Iambos, Comedy and the Question of Generic Affiliation

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GREEK COMEDY AND THE
DISCOURSE OF GENRES

EDITED BY
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inherits a far greater degree than tragedy or even satyr-play. For this reason comedy can fairly be called a 'genre of genres' and in this respect too it resembles its cultic Dionysian matrix. Old Comedy draws freely upon all musical and speech genres, but Old Comedy mostly draws its form and contents from the cognate Dionysian genres of tragedy, satyr-play, dithyramb, *iambos* and the sub-literary choral *komoi* of the *Pompe*. In this sense, Aristotle is both deeply insightful and surely wrong, or at least overstating the case, when he derives comedy specifically from the *phalika*.

**CHAPTER 3**

**Iambos, comedy and the question of generic affiliation**

**Ralph Rosen**

It is a commonplace to note Old Comedy's many explicit interactions with other literary genres. Indeed, parodic, mocking comedy, in particular — which characterizes much of Aristophanes and probably many of his fragmentary or lost contemporaries — derives much of its appeal, if not its very raison d'être, from its relationship with other genres. In the case of Old Comedy, parody of tragedy is the most famous instance of its self-conscious dialogue of genres, but there are many others as well — its parody of epic and lyric poetry, for example, and even of contemporary prose genres of history, philosophy, medicine and rhetoric. The relationship that Old Comedy fashions for itself with all such genres is one of alterity, by which I mean that its success depends at the most basic level on the fact that these target genres are other than, different from, comedy, and would under ordinary circumstances be out of place within the comic enterprise. Literary parody within comedy, in short, is a process of 'allusion', construed in the most traditional sense of the word as indicating a conscious attempt by the poet to play to an audience's familiarity with a literary tradition that is not comedy (or at least not Aristophanic comedy), and which would be laughable when incorporated into it.  

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1. See Willi 2003: 9-10 (and then passim) on linguistic 'register variation' in Aristophanes. Not all register variation in Aristophanes is parody, but most parody involves some sort of register variation to mark it as a language that is different from an expected norm. See Willi 2003: 133-69 for an attempt to establish a baseline Aristophanic grammar (and stylistics) which can be helpful in detecting parodic deviations.  

2. Literary parody (as opposed to parody in other artistic modes, such as music, where the term can be used neutrally to describe thematic borrowing), especially in comic genres, tends to be mocking and 'negative', but not necessarily or always so; it does, however, nearly always strive to elicit some form of laughter. See M. A. Rune 1993: 3-35, for the history of terms for parody, and in particular, the relationship between parody and ridicule; for parody in Aristophanes in particular, see Goldhill 1991: 209-11. On the problem of sorting out the different kinds of allusion in Old Comedy — from designation to overt parody — see Nagelmann's taxonomy of 'Reflection' (1996: 3-4) that he uses in discussing how poets of Old Comedy intersected with Greek lyric poetry.
This otherness of a parodied text within comedy makes it fairly easy to spot and to understand in context, and it explains why scholars have often analogized the relationship between a comedy and the texts it parodies to that between parasite and host. But Old Comedy also interacts with other genres in far more original ways, where there is no question of parody and quite often no apparent self-consciousness about allusion or authorial intentionality. Sometimes these are instances where texts interact with each other synchronically as a function of cultural forces that a poet may or may not pay any attention to, such as the ways in which Athenian tragedy and comedy share the same stage and are influenced by common production and performance protocols. Other times comic texts interact with previous authors diachronically, reflecting a generic heritage so old and complex that no single poet could possibly trace a comprehensive history of origins. Aristotle himself put his finger on the problem for Old Comedy when he noted at Poetics 1449a that the early history of Greek comedy could not really be known because no records were kept before its formal state recognition at the City Dionysia (486 BCE). We still, in fact, share Aristotle's frustration and crave information about how these
diachronic literary relationships might have actually taken shape: where does Old Comedy come from? What accounts for its distinctive generic hybridity? Will isolating its constituent 'parts' help us understand how it interacted with other genres and, more important, clarify for us what Old Comedy was, as a discrete genre itself, actually is supposed to do?

