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# Aristophanes, Old Comedy, and Greek Tragedy

*Ralph M. Rosen*

In a famous scene at the end of Plato's *Symposium*, after a high-minded philosophical discussion about the nature of love at a festive dinner-party had degenerated into a drunken free-for-all, only three of the guests were sober enough to continue the conversation: the philosopher Socrates, the tragic poet Agathon, and the comic poet Aristophanes. Socrates, it seems, had been trying to get the guests to agree that "the same man is capable of writing both a comedy and a tragedy; that the tragic poet could also be a comic poet." But before the topic could be pursued at any length, Agathon and Aristophanes fell asleep, and Plato's narrator – a devotee of Socrates named Aristodemus who had been up all night drinking with the others – became too sleepy himself to remember any details. It is not entirely clear why Plato chose to end the *Symposium* with this little flourish, especially considering that the work as a whole has nothing explicitly to do with tragedy or comedy, but the issues he fleetingly alludes to here are highly suggestive, and point to a curious relationship between the two genres within the literary culture of fifth-century Athens which we will explore in this chapter.

The first thing we may infer from Socrates' discussion with Agathon and Aristophanes is that it was not common for poets of his time to venture outside of their chosen genre. Greek tragic poets may have embellished their plays with touches of comedy here and there,[1] and comic poets, as we will see below, certainly loved to incorporate elements of tragic drama into their own works, if only for the sake of parody; but tragic poets normally stuck to tragedy; comic poets to comedy. One searches in vain for any example suggesting otherwise in the literature that has survived from the period.[2] Why, then, might Socrates have imagined that it could be possible, even desirable, for the same person to compose tragedy and comedy? This question is an appropriate starting point for this chapter because we tend in our own time to share Socrates' assumptions that, despite their obvious differences, Greek tragedy and comedy were nevertheless inextricably bound up with one another. This chapter will be devoted to substantiating such an assumption and demonstrating that

in fifth-century Athens, at least, tragic and comic poets often relied upon each other for their own self-definition.

Any discussion of the relationship between Greek tragedy and comedy must begin with a few caveats. The sampling we have of Greek tragedy is already meager enough – a small percentage of plays by a small percentage of known playwrights – but comedy is proportionately even less well represented. We have complete plays by only one comic playwright from the classical period, Aristophanes, and the 11 extant plays account for less than 20 percent of his total output. Although scholars have collected hundreds of fragmentary verses from other contemporary comic poets, serendipitously preserved over the centuries in a variety of sources, only in a few cases can we comfortably extrapolate from these a detailed understanding of the play's plot.[3] Since Aristophanes, therefore, must serve as our main representative of Old Comedy (the comic drama contemporaneous with the great fifth-century tragedians of Athens), we need always to remember that other comic playwrights of the period might well have done things differently at least some of the time. On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence external to Aristophanes to suggest that Athenians could easily conceptualize tragedy and comedy as affiliated genres, even if they expected their poets to compose in only one of them. Aristophanes' interaction with tragedy, in other words, may have been reasonably idiosyncratic in its details, but his audience would have found nothing unfamiliar about a comic poet assuming an almost "natural" relationship with tragedy in the context of Greek theatrical performance.

## Occasion and Form

Probably the most obvious point of contact between the tragedy and comedy of classical Athens is the fact that they were each performed at the same two religious festivals in honor of the god Dionysus: the City Dionysia in early spring and the festival at the Lenaia, held in midwinter.[4] The details of these festivals are discussed at greater length elsewhere in this book, but we may note here that audiences would have seen both tragedies and comedies on successive days. Performance traditions were different for each festival: five comedies were produced by five different comic poets at both the Lenaia and the City Dionysia, but at the Lenaia only two tragic poets produced two tragedies each, while at the City Dionysia, three tragic poets produced a tetralogy consisting of three tragedies plus a comedic satyr play.[5] It may well be, as is commonly inferred from this programming, that comedy was more central to the Lenaia, tragedy to the City Dionysia, but the important point to remember is that by the late fifth century Athenians would have watched performances of tragedy and comedy back-to-back on successive days twice a year. A citizen who attended both festivals in a given year, therefore, could have seen up to thirteen tragedies, ten comedies, and three satyr plays. Over a lifetime, this adds up to a substantial number of plays, and it is hardly surprising that audiences would have developed highly

sophisticated critical faculties and a well-honed sensitivity to the interaction of the dramatic genres that shared the same stage.

There were more compelling reasons, however, why audiences might conceptualize tragedy and comedy as affiliated genres, quite apart from the mere fact that they appeared at the same festivals. To begin with, by the time of Aristophanes' earliest extant comedy (*Acharnians*, 425 BCE), comedy had evolved to the point where, structurally speaking, it looked a lot like tragedy. Oliver Taplin's fundamental description of tragedy as an alternation of an actor's spoken verse and the singing (and dancing) of a chorus[6] holds equally for comedy, even if comedy tended to have a looser feel.[7] Like tragedy, that is, a typical comedy was composed of episodes in which actors spoke – usually, though not exclusively – in iambic trimeters, punctuated by passages of choral lyric. As Aristophanes' *Frogs* (405 BCE) makes clear, a technical terminology to describe tragedy had already developed by the end of the fifth century,[8] and there is no reason to suppose that people could not speak about the structural features of comedy with the same degree of self-consciousness.

