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Aristophanes, Fandom and the Classicizing of Greek Tragedy

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Abstract

It is no doubt true that the questions I would like to address in this chapter, which concern Aristophanes' role (and more broadly, the role of Old Comedy) in disseminating and popularizing Greek tragedy, can never be answered adequately, given the nature of the evidence we have to work with. But it is also true that if any progress can be made in answering them, Alan Sommerstein's magisterial editions of Aristophanes, as well as his other voluminous work on Greek drama, deserve a good deal of the credit for it. For during the course of his long-standing scholarly engagement with Aristophanes, Professor Sommerstein has often shown a particular interest in the interaction of comedy and tragedy during the Classical period, and his own contributions to this topic throughout his Aristophanes commentaries have directly inspired the discussion that follows.

Comments

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It is no doubt true that the questions I would like to address in this chapter, which concern Aristophanes' role (and more broadly, the role of Old Comedy) in disseminating and popularizing Greek tragedy, can never be answered adequately, given the nature of the evidence we have to work with. But it is also true that if any progress can be made in answering them, Alan Sommerstein's magisterial editions of Aristophanes, as well as his other voluminous work on Greek drama, deserve a good deal of the credit for it. For during the course of his long-standing scholarly engagement with Aristophanes, Professor Sommerstein has often shown a particular interest in the interaction of comedy and tragedy during the Classical period, and his own contributions to this topic throughout his Aristophanes commentaries have directly inspired the discussion that follows.

In simplest terms, we may put the problem this way: In fifth-century Athens, how was the literary legacy of a tragic dramatist—composing as he normally did with his eye on a single, ephemeral performative event—formed and ensured? In an age of uncertain, probably limited, literacy, when the very notions of “publication” and “readership” seemed inchoate and unstable at best, what were the mechanisms by which tragedians became “classicized” both within their own generation, and in subsequent periods? How did they ensure their own fame? How is it that *some* poets became part of a literary canon, while others were soon forgotten, or at least had a relatively short shelf-life in Athenian culture (which, of course, means, that they rarely make it down to our

age)?¹ Another way to ask the question might be this: If there were no Aristophanes, would Euripides (for example) have become the “classic” that he eventually did? What specific role, in other words, did paratragedy play in this process of solidifying a comic poet’s reputation? While we cannot expect a simple or monolithic answer to such questions, I would like to suggest in this chapter that the forms of sustained parody and satire directed “against” tragedy in the comic drama of the period can be considered at least one important means by which tragic poets secured a reputation, and in some cases were even turned into classics within their own time.² To put it another way, without the consistent “feedback loop,” so to speak, that comic paratragedy provided *for* tragedy, the canon of tragic poets, and their individual status within it, might very well have evolved rather differently than it did.

Tragedy is of particular interest in this regard because it was poetry composed, in principle anyway, for the singular and non-repeatable public occasion of a particular

¹ I bracket in this discussion the related question of *why* some poets became “classics” in the fifth century, and focus rather on *how*. The two are obviously interconnected, but they take us ultimately in different directions, and the first question (“why?”) is probably even more intractable than the second.

² The term “classic” is notoriously difficult to define succinctly; I use the term to refer to a work that has become highly valued by the dominant culture of a given period, a work felt to convey authority as a representative of its genre, and at least an illusion of transcendence. In a trenchant and witty essay, “Why Read the Classics?”, Italo Calvino (1986: 125-34) offers one definition (among many) that comes close to the sense in which I use the term in this chapter: “The classics are books that exert a peculiar influence, both when they refuse to be eradicated from the mind, and when they conceal themselves in the folds of memory, camouflaging themselves as the collective or individual unconscious.” (p. 127).

festival performance,³ and so its status as an explicitly “textual” form was especially ambiguous. If the performance itself was really paramount for the poet and audience, one might well wonder what would motivate a poet to produce a version of it in text form after the performance, and who would be its readership. Somehow the lines were written down, of course, but by whom, and when? And to what end?⁴ In order to retain a place in the cultural memory of one’s own time, and in that of subsequent generations, one needs a mechanism of iterability, and in the case of drama, if the experience of a performance cannot be reproduced very easily or at all, there needs to be a way—a context and a medium—for the words themselves to be repeated and associated with the poet. A dramatic poet’s work, in short, had to assume a life of its own after its initial appearance,