While we cannot here take up the grand (and, it has to be said, intractable) problem of Old Comedy's 'ultimate' origins, I would like to address a specific aspect of Old Comedy's generic provenance that has a bearing both on the question of its early, pre-fifth-century - and so, pre-historical - forms, and on how it came to be conceptualized in later periods of antiquity when it had become a genre to be read or studied rather than performed. In my book Old Comedy and the Lambrograph Telluric Tradition (hereafter, OCIT), I tried to make a case for Old Comedy's close generic dependence on the tradition of iambic poetry, most famously represented by Archilochus in the seventh century BCE and Hipponax in the sixth. Since then, there has been considerable scholarly progress on the iambic poets, and some useful engagement with, and criticism of, the approach I took in that work, so this seems a fitting time to revisit the position I argued for in that work. The conception of 'generic dependence' that I was working with in OCIT was standard for philological scholarship at the time: look in authors working in genre A for lexical similarities with authors working in genre B, collect overt allusions and pay special attention to passages where one author mentions an earlier one by name. Next, affirm the suspected connection, if possible, by finding ancient testimonia that support the notion of generic affiliation. This method is neither illegitimate nor inconsequential as a first pass at the problem. Certainly, if Archilochus can be shown to quote Archilochus (as he does), or to mention Hipponax by name (as he does), we have the beginnings of an argument for at least some sort of relationship among these poets. But the real question is what kind of relationship. Are Archilochus' quotations of Archilochus categorically different from his far more numerous and full quotations of tragic poets,
for example? Or to put it another way, when Cratinus wrote a play entitled *Archilochoi*, almost certainly bringing Archilochus on to the stage in some guise, and peppering the play with Archilochian allusions and quotations, was he constructing a *parodic* relationship—a relationship of mocking otherness, not affiliation—with Archilochos, akin to Aristophanes’ relationship with Euripides? Or was it an attempt on Cratinus’ part to acknowledge an organic generic relationship between his poetry and Archilochus’ that was more knowing *homage* than parody? I argued for this latter position in *OCIT*, but the case can be made even more forcefully that *iambos* and *Old Comedy* were powerfully and uniquely affiliated, I believe, if we move beyond a strictly philological approach and consider them—despite their many differences in literary form, performative structures, or even localized social functioning—as, first and foremost, *genres* of *satire*.

The key issue in any discussion of generic affiliation is the question of authorial self-consciousness: if we say that various genres are *affiliated* or *connected*, or whatever metaphor we choose, does it matter that the poets whom we think were influenced by others were aware of the processes by which they were influenced? Is this kind of self-consciousness an essential criterion for even speaking of *affiliation* to begin with? And is *affiliation* even the appropriate word to use in cases where there seems to be no awareness on the author’s part of how his work interacts with anyone else’s, even when we seem to be able to see a clear case of interaction? There are questions that genre theorists in other literary fields have wrestled with for some time, and classicists, too, have not been insensitive to the complexity of the problems, but for a variety of reasons comic genres have presented particular challenges to thinking outside of familiar philological parameters. In the specific case of *iambos* and *Old Comedy*, this reluctance to theorize about genre has created some confusion about what we are looking for when we come to the question of how the two relate to one another.

Much of the confusion has arisen because scholars have often conflated what are really four distinct questions:

1. *How historically* did a particular genre come into being and develop?
2. *How did a given genre represent itself*, its origin, its history and its ‘essence’, and why did it do so in that way?
3. *What did the audience think of the genre of Old Comedy?*
4. How have *critics* (and this can include authors themselves, contemplating the provenance of literary genres) understood a given genre’s origin, history and ‘essence’, and why did they do so in that way, especially if their claims turn out to be historically inaccurate?

Sometimes scholars will assume that the one will necessarily follow from the other but, in fact, as I would like to argue here, actual historical dependence between, or affiliation of, genres need hardly imply self-consciousness of such a relationship, nor need we always assume that what an author tells us about generic history is historically ‘accurate’.

The argument of *OCIT* illustrates well the need to clarify which questions we are seeking to answer, and the evidence that can be brought to bear on them. Everyone would agree that *Old Comedy* and *iambos* share some literary features: both can employ invective, obscenity, episodic narrative structures, and so forth. I wanted to argue that these shared features suggested that the later genre, Athenian *Old Comedy*, in some sense descended from the earlier one, and that the comic poets were both aware of the generic affiliation they had with iambographers and self-consciously *indebted* to those earlier poets for many of the stylistic features for which they were famous in their own time, especially obscenity and political...

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11 See, e.g., Farrell 2003, Rosen 2007: 44–47, and now Rosen 2010 (esp. 7–24), who often offers a lucid discussion, with bibliography, of the major theoretical challenges of genre criticism as practiced both in antiquity and by theorists of our own time.
12 Among other things, comedy, and in particular satirical strands of comic literature, tend to construct for themselves a historically specific reality that exists primarily in the here and now, enrolling its audience into thinking that there must be some relation between their lived reality and reality of the comic performance. Matters become even more complicated when authors speak in their own voice in their works, especially when they mock other people who would be known to the audience and make claims for themselves that have the verisimilitude of a verbal truth. One can find even the most sophisticated critics, for example, being drawn into a satire’s insistence (a conventional trope in itself) that his work must be taken at face value and as representative of a historical reality. See Rosen 2007: 13–15, 243–7.