Comedy did certainly display a number of structural devices of its own which served to differentiate it from tragedy. The so-called "parabasis," for example, allowed the chorus leader to step forward (or literally, "aside," from *parabaino*), shed his outer costume in a symbolic gesture of "dropping character," and address the audience in the persona of the poet himself. Some of the examples in Aristophanes indicate that parabases themselves could be embedded within a larger structure that has become known as an "epirrhematic syzygy," a highly formalized choral interlude, in which spoken verses (epirrhemata) were "joined together" (syzygy) with sung passages in carefully balanced alternation.[9] Such highly self-conscious, often metatheatrical, passages would clearly be out of place in a tragedy, where dramatic illusion was considerably less breachable than it was in comedy. Other devices that we have come to associate with Old Comedy, however, had parallels in tragedy as well, such as the formalized contest, or *agon*, in which antagonists played out a central dilemma of the play.[10] Aristophanes' *Clouds* (first produced in 423, but revised as the version we have, ca. 418 BCE), for example, featured an *agon* between two allegorical figures called "Stronger Philosophy" and "Weaker Philosophy," and *Frogs* (405 BCE), to which we will return below, pitted the old-timer Aeschylus against the *outré* Euripides in a debate over poetic style. Tragedy had its own variety of *agon*, and some, such as the debate between Agamemnon and Teucer (with Odysseus interceding) in Sophocles' *Ajax*, or the highly rhetorical quarrel between Jason and Medea in Euripides' *Medea* (446–626), seem every bit as formalized as a comic *agon*. Such formal similarities between the two genres would have easily allowed audiences to regard both as close generic relatives.

Where the two genres differed most was in the matter of plot, and it is perhaps somewhat paradoxical that this difference is what seems most responsible for their close interaction. Tragic plots, as has been discussed elsewhere in this book (see chs. 10-11), deal almost exclusively with mythological narratives – the gods, heroes, famous quasi-historical figures of a distant past, whose actions often had monumental

consequences for successive generations. Despite plenty of opportunity for innovation and nuance, tragic poets used inherited plotlines with outcomes often already known to the audience. Comic poets, by contrast, were expected to compose original plots, whether drawn wholly from the imagination or based on themes that had become standard fare for comic treatment.[11] Aristophanes worked with a variety of plot-types: highly topical political plots, such as *Acharnians*, *Knights*, or *Lysistrata*, plots of explicit fantasy, such as the utopian *Birds*, and others aimed at satirizing various aspects of contemporary culture, such as *Clouds*, *Thesmophoriazusae*, or *Frogs*. Usually, in fact, he drew on several plot-types within a single play, and there is no reason to suppose that other comic playwrights of the period (to judge from the many titles and fragments of theirs that survive) did not do likewise.

Despite their wide variation, however, all Aristophanic plots can be characterized as satirical or mocking, in the sense that they were all ultimately directed *against* something – whether a person or an institution. Some plays were explicitly *ad hominem* – *Knights*, for example, directed against the controversial politician Cleon; some more abstract, e.g., *Ecclesiazusae*, a critique of the Athenian political system; others a bit of both, e.g., *Wasps*, a comic send-up of the Athenian judicial system, with barely veiled mockery of Cleon – but very little was off-limits for the comic poets, and it was known throughout antiquity – not always approvingly – as the genre of vituperation, parody, and general scurrility.

In keeping with such literary agenda, Old Comedy frequently sought to deflate with humor anything or anyone with elevated pretensions or an excessive aura of seriousness. It is not surprising, therefore, that tragedy became a favorite target for Aristophanic parody. For tragedy was, after all, a dramatic form with obvious similarities to comedy, performed at the same festivals to the same audiences, but which exuded a kind of piety and solemnity that comedy continually resisted. Its themes were the grandest ones available – man's interaction with the gods, justice, politics, fate, failures of language, to name only a few – but in the hands of a master comic poet, what was in one context tragic profundity could quickly be transformed into mere bombast. Less talented tragedians were easy objects of ridicule, and Athenian audiences, it seems, could be merciless critics. In Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, for example, an otherwise obscure tragic poet named Theognis is ridiculed on several occasions for his "frigid" style (e.g., 138–40). But if we can generalize from Aristophanes, at least, it was far more common for the comic poets to ridicule precisely those tragedians who had been most popular and successful rather than the less illustrious ones who made little impression on the audiences and were quickly forgotten. A hack poet may have been an easy mark for a cheap shot, but Aristophanes seemed to be interested in a more complex type of humor which targeted tragedy that had already become, or was in the process of becoming, canonized.

Aristophanes was obviously intrigued by the comic potential of tragic burlesque, since four of his extant eleven plays have plots explicitly implicated with tragedy or tragic performance (*Acharnians*, *Peace*, *Thesmophoriazusae*, and *Frogs*), and nearly all the others are suffused with parodic allusions to that genre. It is through such "para-

tragedy," as it has come to be called, that Aristophanes, and, we may presume, his fellow comic poets, offered their most sustained and self-conscious interaction with tragedy.[12] In the next section we will examine this literary relationship, as it is reflected most amply in Aristophanes, and consider some of the larger ramifications of paratragedy.

## Aristophanic Paratragedy

We may begin with a simple question: why did Aristophanes parody tragedy so extensively? Was it merely because he knew it would raise a laugh with his audiences, and so would bring him closer to winning the prize at the festival competition? Or did he have in mind some broader, more systematic agenda through which he hoped to articulate some form of "serious" literary criticism? Since Aristophanic paratragedy so often involved *Euripidean* tragedy, moreover, does this mean that he had a particular "problem" with Euripides, as has often been thought?[13] Definitive answers to such questions are difficult to find, since our only evidence must come from the plays themselves, and comic genres are well known for playing fast and loose with fact and reality, but Aristophanes does provide us with a few entry points for discussion.