³ Tragedies could, of course, be revised for re-performance at Athens in the fifth century BCE, or re-performed at rural festivals, and some find the notion of a “single performance” somewhat misleading, (as Csapo and Slater 1995: 2-3). It seems unlikely, however, that a tragedian who composed a play originally for a specific festival would assume at the time of composition that the play would necessarily be re-performed or revived in the distant future. For further discussion, see Pöhlmann, 1988: 23-40, and Rosen 1997: 414, n.4.

⁴ I addressed this problem a few years ago as it pertained to the second edition of Aristophanes’ *Clouds* in Rosen 1997, where I argued that in the parabasis of the extant *Clouds* the poet was wrestling with the notion that he was conceptualizing his “work”—the play itself—as a textual “thing,” and that his success with posterity as a “textual” author interested him as much as success in the theaters of Attica. The anxiety that I ascribed to Aristophanes over this may not have been shared by all dramatic poets of the fifth century, but it points up the basic mechanical problems of transmission and reception of a largely performative genre, where “readers” were at best a “secondary” audience. For a review of the limited evidence we have about how early Greek poetry came to be written down, see Herington 1985: 45-48. Also Thomas 1992: 123-27, and Ford 2003.

whether by becoming a recurrent topic of informal discussion or by circulating in some written medium that made it readily available for reference, such as a papyrus text.⁵

Such “artifactualizing” of an ephemeral performance allows for ongoing critical review and exegesis by supporters and detractors alike, i.e., the groups of people who end up establishing a work’s status, for better or worse, within its own time, and often setting its course for posterity. In fifth-century Athens a playwright may well have garnered a certain amount of local stature by simply producing plays with some regularity at the Dionysian festivals, but it would have taken considerably more, I suspect, to turn a poet and his work into something sufficiently reified to invite systematic contemplation and valorization by his contemporaries.

It remains a mystery, of course, what *exactly* took place between the final moment of a play’s performance and its circulation for public consumption, and it is doubtless anachronistic for us to use our own term “publication” for the process by which a play was textualized.⁶ Some ancient sources leave us with the impression that tragedies—or

⁵ The novelist and critic J. M. Coetzee, in an essay originally published in 1993 [Coetzee 2001: 1-16], entitled “What is a Classic?” (itself alluding to T. S. Eliot’s famous lecture of the same title from 1944), suggests that an artistic work becomes classicized when it has survived the “process of day-by-day testing” generation after generation, and “emerges intact.” This is an attractive enough formulation for the poetry of fifth-century Athens as well, but highlights all the more acutely the need for a mechanism of repetition. A work obviously cannot be “tested” unless it is readily available for public scrutiny.

⁶ For an illuminating discussion of this problem, and the various forms of textualizing in the fifth century that might be considered “publication”, see Thomas 2003: 170-73: “[W]e may at least ask whether a written text was for the author’s own record only, for the author to use for revising, for the author to memorize and perform from, or for the author to send out into the wider world and allow to be replicated

probably more accurately, select passages of tragedies—circulated orally, but even a clear tradition oral transmission cannot itself settle whether such material began as texts written down either “official documents” or merely as *aides-memoires*. One thinks, for example, of Plutarch’s famous anecdote in his life of Nicias which recounts how many Athenian prisoners in Sicily at the end of the Sicilian expedition gained freedom by reciting “as much they could remember of Euripides’ poetry” (ἐκδιδάξαντες ὅσα τῶν ἐκείνου ποιημάτων ἐμύμνηντο) to their Euripides-crazed captors.⁷ Did these luckily literate Athenians memorize Euripides from texts, or had they themselves acquired him from repetitive recitation?⁸ It is impossible to say, of course, but it at least made sense in 405 for Aristophanes to depict Dionysus in *Frogs* (52-54) actually “reading” (or at least, reciting

and sold...”(p. 171). Galen’s treatise, *On My Own Books*, offers a richly self-conscious discussion of the many problems of “publication” that beset an author in the face of so many ways of construing “publication.” Although Galen was, of course, writing much later (2nd C. CE), the fundamental problems of textual dissemination, authorship and authenticity that he enumerates seem to have changed little since the fifth century BCE.