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mockery. Let us say, however, that the philology, and even the testimonia, are not strong enough to sustain the position that Attic comedy 'descended' from the iambos or that Athenian comic poets knowingly modelled their plays on iambic poets. What would this actually mean for the question of generic affiliation? How self-aware of their literary forebears must poets be before we can legitimately speak in terms of generic 'descent', 'affiliation' or 'influence'? Other criteria have been invoked to downplay or even deny a meaningful affiliation between iambos and comedy: 'social conditions', length of work, composition of the audience, modes of performance — each of these categories looks quite different for iambos and Old Comedy. Another way of putting this might be to say that although Archilochus composed a humorous, obscene pseux against Lycambes in the seventh century B.C., and Aristophanes composed a humorous, obscene pseux against Cleon in the fifth, the date and conditions of performance, audience composition and reception were so different that any similarities between them were more likely coincidental than indicative of any sort of lineage relationship.

The major premise behind this statement is that because both iambos and Old Comedy can be shown to involve many other things besides abuse and political mockery, these elements themselves cannot be regarded as definitional of either genre. As a basic principle, this seems unobjectionable enough; just because we can find similar phenomena in two genres does not necessarily mean that they are related in anything more than a coincidental way. As Farrell has pointed out,15 Pindar's Odes may have been commissioned to praise victors, but they could on occasion include blame and criticism as well; the mere appearance of 'blame' in his Odes does not, however, suddenly turn Pindar into a 'blame poet', and he even famously goes out of his way to distance himself from such an association, at Pythians 2.52-7, where he repudiates the iambic poet Archilochus for being pseux. With Pindar, there is never any question of what his

14 As L. Bowes 2002, who concludes that we should not think of Attic comedy as 'descended from', or even 'strongly influenced by', iambos. See also Willi 2002: 7-10. The real issue, it seems, is the use of 'descent', which again returns us to the question of authorial self-consciousness: is a modern pop poster lyric 'descended from' ancient examples of similar usage? Is Death of a Salesman 'descended from' Greek tragedy? A case could be made for either position in both examples, depending on whether one uses the word 'descent' to imply that authors used to be aware of their literary antecedents. Bowes 2002: 86-8 distinguishes between genres that develop 'out of' other genres, and those that are 'similar to but not deriving from' other genres. This distinction highlights well the problems inherent in the terms we use to discuss influences on, and relationships between, genres, since the actual difference between the two options is not always easy to pinpoint. (See further discussion below, n. 40.)


Odes are supposed to 'do' — Pindar in this context composed praise poetry, no matter what other literary elements he deployed, some of which, as we have seen with iambos, may even be generically at odds with the goals of epinician. So, in the case of iambos and Old Comedy, the real question is: how important is abuse and comic mockery to each, and what is it actually doing in each one?26 And if we can determine that the 'work' being done by such elements in each genre is functionally similar, would this similarity effectively constitute generic affiliation?

This is a far more profitable direction for us to take in considering iambos and comedy. I believe, than mere philology, since literary works by different authors can certainly function in similar ways, as similar 'speech acts' with similar claims to efficacy — even if the words and forms they use are dissimilar to each other's. Horace offers a useful case in point: he did not have philology, or even history, on his mind when he noted at the opening of Satires 1.4 that Lucullian satire derived from (pendet) the poets of Old Comedy. This is one of the most famous pronouncements of generic affiliation in all of classical literature, especially since it addresses the bifurcation I have discussed earlier between generic self-consciousness on the one hand (Horace seems to want us to believe that all Roman satirists would have been conscious of a literary, or at least discursive, debt to Old Comedy and could draw on the antecedent genre for allusive play) and, on the other, the notion of an organic generic affiliation (Old Comedy and Roman satire were related to one another simply by virtue of doing similar things, whether or not the poets realized it).

What exactly has Horace sensed here in Old Comedy that seemed relevant to Roman satire? He says clearly enough that it was the libertas of Old Comedy, its freedom to attack prominent wrongdoers, that he admires, even if (as he claims) his own speech has to be more constrained. There is an interesting, playful bit of generic gamesmanship at work here, for by denying that he is able to do in his satires what Old Comedy could (nostabam...), Horace both distances, apologetically, the nature of his own work from Old Comedy, and at the same time brings it into closer contact by implying that in a perfect world where speech was unconstrained (as he believed it was in fifth-century Athens) his satires would be just like Old

16 This is the central question that Bowes's remark (2002: 77) calls to mind: 'If my argument [for a multiplicity of "identifying features" at iambos] were to be correct, their relevance... would be to diminish the importance within iambos of that element which has most often been seen as linking it closely with comedy, abuse' (my emphasis).