The first can be found in Aristophanes' earliest extant play, *Acharnians*, produced in 425 BCE. This play is usually classified as one of Aristophanes' "antiwar" plays – its central figure, Dicaeopolis, exasperated by the war between Athens and Sparta, tries to secure a "private peace" of his own – but most of its explicit humor derives from its ongoing parody of a Euripidean play, *Telephus* (438 BCE). The plot of *Acharnians*, in fact, is structured around what must have been the most dramatic and memorable scenes of the Euripides' *Telephus*. Telephus was a king of ancient Mysia (a region in present-day Turkey), who was wounded by Achilles when the Greeks mistook his country for Troy. When his wound would not heal, he learned from an oracle that he must seek a cure from Achilles himself at Argos. Evidently, he appeared at Agamemnon's palace disguised as a beggar, and held the baby Orestes (Agamemnon's son) hostage until his request for a cure was granted.[14] The story contained many of the elements that came to be associated with Euripides: heroic figures reduced to abjection, theatrical spectacle (much seems to have been made of Telephus' beggar costume), and shocking plot twists (the abduction of Orestes was evidently a Euripidean innovation). In Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, when Dicaeopolis realizes that the pro-war Acharnians (a local region of Attica) are after his head for brokering his private truce, he decides to take on the role of the Euripidean Telephus in confronting them. Specifically, he first produces a charcoal basket and treats it comically, as if he is holding a baby hostage. The Acharnians, famous for their production of charcoal, are alarmed at Dicaeopolis' threat and grant him his request to plead his defense to them.

As if there were any doubt by this point that Aristophanes was heading toward a parody of Euripides' *Telephus*, Dicaeopolis then pays a visit to Euripides' house in order to borrow a tragic costume that will make him look especially pitiable when he

speaks before the Acharnians. He settles, of course, on the costume that Telephus wore in the original tragic production. The entire scene at Euripides' house (395–479) is laced with lines and phrases either taken directly from Euripides or at least made to sound Euripidean by means of "elevated" language and idiosyncratically tragic diction and meter. Even the staging of the scene itself is self-consciously parodic: Euripides is wheeled out from indoors on that famous emblem of Greek tragedy, the mobile platform known as an *ekkyklema*, reclining and absorbed in the composition of tragedies! Many of the dictional markers of paratragedy are only accessible through the original Greek, but a short passage in this scene will offer perhaps some idea of Aristophanes' paratragic technique. At line 449, Euripides has had his fill of Dicaeopolis' shenanigans, gives him the last piece of Telephus' costume that he had asked for (his little felt cap), and tries once and for all to get rid of him:

> EURIPIDES: Take this, and get thee from these marble halls.
> DICAEOPOLIS: My soul, thou seest how I am thrust from the house, when there's still a lot of props I need. Now then, be clingy, beg and beseech. – Euripides, give me a little basket burnt through by a lamp.
> EURIPIDES: Why needest thou that wicker, thou poor wretch?
> DICAEOPOLIS: I don't need it at all; just the same to have it.
>
> (449–55, trans. Sommerstein)

Philological analysis of the Greek confirms that this is a parody of tragic diction[15] and this translation by Alan Sommerstein (1980) tries to convey some of the comic bombast and bathos of the original with its formal, archaic English. One of the ancient commentators on the passage, preserved in some of the medieval manuscripts of Aristophanes, even identifies the verse from Euripides' *Telephus* which *Acharnians* 454 parodies. By juxtaposing the tragic target text with the comic parody in Aristophanes and translating them very literally, we may catch a glimpse of Aristophanes' technique:

> EURIPIDES: Why, you poor wretch, do you need that wicker?
> *ti' d', o talas, se toud' ekhei plekous khreos?*
>
> (*Acharnians* 454)
>
> What then, you poor wretch? Are you about to obey this one?
> *ti d', o talas? su toide peithesthai melleis?*
>
> (Euripides *Telephus* fr. 717)

If we compare the underlined words in the transliterated Greek above, we can see that both lines sound identical for the first half, though they diverge in sense from the beginning. Aristophanes exploits an ambiguity in the Greek interrogative pronoun *ti* ("why" or "what"), and so completely changes the meaning of his version, but an audience would have recognized the allusion by the phonological similarity between the two verses, and presumably would have found the application of tragic diction to a wicker basket rather amusing. Indeed, it is this persistent, incongruous juxtaposition of tragedy's elevated registers with the rambunctious, often scrappy tones of comedy that made Aristophanic paratragedy so effective.

Now, the first question we may ask is whether Aristophanes' extensive parodies of Euripides in *Acharnians* imply actual "criticism" of the tragedian or of tragedy as a whole. The short answer to this question is certainly "not necessarily," and even a casual consideration of the way parody works throughout literary history will confirm this virtually as a matter of principle. Just to take a modern example: No one hearing the British comedy troupe Monty Python's sketch about an "all-British Proust-writing contest" would conclude that its writers were trying to "repudiate" Proust in any serious fashion. The humor of such a parody lies in the absurd juxtaposition of the highbrow and lowbrow, and in the clever conceit of situating a "classic" novelist in the context of a sporting event.[16] Along the way, whatever "criticism" one might extrapolate from the parody of Proust never really rises above the level of the familiar cliché that Proust wrote long, complicated novels. The same might be said of Aristophanic paratragedy, which relies heavily, as we have seen in some of the examples discussed above, on the immediate comic effect of incorporating grandiose tragic diction within a "lowly" comic context, and often enough does not appear to imply a substantive critique. And yet, in *Acharnians*, at any rate, even though much of the paratragic moments seem to exist for their surface humor – the quick laugh from the audience as they recognize a clever contortion of some known Euripidean line or passage – Aristophanes has also incorporated the figure of Euripides himself so centrally into the plot that one suspects that more is at work here.

