules	pre-423	5	423-05	1	?	
Hellen-cyclus	pre-425	5	424-21	3	425-05	*Peace*
Hippolytus	412-06	5	405			*Frogs*
Stheneboea	pre-423	5	422-05	3	421-05	
Andromeda	412	5	411-05	1	405	*Thesm.*
Melanippe the Wise	pre-411	5	411-05	1	411	
Aeolus	pre-423	4	421-05	4	423-05	

There are several instances of paraphrase or adaptation of Euripides'

Play	Date	Quotations	Dates	References	Dates	Scenes
Meleager	pre-413?	3(4?)	?413-05	1	405	
Phrixus [1]	pre-405	4	405			
Hippolytus		4	424-05	7	411-05	
Hercules Furens	420-15?	3	411			
Erectheus	pre-411	3	411-05			
Phoenix	pre-425	3	? and 411	1	425	
Alcmene		2	405			
Antigone		2	405			
Oineus	pre-425	2	425, 405	1	425	
Alexander	415	2	405			
Palamedes	415	1	405	3	411 (*Thesm.*)	
Peleus		?1	423	?2	423, 405	
Philoctetes	431	1	405	1	425	

Single quotations from *Phoenissae*, *Electra*, *Alcmaeon in Psophis*, *Archelaus*, *Orestes*, *Supplices*, *Iphigeneia in Tauris* and *Ion*.

Two references to the *Cretan Women* (? plus one quotation)

One quotation from the *Cretans* (? plus one reference)

One quotation from *Iphigeneia in Aulis*

'Quotation' does not include mere resemblance of style, or unconscious reminiscence, as far as these can be distinguished.

1 Three of these quotations are assigned by some authorities to *Polyidus*.

NOTES

1 e.g. variations on *Hipp.* 612 (*Thesm.* 275; *Frogs* 101, 1471).

2 e.g. *Clouds* 718-22.

3 See C. W. Peppler in *AJPh* xxxvii (1916).

4 *Knights* 17.

5 In most of these examples Aristophanes keeps as near as he can to the sound of the original; e.g. *Wasps* 111 - *Sthen.* 668.

6 *Frogs* 52-4; 1109-18.

7 W. B. Sedgwick, *Class. et Med.* ix (1947).

8 *Birds* 974-1030.

9 See E. G. Turner, *Athenian Books in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.* (Inaugural lecture, 1952).

10 *Frogs* 868, *Ach.* 10.

11 *Clouds* 1352 ff.

12 *Knights* 529 f.

13 *Ach.* 393-480.

14 *Thesm.* 451.

15 *Thesm.* 848.

16 *Frogs* 97.

17 *Frogs* 1491.

18 cf. *Peace* 114 ff., *Wasps* 291 ff.

19 *Peace* - *Bellerophon.*

20 *Thesm.* - *Telephus.*

21 *Thesm.* - *Palamedes.*

22 *Lys.* 893 - *Medea* 1361 (note mention of children).

23 *Clouds* 1415 - *Alcestis* 691.

24 *Knights* 1251 - *Alcestis* 181.

25 *Ach.* 893 - *Alcestis* 367.

26 e.g. ἄξιον γὰρ Ἑλλάδι *Ach.* 8.

27 *Hipp.* 612 - *Frogs* 1471 *et al.*

28 *Mel. Soph.* fr.491 - *Frogs* 100.

29 *Andromeda* fr.145 - *Frogs* 105.

30 *Hec.* 171 - *Clouds* 1165.

31 e.g. *Ach.* 47 ff.

32 *Fifty Years of Classical Scholarship* p.76.