17 As Freedenburg 2001: 89 succinctly put it: 'The lines are fraught with misinformation that caricatures not only the poets of Greek Old Comedy, but Lucullian as well.' See Rosen 2007: 6-40 for discussion and further bibliography.
Comedy. If Horace had never written these lines, or if they were lost to us, how willing would we be to think of Roman satire and Old Comedy as affiliated genres? A strict historicist would probably conclude that any resemblance between Roman satire and Old Comedy was coincidental or arose, one might say, "independently." Certainly no one, ancient or modern, would claim that the relationship between Roman satire and Old Comedy was anything like that between Roman comic drama and Greek New Comedy, where it can be easily shown both that the relationship was historical and that the Roman comic poets were well aware of that fact. Horace's statement in Satires 1.4 about satire's provenance in Old Comedy is by all measures eccentric, in fact, at least when considered as a piece of literary history. But what might we imagine prompted it? What kind of relationship between the two genres did Horace perceive—despite whatever a historian might think—that could be both 'valid' and yet unhistorical at the same time?

These are questions that can be applied equally to the problem of how Old Comedy was related to iambos, where the historicity of a generic relationship—which is to say, clear evidence that the former descended organically and formally from the latter—cannot be well established. We are left, instead, with impressions from the poets of Old Comedy, as I discussed in OCTT, that remind us of Horace on satire; they sensed that what they were doing with their comedies was somehow 'like' an antecedent genre, even if they would have been unable to make a historically legitimate argument for lineage and descent. Their clear interest in iambos, however, like Horace's interest in Old Comedy, ought to be sufficient to prompt us, in turn, at the very least to consider what inspired this interest in the first place.

To answer this question, it is helpful for us to think in terms of a genre's 'dynamics' rather than any static qualities of form or language. What distinguishes one genre from another, to rephrase my earlier question, becomes more a matter of what they do than of what they are. This approach allows us to reframe our search for a genre's defining features by asking what it is about a given literary work that no other genre would be able to replicate in quite the same way, and with the same effect. In the case of iambos, Old Comedy and even Roman satire, I have argued elsewhere that the concept of 'satire' is a reasonably good start, for 'satire' is a broad term that is not defined by specific literary elements—metres, or structures or performance protocols—but rather by its dynamics, the way it sets out to construct a particular relationship between an author and an audience over against some other person or abstract thing. Satirical authors may draw on a common arsenal of tropes or devices (obscenity, low diction, parody and personal mockery, just to name a few), but none of these itself defines satire, and most of them can be found in any number of other genres. Greek orators, lyric poets and even tragedians mock individuals, use obscenity or engage in parody, and in such moments we may even say that these authors are being 'satirical.' But to use that adjective is to imply that there is something we consider 'true satire,' different from the examples that we label 'satirical.' What distinguishes genres of satire from genres that may merely incorporate satire, is that the work of the former—the ergon or telos of satire, to borrow terms that Aristotle uses for the function and aim of tragedy—is understood by audiences, authors and critics to be laughter. This is laughter of a rather specific kind, of course, but it always lurks behind the mockery and ridicule found in this kind of literary work, and there usually is no further telos, despite an author's occasional (and equally humorous) claims to the contrary. Aischrylos may pepper a forensic or persuasive speech, for example, and elicit laughter from its audience at that moment, but laughter is hardly that work's telos; it functions more as rhetorical spice—strategically deploying humour in a work that is not otherwise generically characterized as comic.
frequent didactic claims one associates with satirical authors, disingenuous or not, or subservient to the work’s goal of humouring an audience.66

In considering the relationship between iambos and comedy, therefore, we can more easily lay aside the many formal or contextual differences between the two that scholars have legitimately pointed out and instead look at the work each is trying to accomplish. What we find, I think, are strikingly parallel dynamics in play — an author singles out another person for ridicule, usually ingnant over that person’s behaviour or some other abstract issue of the day in which that person is implicated; he speaks to, or in front of, any audience of people who are supposed to be sympathetic listeners; and in the course of his attacks, he makes an audience laugh. It is easy to anticipate objections that such a formulation is simplistic and incomplete — surely not every iambic or comic poet at every moment in a given work is engaged in this very enterprise; and there are, of course, many other aspects of their works that seem to have nothing to do with invective or mockery.67 But if we start with the almost tautological fact that both iambos and Old Comedy are comic genres, and consider what the preponderant nature of that comedy is — namely, what kind of humour these genres most rely on to distinguish themselves from other comic forms — it is clear that this would be the comedy of personal mockery. It is worth noting, moreover, that iambos and Old Comedy are the only literary genres (certainly the only poetic genres) of Greek antiquity about which this can be said.68

66 Satirists consistently make didactic claims for their ridicule and invective, but such claims tend to be complicated, if not undermined, by their heavy use of (generically indicated) humour and irony. See Rosini (2002).