If Aristophanes actually intended to criticize Euripides in *Acharnians*, one faces a potential paradox: Dicaeopolis – the play's central character who becomes closely identified with the author himself – goes to Euripides in order to *become* one of his characters, i.e., Telephus. In other words, Dicaeopolis actively seeks out a means of impersonating a *tragic* figure in order to be persuasive within a comedy. Why, if Aristophanes wanted to "criticize" Euripides through parody, would he then have Dicaeopolis "act Euripidean" in order to make what he claims to be a serious point? Many scholars have grappled with this problem,[17] and we cannot here do justice to all the complexities it involves, but one passage in the play will serve to formulate the central issues at stake. After Dicaeopolis leaves Euripides with the costume of Telephus, he prepares to make his case before the hostile Acharnians. At line 497, now "disguised" as the abject, tragic Telephus, Dicaeopolis begins his speech:

> DICAEOPOLIS: Be not indignant with me, members of the audience,
> If, though a beggar, I speak before the Athenians
> About public affairs in a comedy [*trygoidia*].
> Even comedy [*trygoidia*] is acquainted with justice;
> And what I have to say will be shocking, but it will be right.
> (497–501, trans. Sommerstein)

Readers have often noticed how oddly Dicaeopolis here fuses details of the fictional plot with a self-consciousness about the play as a theatrical performance in real time. He is supposed to be addressing the fictionalized chorus of Acharnians, after all, but

the "members of the audience" turn out to be (as he says in 498) the Athenians watching the play. It soon becomes clear that Dicaeopolis is, in a sense, really speaking in the voice of the poet Aristophanes, and that his defense is as much directed at the Athenians in the theater as to the chorus of Acharnians within the play. At 502–8, Dicaeopolis alludes for the second time in the play (see also 377–84) to a skirmish he had had with the Athenian politician Cleon the previous year, which has convinced most scholars that Aristophanes is using Dicaeopolis here as a thinly veiled mouthpiece for his own attacks on Cleon. The earlier passage claims that Cleon had taken Aristophanes to court for maligning the Athenians in his production of the (now lost) *Babylonians* (426 BCE), and commentators since antiquity have inferred from this that such legal wranglings really did occur. We cannot here enter into the question of the historicity of the alleged quarrel between Aristophanes and Cleon,[18] but it is certainly apparent that in Dicaeopolis' famous speech before the Acharnians, Aristophanes wants us at least to believe that whatever Dicaeopolis says in the play represents the poet's own views.

With this in mind, then, it is worth looking closely at the opening of Dicaeopolis' speech, quoted above, where Aristophanes seems to imply several distinct ways of conceptualizing tragedy, especially in its relation to comedy. The first point Dicaeopolis/Aristophanes makes is that the audience should not hold it against him that he will address them about "public matters" (literally, about the city) by means of a comedy. He reasons that comedy is a legitimate venue for "serious" discourse, because "even comedy knows what is right." Two things are noteworthy here: first, the implied assumption that a character dressed as a beggar could not easily be taken seriously and that such a character was even less credible when speaking in a comedy; second, the comic neologism Dicaeopolis uses to refer to comic drama, *trygoidia*. Now, since Dicaeopolis was dressed up as Telephus, and Telephus was the Euripidean character who pleaded his case originally in a tragedy, when Dicaeopolis (as Telephus) apologizes for his abject state, it is clear that Aristophanes is gently ribbing Euripides here for his notorious practice of investing "low" figures with tragic solemnity. Since such "low" figures (beggars, slaves, laborers, etc.) would have seemed more at home in comedy than tragedy, the implied "critique" of Euripides is that tragic figures such as Telephus are so over the top that they risk becoming comic at the very moments when they are supposed to be the most intensely tragic. It is an odd moment, in fact, since at the same time as Aristophanes seems to be mocking Euripidean tragedy, *Dicaeopolis*, within the fiction of the play itself, is *defending* the practice of using "beggarly" figures for serious ends.

The key to his defense is that "*even* comedy knows what is morally right";[19] that is, no one in the audience should be surprised (implying, of course, that they actually probably are) that Dicaeopolis should plead a "serious" case within a comedy such as they are in the middle of watching. And as if to drive home this point, he does not use the normal word for comedy, *komoidia*, but rather the term *trygoidia*. *Trygoidia* is clearly a pun on the word for "tragedy" (*tragoidia*); whereas *tragoidia* is formed from the combination of "goat" (*tragos*) and "song" (*aoide*), *trygoidia* derives from the combination of *tryx* (new wine/wine-lees) and *aoidé*, and so from "goat-song" we

end up with something like "wine-song," along with all the comic associations that such a coinage would conjure up. In other words, *trygoidia* certainly means "comedy," but it sounds a lot like the word for "tragedy," as if it wants to borrow from tragedy, however disingenuously, some of its inherent seriousness of purpose.[20]

It is difficult to know exactly how to read this passage, but recent scholarship tends to favor the idea that Aristophanes was in fact using Dicaeopolis here to make the claim that comedy can be as "serious" as tragedy (see especially Edwards 1991). This may be generally true, although it is a position that requires considerable nuance to maintain in view of Aristophanes' own fondness for undermining it at every turn. To begin with, if we take Aristophanes here at face value and accept that comedy can be as serious as tragedy, it is worth remembering that didacticism was a bona fide trope of Aristophanic comedy, as it almost always is in satiric genres, and it is often difficult to distinguish between generically motivated self-aggrandizement (e.g., a poet's persistent claims that his work benefits the city) and genuine protreptic. These two options, of course, may not necessarily be mutually exclusive (a poet, for example, might assume a conventionally didactic posture in his work in order to advance a serious agenda), but as long as the possibility for comic irony exists, the poet's claims will always remain elusive and unstable.