⁷ Plutarch *Nicias* 29. One wonders exactly how the situation would have arisen in which the Sicilians knew enough Euripides to have conceived a deep “longing” for him (μάλιστα...ἐπόθησαν), yet not quite enough to claim an actual textual familiarity with his work. Numerous scenarios are conceivable (occasional performances of Euripides in Sicily, accounts from foreigners of Euripidean plays that they had seen themselves in Athens, etc.), though none explicitly documented. See Taplin 1983, 89-99.

⁸ For a recent discussion of this passage, see Ford 2003: 33. Ford suggests that some of the Athenians—those whom Plutarch describes as “teaching” the Sicilians Euripidean poetry (ἐκδιδάξαντες)—might have relied on a knowledge of Euripides that they had learned in school. I am not entirely convinced, though, for reasons I will address below, that Euripides would have actually become a school text as early as the years preceding the Sicilian expedition. See also Stevens 1956: 90.

from) a written text of Euripides' *Andromeda*.⁹ There is little doubt, then, that Athenian culture was becoming increasingly textual by the end of the fifth century; but less clear is how textual and non-textual forces worked together to construct a poet's reputation in his own time, and secure a his reputation for posterity.

Even if we cannot say exactly when dramatic works were fixed in some kind of textual form, we certainly know a number of contexts in which they were disseminated—the many references to symposia or schools as venues for tragic recitation, for example.¹⁰ No doubt such opportunities for verbal repeatability played an important role in maintaining a poet's reputation once it had been established, but I suspect that these venues adopted for their particular purposes poetry that had *already* been classicized, and it was precisely *because* the poetry had been classicized that it was felt to be appropriate entertainment for pedagogical purposes. It is perhaps worth remembering that our own school curricula have not *made* Shakespeare a classic, but rather they adopt him as part of their pedagogical program precisely because he *already is* one.

⁹ See also the frequently cited passage later in the same play, lines 1109-18, in which the chorus claims that the audience can grasp the subtleties of the poetic agon between Aeschylus and Euripides precisely because “each one has a book” (1114). This passage has been much discussed for obvious reasons; see Dover, 1993: 34-35 for a summary of the interpretive problems of the passage and further bibliography. Note also Sommerstein's sobering remarks and sensible analysis of the passage's humor, ad loc. p. 255.

¹⁰ Cf., for example, the conflict between Strepsiades and Pheidippides at the end of Aristophanes' *Clouds* (1362-76) over whether Euripides or Aeschylus was more appropriate as *symposiastic* fare, with discussion below [p. 000]. On schooling as a venue for recitation, see Ford 2003: 24-30.

I would maintain, therefore, that the formative stages in the classicizing of tragic poets must have occurred elsewhere than in dining halls and schoolrooms—but where, and how? In what follows I will attempt to suggest a few places where we might find some insights into these questions, even if complete answers must remain elusive. I begin by positing a simple principle, namely that at Athens the classicizing of a work precedes its circulation as a text for reading; or we might put this more tentatively and say that the existence of a written text need not be a necessary condition for a work to be classicized. I say this to emphasize a point that may seem painfully obvious, but which is often unarticulated, namely, that a work can become a classic without actually being known accurately, or in its entirety. Our own culture may regard Mozart, Shakespeare and the Beatles as classics, but only a very few who hold such an opinion, or would fight for it when it came to establishing canons, would be able to sing, hum or recite in their entirety even reasonably accurate versions of their respective works. Similarly in Athens, the proverbial man in the street might have strong opinions about the relative merits of tragic poets, but be able to cite very little, if any, of the actual lines from them. How, then, are their opinions on such matters formed?