67 This notion is what seems to have persuaded E. Bowie 2002, 2001 that iambos has been wrongly conceptualised as, at root, a genre of mockery and blame: “Iambos was a form of poetry in which a number of identifying features regularly appeared” (2002: 37), and mockery was simply one of these features. “No one of these features”, he continues, “needed to be present for a poem to be recognized as (an) iambos.” Here we confront again the vexatious question of what we think we are describing — a historical phenomenon that would have been recognizable to contemporary audiences, or a conceptual construct that only crystallized as a genre over time (Rosini’s much stabler ‘received iambos’, see above n.12). The problem is knowing when to consider that a genre has ‘come into being’; in the first place, if there really were archaic performances of iambos that could be completely devoid of anything we might consider, broadly construed, satirical (which I very much doubt, but here our evidence is too incomplete to judge for sure either way), we are even justified in referring to such performances as ‘iambos’ to begin with, especially in light of the fact that later antiquity almost universally came to regard blame and mockery as ‘identifying features’ of iambos and would not readily refer to something as ‘iambos’ that did not include mockery? See Rosini 2002, 395–396, a chapter with the revealing title, “Invective as the Dominant Feature of Iambic”.

68 Rosini 2002: 96–7, in her analysis of Aristophanes’s use of the term pagan and iambos, lays out Aristophanes’s varying stance on the matter clearly but, like Bowie, she focuses on the issue of individual iambos that may not actually contain abuse; the different forms of abuse figure only in part of the works by poets of the ‘received iambos’, while they are found in other genres of poetry as well (97). See above, p. 89, on the difference between satire as a genre and genres that merely incorporate satirical elements but do something else, generically speaking. To put this another way, if we find a poet with no abuse by a poet who otherwise has a predilection for abuse, does that mean that the poet cannot be considered, in terms of generic congruency, a poet of abuse? It seems more profitable to identify an author’s genre as a function of his entire known oeuvre, and of what we can know about what this oeuvre is supposed — by author and audiences alike — to be doing. No one would ever say, for example, that Euripides is not a tragedian because his plays sometimes contain scenes that play like love lyrics, pastoral or comedy. Rosini 2002: 241 is right to say that ‘invective is not a literary genre’, but ‘invective is not synonymous with satire’, which, even if we are unwilling to regard it as a bona fide genre as such, is certainly a literary mode that can define certain authors and the genres they write in. This is exactly what Pindar, 5.27, 5.57–5.6 had in mind in his complaint about Archilochus as pagon (i.e. a ‘blamer’, but in the context of Archilochus, comic aims, not as far from our term ‘satirical’), whether or not we should assume that Pindar had Archilochus’ iambos specifically in mind here (cf. Rosini 2002: 187). Pindar’s insight into Archilochos is not that everything Archilochus composed was blame poetry, but that so much ‘blaming’ could be found in his work that he can legitimately be characterised with an adjective that reflects this (pagon). See also Nagy 1979: 244–25.245: Rosini 2002: 71, 210. That term, in other words, would still have meaning even in the context of a non-invective, non-satirical poem. Of course, in the end, one has to concede that not enough Archilochus poetry survives to make any very certain judgement about the variations in generic character across his different works; which is why the testimony of a witness relatively close in time to Archilochus, such as Pindar, is all the more revealing.

69 See above, nn. 12, 13.

70 Paus. E. Bowie 2000: 48, whose firm denial that Aristophanes could have had any notion of ‘decent’ in mind when he noted similarities between iambos and comedy seems overstated, based as it is on argument c ad finem: that Aristophanes did not [think Old Comedy was descended from iambos] is further demonstrated by his total silence on iambic iambos... when he alludes to...the origins
question is just how Aristotle conceived of their relationship. The case I would like to make on this point is this: even though Aristotle imagines a more or less conventional diachronic history of tragedy at the beginning of Poetics, he is not really concerned with trajectories of ‘influence’ or authorial self-consciousness. His notions of literary evolution derive rather from a phenomenological analysis and taxonomizing of literary forms and dynamics, and from an attempt to extrapolate from this commonalities among different works. This is why Bowie imagines a false problem when he voices scepticism that Aristotle saw Old Comedy as a ‘direct descendent’ of iambos, since Aristotle does not seem especially concerned to make an argument for direct descent here.