Further complications arise when we ask why a comic poet would feel compelled to "defend himself" with assertions of didactic self-righteousness in the first place. If we choose to minimize the generic provenance of such apologiae, and accept their sincerity, does this imply that under putatively "normal" circumstances, audiences would *not* be inclined to find much in comic drama to take as seriously as they might a tragedy? When Aristophanes maintains that his comedy has an affiliation with tragedy, as his frequent use of the word *trygoidia* for comedy indicates, does he mean to imply that this affiliation is unusual or idiosyncratic? Or is this constant crowing about the *gravitas* of his comedy ironically tongue-in-cheek, something all ancient audiences might have come to expect of any comedy, and which they would consequently take with a broad grin and a grain of salt? In short, are such passages ironic because no one (including the poet) would ever believe that comedy could have the same effect as tragedy, or do they make the case that Aristophanes was, quite idiosyncratically, reaching beyond the traditional parameters of comedy in an attempt to make comedy behave more like tragedy?

To illustrate just how difficult Aristophanes himself makes it to answer such questions with any certainty, we may consider another passage from *Acharnians*, where the poet again makes grand claims for his *trygoidia*. The following lines come from the play's parabasis (628–64), a section of a comedy which, as we noted earlier, is by nature self-reflective and often assumes a didactic posture:

> . . . Ever since our producer has had charge of comic choruses [*khoroisin . . . trygikois*],
> He has never come forward to the audience to say that he is clever.
>
> But having been traduced by his enemies before the Athenians, ever quick to make up their minds, 630

As one who ridicules our city and insults our people, he now desires to make his reply before the Athenians, ever ready to change their minds.
Our poet says that he deserves a rich reward at your hands
For having stopped you being too easily deceived by the words of foreigners,
Taking pleasure in flattery, being citizens of Emptyhead.
Previously, when the ambassadors from the allied states were trying to deceive
You, they began by calling you "violet-crowned"; and when someone
Said that, at once that word "crowned" made you sit on the tips of your little buttocks.
And if by way of buttering you up someone called Athens "gleaming",
He could win anything from you by virtue of that word "gleaming", by fastening on you an honour fit only for sardines.
For doing that our poet deserves a rich reward at your hands,
And also for showing what democracy meant for the peoples of the allied states.
That is why they will come now from those states bringing you their tribute,
Eager to see that superb poet who *took the risk of talking justice* to the Athenians . . .
[. . .]
But if you take my advice, never you let go of him; for in his comedies he'll say *what's right*.
He says he will give you *much good instruction* that will bring you true felicity,
Not flattering you nor dangling rewards before you nor diddling you nor playing any knavish tricks
Nor drenching you with praise, but *giving you the best of instruction*.
So let Cleon contrive,
Let him devise what he will against me;
For *right and justice*
*Will be my allies*, and never shall I be convicted of being,
As he is, a cowardly and
Right buggerable citizen.

(trans. Sommerstein; emphasis added and lineation modified)

This passage seems more straightforward than it actually is. It is usually read (as parabases often are) as a genuine statement of the poet's goals and desires, but exactly what such desires might be is far from obvious when one actually examines the poetic dynamics at work here. With its opening reference to comic choruses as *trygikoi*, the passage implies an affiliation between comedy and tragedy, and so signals that what follows should be taken as "seriously" as one would tragedy. The "serious" claims that the parabasis makes, however, ultimately amounts to little more than boasting about the poet's own greatness. In fact, the chorus leader's attitude to the poet is defensive. It is high time, he says, that the poet should get some recognition for his cleverness (629), especially since he has recently been censured (by Cleon) for inappropriately criticizing the Athenians (631). This is mildly amusing as an opening gambit, but the speaker rises to a crescendo of hyperbolic (self-) promotion on behalf of his poet, claiming through it all that whichever of the warring parties had Aristophanes on their side would be the stronger because they would be able to benefit from his criticism and mockery! The passage alleges that comedy constantly desires to instruct

by articulating what is just and fair, and so on, a claim that the audience would have associated with tragedy (see next section). This "instruction" here consists in a skillful repackaging of mockery (the Athenians were too quick to make decisions, 630; too quick to change their minds, 631, gullible and easily flattered, 634–40, etc.) as something positive ("mockery may be hard to take, but it's good for you if it originates from a position of self-righteousness").

By the end of the passage, any moral authority that the speaker has implicitly appropriated for comedy from tragedy through such terms as *trygoidia* and *trygikos* has been largely undermined by his own comic narcissism. The scene never offers anything an audience might actually regard as didactic substance, and instead "degenerates" into petty squabbling with his *bête noire* Cleon. Even the diction of the final stanza, which in the Greek offers patterns of rhyming and repetition, seems intended to assure that the audience not miss a note of the irony. We can see, therefore, that in passages such as this Aristophanes indeed adopts a stereotyped posture of tragic seriousness, but this seriousness is soon made to seem disingenuous and self-serving. The "best instruction" (668) claimed for comedy turns out to be either confused or (if one insists on pressing the text for didactic content) simply banal: will the audience really find it profound, after all, to hear the suggestion that war is a bad thing, or that the Athenians ought to work harder to make peace with their Spartan enemies, two obvious "lessons" of *Acharnians*? It is not so much, therefore, that Aristophanes wanted his comedy to "be like" tragedy in any real sense or to transform itself into something less comic than it had been up to that point in its history, but rather that he found ready to hand, in tragedy's hallmark seriousness of purpose, a perfect way to repackage several already established tropes of ancient satirical genres. For long before tragic drama as we know it even existed in Athens, Greek satirical poets had anticipated many of the conceits later worked out on the comic stage of the fifth-century city, such as the poet's stance of self-righteousness and abjection, and a humorous fondness for self-indulgent complaining. Such poetry thrived on a *pretense* of seriousness, even if its seriousness turned out to be just another trick up the poet's comic sleeve. Since tragedy had evolved into (if it had not been from the start) a genre of *genuine* seriousness by Aristophanes' time, it was easily tapped by comic poets as a means of cloaking their conventionally disingenuous claims to seriousness with a veneer of authority and decorum. The veneer, however, was thin, as we have seen, and in the end there was little chance that the audience would ever mistake a comedy for a tragedy.