I would suggest that the the key players in the classicizing process are what, for lack of a more technical term, I would call “fans”, although other synonyms would work just as well: devotees, *cognoscenti*, etc. Before a performative work is fixed and circulated as a text, it will amass a coterie of devotees for whom, for whatever reasons (and there may be many), the works have special resonance. As I noted above, however, for a work to endure, it requires some measure of iterability, even if this means simply some

mechanism by which the memory of the event and its author are kept alive. Fans provide this service well in advance of any formal means of mechanical reproduction, for they will take the work seriously enough to continue discussing it among themselves and to proselytize among skeptics about the virtues of their chosen heroes. We catch a glimpse of this process, I think, in the passage at *Clouds* 1362-76, where Strepsiades recounts how he and his son Pheidippides came to blows when the latter repudiated the recitation of Aeschylus, by then an established classic, in favor of the “new” poet, Euripides, whose reputation was evidently still in the process of consolidation. Pheidippides here adopts a kind of critical idiolect so characteristic of obsessive fans:

ἐγὼ γὰρ Αἰσχύλον νομίζω πρῶτον ἐν ποιηταῖς
ψόφου πλέων. ἀξύστατον. στόμφακα. κρημνοποιόν. (1366-67)

Oh yes, I regard Aeschylus as supreme among poets—at being full of noise, incoherent, a bombastic ranter and a creator of mountainous words. [Tr. Sommerstein]

Strepsiades responds that Pheidippides should then instead recite something “from these modern poets, that clever stuff, whatever it is.”

ὁμως δὲ τὸν θυμὸν δακῶν ἔφην· “σὺ δ’ ἀλλὰ τούτων
λέξον τι τῶν νεωτέρων. ἄττ’ ἐστὶ τὰ σοφὰ ταῦτα.” 1370
ὁ δ’ εὐθύς ἦκ’ Εὐριπίδου ῥῆσιν τιν’, ὡς ἐκίνει
ἀδελφός, ὦ λειξίκακε, τὴν ὁμομητρίαν ἀδελφήν.
κὰγὼ οὐκέτ’ ἐξηνησχόμην, ἀλλ’ εὐθέως ἀράττω
πολλοῖς κακοῖς καίσχροισι. κᾶτ’ ἐντεῦθεν, οἷον εἰκός,
ἔπος πρὸς ἔπος ἠρειδόμεσθ’· εἶθ’ οὗτος ἐπαναπηδᾷ, 1375
κᾶπειτ’ ἔφλα με κάσπῳδεὶ κᾶπνιγε κᾶπέτριβεν.

...But I bit back my rage and said, “All right, you recite something from these modern poets, that clever stuff, whatever it is.” And he immediately loosed off [reading ἦκ’, rather than mss ἦσ’] a speech of Euripides, about how a brother, heaven forbid, was having it off with his sister by the same mother. Well, I could take it no longer, and I immediately piled into him with many hard and foul words; and after that, as you might expect, we attacked each other insult for insult. Then he jumps up; and he knocked me and banged me and choked me and pulverized me. [Tr. Sommerstein]

Even in antiquity it hardly took a professional or an academic to articulate a theoretical framework for promoting a work of art, when the passion ran deep enough. Behind this

little comic interlude in *Clouds*, then, lies a parody of Athenian “fan-dom”, the *fanaticism* that was capable of driving two grown men to fisticuffs in a dispute over literary merit. We may note how Aristophanes characterizes the extent of Pheidippides’ devotion to Euripides: *Strepsiades*, who recounts the episode, claims not to know Euripides at all, really: “...whatever it is...”, he says (ἄττ’ ἐστὶ τὰ σοφὰ ταῦτα). People have apparently characterized his work as *sopha*, but Strepsiades is not even in a position to repudiate this, because (as he implies) he does not himself have a real sense of what Euripides is all about. Indeed, Strepsiades seems a little startled by his son’s ability to rattle off a Euripidean speech (ὁ δ’ εὐθύς ἤκ’ Εὐριπίδου ῥῆσίν τιν’) especially since he does not seem to have any memory of having seen that play¹¹ (the plot seems to come as