The relevant passage from Poetics (1448b24–1449a3) is worth considering here with these issues in mind:

διαπραξήθη δὲ κατὰ τὰ ὁμάθα ἢτον ἡ ποιήσις; οὐ μὲν γὰρ συμμέτρει τὸ κακὸν ἐμποδίζειν πράξεις καὶ τῶν τιμώτων, οὐ δὲ ὀνομάζεται τὰ τῶν φιλών, πρόων ψυχῶν σπουδάζει, ὡσπέρ ἄριτος ὄμοιός καὶ ἐγκώμιοι, τὸν μὲν οὖν πρὸ Ομήρου οὐδεὶς ἐχόμεν ἐπειδὴ τιμῶτων ποίησις, εἰκὸς δὲ εἶναι πολύστα, ὀποῖα δὲ Ομήρου δραματικοὶ θετικοὶ, ὁδὸν λαύνειν καὶ Μαρτυρίας καὶ τὰ τιμώτα, ἐν αἷς κατὰ τὸ ὄροστο καὶ τὸ ἱππαστὸς μέτρου – δὴ καὶ Λαύδων καλῶς νῦν, ὡς ἐν τῷ μέτρῳ τῶν ιππαστῶν ἀλλήλοις, καὶ ἑγγύνεται τῶν ποιησιῶν οὐ μὲν ἰορακώνοις οὐ δὲ ἱππαστὸς ποιοῦσι, ὡσπέρ δὲ καὶ τὰ στουπασά μόλις ἀμυντῆτος ιππαστής Ομήρου ἤν (μόνος γὰρ οὐκ ὑπερανακαίνθησαν, καὶ αὐτός καὶ τὸ τῆς κοιμασίας σχῆμα πρῶτος οὕτως ἐπέβεβλησαν, οὐκόν οὐδὲ τὸ γέλαδεν δραματικοποιηθεῖσα ὁ γὰρ Μαρτυρίας ἀλλοιογυν έχει, ὡσπέρ ἰδιός καὶ ἤλθεν Πρὸς τὰς τραγῳδίας, οὐδὲ καὶ οὕτως πρὸς τὰς κοιμασίας, παραφυλάξεις δὲ τὰς τραγῳδίας καὶ κοιμασίας οὐκ ἔδεισέν τις τῆς ποιήσεως ὁμολογίας κατὰ τὴν αἰκενθῆν μέτρου οὐ μὲν οὐκ ἔγγυνεν τῶν οὐδὲν καλῶς τοιαῦτα τῶν ποιησιῶν ἂν τῶν μὲν καὶ ἤμετρον τὰ σχήματα εἶναι τῶν ιππαστῶν.

Poetry branched into two, according to its creators’ characters: the more serious produced mimetic of noble actions and the actions of noble people, while the more vulgar depicted the actions of the base, in the first place by composing invectives just as others produced hymns and encomia. Now, we cannot name such an invective by any poet earlier than Homer.

of Athenian comedy in phallic choruses performances’. Again, it would have been very easy to say that pre-Cratinian comedy was a direct descendent of iambos. . . . In fact, Aristotle does not have to mention iambos at 1448b23, because he had already dealt with it in the preceding section, where he had made it clear that iambic writers were precisely the ones who became writers of comedy (see Rossini 1992: 87): οὐ μὲν ὄντι τῶν ιππαστῶν κοιμασίας έγγυνότο (to name because poets of comedy instead of iambic verse).


In discussing this passage, Bowie concludes that Aristotle ‘writes as if [iambot and comedy] had related features’ rather than that the one was ‘descended from or strongly influenced by the other’ (my emphasis). Even if Aristotle were interested in making this specific point, which is hardly clear from the text, Bowie’s scepticism raises an interesting methodological question – if one acknowledges that two genres have ‘related features’, as Bowie does, what does it take to transform these features into sufficient evidence for generic affiliation? Philosophers might recognize here a variation of the socrates-problem (how many individual grains of wheat does it take to make a heap?), and the stakes are far from trivial. For establishing affiliation between literary genres brings us back to our original concern for discovering what each genre is actually trying to do. Put more concretely: if we think we understand what Hipponax is doing when he mocks Bupalus, and we think that, when Aristophanes mocks his targets, we can detect in him similar goals, formal structures, diction, and so on, a case for affiliation, if not descent, seems assured. Some might object, as Will and Bowie have done, that historical contingencies colour the nature of each poet’s mockery too much to argue for anything but the most casual or coincidental affiliation. Why, for example, should we assume that a poet mocking a target in sixth-century bc Clazomenae should be after the same effect as a poet mocking a target in the fifth, when political structures and social relationships were different? Because, I think we can say, each poet would have the same answer to the following question: what are you really trying to do when you make fun of your targets – not at the localized, specific level, but at the most conceptual, poetic one? To this