## Euripides in Aristophanes' *Frogs*

In the preceding section we found that Aristophanes' paratragedy is rarely consistent in its effect. He played with the fact that both tragedy and comedy could legitimately claim to be "serious" genres, but the more he insisted on appropriating tragedy for serious purposes, the less credible (and more humorous) he became. This is not to say, of

course, that Aristophanes could not communicate anything serious to his audience with his comedies, but only that paratragedy was generally not the most reliable means of doing so. We have seen, also, that Aristophanes' particular attention to Euripides in *Acharnians* was equally complicated: he included many jokes and distorted quotations at Euripides' expense, but at the same time he had Dicaeopolis impersonate Euripides for supposedly respectful reasons. There is little to suggest, in short, that in *Acharnians* paratragedy was intended to repudiate or disparage Euripides.

We turn in this section, however, to another play by Aristophanes, *Frogs*, which has often been interpreted as an *ad hominem* attack on Euripides, or, in a milder variation, an attempt to offer a serious critique of Euripidean tragedy. It is not difficult to see why scholars have often reached such conclusions. First of all, there is the basic plot of the play: the patron god of tragedy, Dionysus, decides to retrieve the recently deceased Euripides from the underworld in order to save Athens from her current wartime troubles. At the end of the play, however, he changes his mind and brings back the older tragedian Aeschylus instead. The focal point of the play is the famous contest between Aeschylus and Euripides, and when Dionysus awards the prize to Aeschylus, it is easy enough to believe that Euripides, and the style of tragedy that he represents in the play, has been repudiated. Certainly, by the end of the play the chorus has become openly hostile to Euripides. At 1482–90, for example, after Euripides leaves the stage in ignominious defeat, it praises Aeschylus for his "accurate understanding," his "good sense" and "intelligence," and contrasts him with Euripides, whom it associates with idle sophists, verbal quibbling, and pretentious diction:

> So it isn't stylish to sit
> Beside Socrates and blabber away,
> Discarding artistry
> And ignoring the most important things
> About the tragedian's craft.
> To spend one's time fecklessly
> On pretentious talk
> And nit-picking humbug
> Is to act like a lunatic.
> (1491–9; trans. Sommerstein, lineation modified)

Aside from the well-known dangers, however, of assuming that the words of a comic chorus necessarily reflect the views of the poet, there are other more compelling reasons to doubt that the point of *Frogs* was to censure Euripides and his tragedy, at least in any simple, unironized fashion. For one thing, both Aeschylus and Euripides are subjected to considerable comic abuse throughout the play, and the formal contest between them, staged between lines 1120 and 1410, hardly points to a decisive winner, despite the fact that Dionysus chooses Aeschylus. In fact, Dionysus himself would be happier if he did not have to choose a winner, since he still likes them both. He articulates, in fact, his inability to decide at 1411–13, where he says to Pluto, the god of the underworld: "These two are friends of mine, and I won't judge between

them, because I don't want to become an enemy of either. For I consider *the one* to be wise, and the other – well, I just enjoy!" Aristophanes deliberately has Dionysus avoid clarifying which is "the one," and which "the other," so that we can apply the epithets "wise" and "enjoyable" to either one. Forced by Pluto to make a decision, however, Dionysus explains his mission to the two tragic poets, and poses one final question to each to help him decide:

> . . . I came down here for a poet; and why?
> So that the City may survive and go on holding her choral festivals.
> So whichever of you is going to give some good advice to the City,
> That is the one that I think I'll be taking back with me.
> First of all, then, what opinion does each of you have about Alcibiades?
> The City is in travail about him.
>
> (1418–23, trans. Sommerstein, lineation modified)

The answers offered by each tragedian to the Alcibiades question satisfy Dionysus, and once again he is unable to decide. Replicating the ambiguity of 1413, quoted above, he states at 1434 that "One of them has spoken intelligently, the other intelligibly." After offering Aeschylus and Euripides one more chance to make their respective cases for saving the city, Dionysus continues to stall aporetically until Pluto finally forces him to make a decision (1467). In the famous scene that follows, Dionysus strings together a series of (largely) Euripidean quotations (indicated by quotation marks below) in order to explain his choice of Aeschylus:

> *Dionysus:* This shall be my decision between you:
> "him whom my soul doth wish to choose, him will I choose."
> *Euripides:* Remember the gods when you choose your friends – the gods
> by whom you swore that you would take me back home!
> *Dionysus:* "'Twas but my tongue that swore"; I'm choosing Aeschylus.
> *Euripides:* What ever have you done, you filthy villain?
> *Dionysus:* Me? I've judged Aeschylus the winner. Why shouldn't I?
> *Euripides:* How can you look me in the face after doing such an utterly shameful thing?
> *Dionysus:* "What's shameful, if it seem not so to those" out there? (*indicating the audience*)
> *Euripides:* You heartless rogue, will you really stand by and let me . . . stay dead?
> *Dionysus:* "Who knows if life is truly death"–
> and dying is dining, and sleep is a fleecy blanket?
>
> (1467–78, trans. Sommerstein)

In short, Dionysus' decision has no particular rational basis, and he roguishly tries to divert attention from this fact by quoting Euripides back at Euripides![21] The three lines he quotes were famously controversial at the time for their apparent endorsement of perceptual and moral relativism, which Dionysus appropriates in order to disclaim any real responsibility for his decision. It is a fast-paced, over-the-top ending, which does not – nor should it be expected to – hold up to much systematic scrutiny if we try to imagine it in performance.[22] Dionysus had already made it clear in the

preceding scene, and indeed throughout most of the play, that he had no particularly deep-seated problems with either Euripides or Aeschylus, and that he could easily see either one of them as a potential "savior" of Athens.