33 Here and elsewhere I reproduce the translations of Aristotle’s Poetics by Hallett 1995 (my emphasis).
34 See above, n. 15.
35 E. Bowie 2002: 49.
question, each would doubtless answer that he is ultimately interested in making his audience laugh, and the mode he has decided to adopt is one of satire and mockery; each would claim he has privileged a satirical mode because something about his targets annoys him, and the indignation that results allows him to fulfill his comic strategy.35 Exactly how each puts this together in a given poem is highly idiosyncratic, of course, but the same satirical scaffolding can be seen sturdy in place in each case, in examples from antiquity to the present.36

Aristotle himself also urges us not to fixate on the contingencies of individual authors and works, but rather to think in terms of literary telos, dynamics and a largely unconscious evolutionary process. The opening line of the passage quoted above is a key statement: διορθοσθη κατα το αικες της θητης η ποιησις. "Poetry", he says, "split apart according to poets' oikia ηθη", their 'individual characters'. By suggesting that poets are drawn to certain types of poetry according to their respective temperaments (οικοι θητη)37 Aristotle attempts to isolate fixed, 'natural' categories that can unify a multiplicity of poetic forms, regardless of how these forms might relate to one another diachronically or as a function of authorial intention. Aristotle’s phrasing of this process at 1449a is revealing:

παραφανείς δε της τραγωδίας και κομικής οι κυριαρχούκε η την ποιησιν ουραντες κατά την οικεια φιλο. Οι μεν αυτο των ιμαθων κομικής δε εμφανίσια η γένεσις. Οι δε αυτο των επιστη τραγωδικοδοσιακοι, δια τη μεζεια και ημερομερεια το σχολια εναι ταυτα εικονει.

And when tragedy and comedy had been glimpsed (in Homer); those whose own natures gave them an impetus towards either type of poetry abandoned Iambic lampons to become the comic poets, or epic to become tragedians, because these newer forms were grander and more esteemed than the earlier.

36 See Rosen and Morris 1999, and Rosen and Baines 2002 for comparative studies of satirical poetry beyond classical authors. For Aristotle, the scaffolding seems to be what lies behind his use of the word (for the first time in current Greek literature) ιμαθως at 1449b10, now well discussed at Bostrom 2001; 100–4, who skewers up the meaning of the verb as 'to do what is typical of iambos' as it was conceived in the fourth century BC, namely, as the enunciation, humorous, sometimes scandalous, comic, aspho, and ad hominem ridicule. Bostrom would say that the idea of iambos as 'dominantly abusive' (102) was a conception that was developing in the fourth century, and then applied 'backcast' to a pre-Homeric age. Why she chooses so categorically along with Bowie, the idea that early iambus might also have been 'dominantly abusive' (or at least, to use a phrase with broader connotations, dominantly satirical) in its own day eludes me, especially given the paucity of actual fragments from the period that would allow us to make definitive judgements either way.
37 There has been some dispute as to whether οικεια θητη refers here to poets or poetry, but see Lucas 1968: 75 ad loc.

Comedy and iambos

When poets began to see, through their experience with Homer, what tragedy and comedy were all about, they cathered to one or the other (ερμοθετη) in accordance with their φυσις. In the lines immediately preceding these Aristotle had already established that comedy, as he conceptualized it, was not identical to iambos,38 but he still could say that epic and iambic poets of an earlier age (και ηγειντο των ποιητων οι μεν ερμοθετη) could map on, by analogy, to the tragedy and comedy of his own day. The kind of person whose φυσις would have drawn him to iambos, in other words, would have had the same character as the person who in classical Athens would have been drawn to comedy.

Aristotle is grasping here for that certain something in both iambos and comedy that would appeal to a person with such a φυσις, their 'natural bent', irrespective of any arguments about how these genres might be interrelated from a diachronic perspective. In fact, it is striking that Aristotle makes a point of saying a few sections later (1449b) that there is no real memory of what came before comedy. The history of comedy's formal aspects -- for example its masks, prologues, number of actors -- was unknown because there were no records and no explicit cultural memory, at least none that he had recourse to (τις δε προσωποι απεδωκεν η προδότες η πληθυ απερικτοι και οι οικειοι, 1449b3). Even so, however, Aristotle has no trouble in positing a clear generic link between iambos and comedy based on his argument that each genre attracted practitioners whose temperaments were themselves linked by their predilection for satiric invective, whether or not they thought very much about how other genres deployed similar literary strategies.39

In short, for Aristotle, the many types of poetry that exist can be categorized according to the kinds of things that each purports to do or what others (audiences, critics) claim that they do. This is an inevitably imprecise procedure, and it is never quite clear what Aristotle regards as