It is this point, however, which raises the larger question of whether *Frogs* can in fact tell us anything about Old Comedy's, or at least Aristophanes', attitude toward tragedy as a cultural force. Does the play suggest that tragedy really had some moral efficacy in the real world, that it could actually "educate" the polis, as Aeschylus and Euripides claim to do with their work at various points in the play? The most we can probably say is that Aristophanes was accurately reflecting contemporary discourse about tragedy as an influential didactic medium.[23] Whether Aristophanes himself believed this himself, and whether he composed *Frogs* in some sense as an attempt to trump tragedy's didacticism with a more effective comic version, must remain an open question. As we noted in the preceding section, Old Comedy thrived on claims of didacticism, but its continual flirtation with disingenuousness and irony rarely allowed an audience to judge these claims with much confidence. What *Frogs* does show, however, for all its own moral indeterminacy, is a sensitivity to aesthetic debates of the period, and a wickedly comic perspective on the various ethical dilemmas to which the different styles of contemporary tragedy gave rise.[24]

## Conclusions

The relationship between Athenian tragedy and comedy is often described as one of "rivalry" and "competition." Aristophanes certainly implies that comedy was constantly trying to elbow its way into a part of the audience's mind that seemed already oversaturated with tragedy. Calling their work *trygoidia* was one obvious example of this jockeying for generic supremacy, and Antiphanes' famous complaint (see note 11, p. 266) that comedy was much harder to compose than tragedy may be our most explicit articulation of something resembling a rivalry between the two genres. But if such evidence really does point to a genuine literary rivalry, it is a strangely unidirectional one. It would, of course, be generically inappropriate for a tragedy to break into a disquisition about Athenian literary practices,[25] and so allow us to hear from the "other side" of this alleged rivalry, but one wonders, nevertheless, whether in the end such a rivalry between the two genres was as real as the comic poets wanted us to think it was, or whether it was, rather, constructed as another generically indicated conceit of comic abjection and self-righteous indignation. Are we to imagine, after all, that Sophocles or Euripides lay awake at nights worrying that audiences might come to "prefer" comedy to tragedy? And should we imagine, conversely, that comic poets were jealous of tragedy's "respectability," and genuinely dispirited to suppose that their audiences thought of comedy as "unelevated" in comparison to tragedy? As we have seen in this chapter, there is plenty to suggest that Athenian comic poets were quite comfortable as parodists and satirists of tragedy, and that they cultivated their role as literary underdog, in fact, not so much to correct unjust perceptions of comedy

as to highlight how fundamentally different tragedy and comedy were, despite their shared literary forms and performance venues.[26] As a mimetic representation of remote mythological plots, tragedy could offer only very limited literary self-consciousness or commentary on its status as a literary or cultural production. It was, as such, a relatively "closed" system which, while it could mirror well enough contemporary Athenian values and ideologies and even occasionally call attention to its own theatricality,[27] was not dynamic and freewheeling in the ways Old Comedy could be.

Greek comedy, on the other hand, scurried frenetically all around this rather staid, often abstracted, form like a duck snapping at one's feet. Comedy, nibbling away as it did at tragedy's various conceits, doubtless had little effect on how or what tragic poets actually composed, but it did provide an invaluable service for the audience in its ability to compensate for tragedy's own lack of self-reflexivity. Comedy, that is, could lay bare the premises, pretenses, and poetic mechanisms that energized tragedy, but which tragedy had to conceal as much as it could. Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides, after all, were not about to call attention to their literary merits or their social value while busy dramatizing mythological plots. It was left to comic poets, therefore, to serve as public commentators on contemporary tragedy, not so much because any of them – even Aristophanes – necessarily had anything resembling a coherent critical agenda or aesthetic mission, but because it has always been the business of comedy to poke and prod at precisely those aspects of a society which appear to be most stable and authoritative.

## Notes

1 See, for example, Seidensticker (1982), Knox (1979), Taplin (1986), Gregory (1999–2000), and Dobrov (2001: 70–85).

2 There remains, of course, the notorious question of what to do with Greek satyr play. Tragic poers in the fifth century composing for the City Dionysia festival normally added a satyr play to their trilogy of tragedies, and there is no question that satyr plays were supposed to be "comic." It is not entirely clear, however, exactly how tragedians (or their audiences) would have conceptualized them in terms of genre, and the single extant complete play, Euripides' *Cyclops*, cannot settle the question on its own. *Cyclops* certainly has many features to distinguish it from a bona fide comedy of the period, but mote evidence from other authots might reveal that the line between satyr play and comedy in the fifth century was more fluid than scholars have usually suspected. The fact remains, however, that no Greek tragedian is known to have composed a comic play (which we might define as a play intended to be performed on the day of the dramatic festival specifically designated for the comic performances; satyr plays were performed on separate days as part of a tragic tetralogy). On the problem of satyr play as a genre, see, e.g., Seaford (1976, 1984: 1–44), Seidensticker (1989), and the remarks of Dobrov (2001: 7).

3 Some notable examples include Cratinus' *Pytine* (wine-flask, frr. 193–217 K–A) and *Dionysalexandros* (frr. 39–51) and Eupolis' *Demoi* (towns, frr. 99–146 K–A), for all of which some form of plot summary has come down to us from antiquity, along with substantial fragments.

4 The Lenaean festival was less prestigious than the City Dionysia, and it seems that the performance of tragedy was introduced there late, toward the last decades of the fifth century. See Wilson (2000: 21–31).

5 On satyr play, see above, n. 2.

6 Taplin (1978: 19–21): "the structural framework [of tragedy] is based on the interaction of (i) the two main modes of delivery (actors' speech/choral song) with (ii) the articulation of the action through exits and entrances. The fundamental form is, then: enter actors – act – exeunt actors/strophic choral song/ enter actors – act – etc." (20).

7 As a rule, Old Comedy allowed for considerably more freedom and flexibility than tragedy in matters of diction, plot, and meter. On the use of dialect in Aristophanes, see Colvin (1999: esp. 1–38); on Aristophanic meter, see Parker (1997: esp. 1–17).

8 Aristophanes' *Frogs* dramatizes a contest between the tragedians Aeschylus and Euripides (discussed in detail below, pp. 262–4), in which various technical aspects of tragedy are considered and compared: "prologues," "monodies," "choral passages," etc.

9 An important early study of the structural elements of Old Comedy is Zielinski (1885). Two major recent studies of the parabasis are Sifakis (1971) and Hubbard (1991).

10 On the *agon* in Aristophanes, see Gelzer (1960).

11 For example, plots based on the conflict between old and young generations, between a paradisiacal past and a corrupt present, between the sexes, etc. A famous fragment by the fourth-century-BCE comic poet Antiphanes (fr. 189 K–A) complains that comedy is much harder to write than tragedy, precisely because tragedy has the advantage of working with inherited, mythological plots, which audiences will readily understand.

12 The foundational study of paratragedy in Aristophanes still remains Rau (1967). See also Silk (1993). Silk faults Rau for a tendency to use the terms "parody" and "paratragedy" interchangeably, and suggests that "paratragedy" be used for "all of comedy's intertextual dependence on tragedy, some of which is parodic, but some is not," while "parody" be used for "any kind of distorting representation of . . . a tragic original" (481). Silk's distinction seems to me unnecessarily categorical, but it serves as a useful reminder that not all parodic language necessarily has an identifiable "target text" lying behind it. Plenty of Aristophanic verses, for example, appropriate tragic diction for comic purposes without trying to conjure up a specific tragic passage.

13 As, for example, Hubbard (1991: 217), in speaking of the literary contest in Aristophanes' *Frogs* between Aeschylus and Euripides: "In the final analysis Euripides' drama is inferior to Aeschylus' because it has lost all sense of poetic presence, that is, the notion of the poet having a special personal relationship with his audience thanks to which he communicates with them through his works." Silk (2000: 52 and *passim*): "Aristophanes is never hostile to Euripides *tout court*, but is content to seem ambivalent about the great tragedian's experiments."

14 For details of the Telephus myth and Aristophanes' particular treatment of it, see Olson (2002: liv–lxi). Aristophanes' deployment of Telephus has inspired a large bibliography. See, for example, Foley (1988), Dobrov (2001: 37–53), and Slater (2002: 42–67), through which one can trace the earlier scholarship on the topic.

15 See Olson's commentary (2002: 191–3).

16 For parody as a literary phenomenon outside of classical literature, see Hutcheon (1985), Dane (1988), and Rose (1993).

17 See Olson (2002: xl–lii), with further bibliography at lxvii n. 23.

18 See now Sommerstein (2004), who traces the history of the question, with further bibliography.

19 The phrase "morally right" translates the Greek phrase *to dikaion*, "the just thing," or "justice." "Presumably inrended to remind the audience of the hero's name [*Dicaeopolis*, mentioned at 406]"; Olson (2002: 201).

20 There is considerable bibliography on the term *trygoidia*; see Olson (2002: 200–1) for discussion and further bibliography. Notable

studies include Taplin (1983) and Edwards (1991).

21 Line 1471 came from Euripides' *Hippolytus*; 1475 from his *Aeolus* (fr. 19), and 1477 from his *Polyidus* (fr. 638).

22 I should note that this is something of a minority view: classical scholars still generally believe that the defeat of Euripides at the end of *Frogs* reflecrs a coherent and pointed "message" from Aristophanes about the effects of tragedy on the Athenian polis. Dover (1993: 23) sums up a prevalent view of how the Athenian audience might have seen the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides along broad lines, "[I]t was understandable that by Aristophanes' time Aeschylus had become a symbol of Athenian power, wealth, and success, Euripides a symbol of decline." For a full-scale examination (with extensive bibliography) of *Frogs* that tegards the play as an eminently serious work centered on the character of Dionysus and his development during the course of the play, see Lada-Richards (1999). On the contest in *Frogs*, see also Heiden (1991) and Rosen (2004).

23 Certainly Plato in the next century took tragedy very seriously as a genre capable of influencing its audiences in profound ways, for better or worse. See his famous discussion of tragedy at *Republic* 376–92, which repudiates most of the tragedy of his day on the grounds that it portrayed characters behaving in morally reprehensible ways. It is often forgotten, however, that this discussion arises out of Plato's attempt to imagine what an ideal education might be for the guardians of a hypothetically ideal state, constructed strictly in accordance with reason. It is less clear what Plato actually thought of Athenian tragedy when he was not explicitly worrying about the philosophical problems of mimetic representation. For a detailed study of tragedy and mimesis in Plato, see Halliwell (2002: *passim*, and esp. 37–71).

24 O'Sullivan (1992) examines the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides in *Frogs* as a reflection of contemporary Athenian debates about stylistic theory, without assuming that Aristophanes was himself necessarily deeply committed to one side or the other.

25 As Oliver Taplin (1993: 63) puts it: "Tragedy would not . . . acknowledge the rivalry of comedy – it is 'beneath notice.' "

26 See Taplin (1986), who likewise stresses how essentially different Greek tragedy and comedy were despite their many points of affiliation. Taplin (1993: 63–6) amplifies and adds nuance to his earlier discussion.

27 Discussion in Taplin (1986, 1993) and Dobrov (2001).

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