38 Aristotle note that Homer's Margin, for example, was a form of iambos of comedy that dramatized the laughable (τοι ιμαθω) which included invective (φυρακετα), but not exclusively so. At 1448b21 he cites Homer as the first known composer of φυρακετα in his Margin, so it is curious that a few lines later, he says that Margin dramatized the laughable, but not invective (ατι φυρακετα). This seems to show that Aristotle thought of φυρακετα as a prominent component of a larger work of comedy, but that not all the comic aspects of the work had to be invective. See now Bostrom 2001; 98–104. 'For Aristotle's Margin seems to be an item on the margins of the broad category of pages that builds τοι ιμαθω into a prose-dramatic story (Εισηγησιονοτοιον) (102).
39 See above, n. 18, in Pind, Path, 3.43–7, which anticipates Aristotle's correlation between a type of poetry and the poet's character. For in calling Archilochos poetarum there, he impose on the personality of the poet a quality that he would identify as being at the heart of Archilochos poetry, namely his fondness for pages. People who are naturally drawn to invective in 'real life' will just as naturally be drawn to poetry that features invective if they decide to become poets.
generic affiliation, but it is clear that he is willing, unlike many scholars, to lay aside the many contingencies that individual works exhibit within the contexts of their production in favour of thinking in terms of a work's ergon, and that this kind of thinking encourages a consideration of how different genres interact with one another. Aristotle's insight about iambos was merely a first step in the generic analysis of iambos, but its significance lay in the way it articulated a literary dynamic — what we would call satire or mockery — that could serve as a meaningful criterion for generic classification without relying on specific authorial practices or self-consciousness. The question of a deliberate, authorially self-conscious, historically verifiable affiliation between iambos and Old Comedy is impossible to answer with much certainty in the current state of our evidence; but denying that there was one or remaining agnostic on the issue does not mean that the two could not be affiliated according to a different set of criteria that have more to do with how humans interact with each other in the world than how aware they always are of what they are actually doing.

true that he had no real evidence on which to base this statement, but he seems to have imagined that all those people with 'poetic' genius, driven to compose in comic forms that involved what we would call 'vaudeville', were people who had really existed. See Rusten 2000b, for the diversity of comic forms in Greek poetry that seem to have been around in the sixth century bc, as potential antecedents to elements found in fifth-century Attic comedy.

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40 Rusten's distinction (2000: 86–8) between Aristotle's 'theoretical' and 'empirical' approaches to the history of poetry makes good sense up to a point, but I suspect the lines between each approach were considerably more blurred for Aristotle: '... In the empirical approach dithyrambs and phallic songs are 'historical'' (not of which?) inaugurators of tragedy and comedy... In the theoretical approach, iambics appear as the conceptual (similar to but not deriving from) consequence of paideia, which I argue is Aristotle's construct, and the conceptual inaugurator of comedy. It is not clear to me why the two approaches need be mutually exclusive, either for Aristotle or for ourselves. If Aristotle thought that Attic comedy arose historically and most directly 'out of' phallic songs, and phallic songs would have featured the kinds of paideia associated with iambics, why would he have had any trouble in thinking that phallic songs themselves had a historical - not only a conceptual - relationship with iambics, that they arose 'out of' iambics (as comedy and phallic songs are Cesn in this volume).

In Aristotle's speculative literary history, after all, all comic forms ultimately derived from the split between the poets of 'the serious' and 'the vulgar' non-serious (cf. μὴ γὰρ αὐτῶν τὸν κόσμον ἔχοντα βιβλιοθήκην παρέχει καὶ τὰς τοιαύτας, οἱ δὲ εὐφράζομεν τὰς τῶν φαλάκρων, 1480α3). It is
a way of reading that renounced the premise of polis-based civic utility in favour of a programme of scholarly inquiry which would neutralize comedy politically and subordinate it to the courtly project of ordering the literary universe under a divine monarch. The Pleiad tragedians made what would turn out to be a decisive contribution to the generational struggle of poetry and philosophy, comedy and tragedy, and finally Athens and Alexandria for ownership of the discourses of criticism: asserting an anti-Peripatetic model of how comedy should be read which deprecatated anecdote, prosopography, and rhetorical and formalist theory in favour of a new kind of philologically informed close reading of the texts, and canonizing the comedians of tragedy's own golden age as the masters of the genre, in defiance of contemporary taste and practice. The absence of practising comedians from the early Museum may itself have been an essentially political fact; at any rate it left the field free for tragedians to claim critical ownership and canonization rights over comedy, after a century and a half of one-sided dialogue in which comedy had asserted its own unchallengeable entitlement to discursive mastery of other genres and tragedy in particular. It seems clear enough that what we thought we knew about Lycophron is as wrong as what we once thought we knew about Euphorion, and that the real story of the founding fathers of scholarship on comedy is still waiting to be told. But their ultimate triumph in the contest to determine which comedies would be read and how was not merely a decisive episode in the history of literary scholarship and critical practice: it was also tragedy's final revenge for the Pogo.

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