¹¹ In fact, there may even be special significance here in the contrast that Aristophanes emphasizes between sung verse and spoken or recited verse. Earlier in the passage (1353ff.), Strepsiades had tried to get his son to sing a classic Simonides tune over dinner. When Pheidippides objects that symposiastic singing of this sort is antiquated and idiotic, Strepsiades then suggests that at least he *recite* something from Aeschylus (τῶν Αἰσχύλου λέξει τί μοι, 1365). Pheidippides then complies with a Euripidean *rhexis*. It could be that the contrast here between song and recitation is emblematic also of a contrast between a classicized work and a work in the process of becoming classicized: to Pheidippides the modernist Euripides fan, Aeschylus has become old hat, having worked its way long before into the song repertoire of traditional symposia. By suggesting a *rhexis* of Euripides instead, Strepsiades seems to imply that this form of quotation operates at a less elevated pitch (as if to say, “Okay; if you won’t recite a famous classic, then at least give me some non-lyric current stuff you can easily toss off”, vel sim.)—one that would not in itself signal a poet’s classicized status. Why would Pheidippides have such control of this *rhexis*, and his father no familiarity at all with it? Because Pheidippides, I would say, is made to represent a fan of a poet whose reputation was still in the making in 423 (and which explains why someone like Strepsiades might not know his work—even if he is being disingenuous), and it was

news to him, or at least he is not familiar enough with it to remember the specific names of the characters: 1371, “...the one where the brother was having it off with the sister...”). I detect in this scene, then, the period in which an author’s reputation is being formed and consolidated by his devotees, a group which is able—as Pheidippides is made to do here—to recite speeches from an author who has not yet become canonical and can still be referred to as νεώτερος.¹² Pheidippides, in short, represents a critical player in the process of building a poet’s reputation, and establishing the criteria by which posterity would judge that poet’s work.

One of the best illustrations from the fifth century of the process by which fans are made comes from an easily overlooked passage in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* (771-78). Here the slave Xanthias chats with Pluto’s slave in the underworld, who recounts the background to the impending agon between Euripides and Aeschylus:

ΟΙ. “Ὅτε δὴ κατῆλθ’ Εὐριπίδης, ἐπεδείκνυτο
τοῖς λωποδύταις καὶ τοῖσι βαλλαντιοτόμοις
καὶ τοῖσι πατραλοῖαισι καὶ τοιχωρύχοις.
ὅπερ ἔστ’ ἐν Ἄιδου πλῆθος, οἱ δ’ ἀκροώμενοι
τῶν ἀντιλογιῶν καὶ λυγισμῶν καὶ στροφῶν
ὑπερεμάνησαν κἀνόμισαν σοφώτατον·
κᾶπειτ’ ἐπαρθεῖς ἀντελάβετο τοῦ θρόνου.”

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his ability to recite from that poet’s oeuvre without batting an eye that makes him, and people like him, a key player in the process of classicizing.

¹² Of course, it is difficult to know whether Aristophanes reflects things as they *actually* were, i.e., whether it was credible that people of Strepsiades’ generation could claim that they were unfamiliar with Euripides. I suspect it was, in fact, but even if it were not, and Euripides had already achieved a certain classic status by this time (423 for the first production of *Clouds*), what is really of interest for our purposes is the way in which Aristophanes can imagine the unstable and ambiguous status an author might have at the moment when he is in the very process of becoming—but has not yet fully become—classicized. See Dover’s (1968) general remarks on this passage, pp. 251-53.

ἵν' Αἰσχύλος καθῆστο.

When Euripides came down here, he began giving display performances to the clothes-snatchers and cutpurses and father-beaters and burglars who abound in Hades, and when they heard his argumentative speeches and his twistings and weavings, they went quite mad over him and thought he was the greatest; and then he got so fired up that he laid claim to the chair where Aeschylus was sitting. [Tr. Sommerstein]

This is, in fact, an extremely significant vignette in the play, however fleetingly it comes and goes, for it offers the key to the play's entire *raison d'être*: Euripides and Aeschylus must compete with each other, after all, because Aeschylus' status as a classic is being challenged by a newcomer whose own fan-base is imagined as threatening to overwhelm and replace it. Holding the "throne" of tragedy in the underworld, after all, is tantamount to claiming the status of a classic, and although in practice there may be nothing to prevent multiple poets from simultaneously being considered classics, it makes for great comedy if we start with the premise that only one poet can hold such an honor. As we see in this play, moreover, this conceit has the added benefit of forcing the poet and audience to hone in with surprising exactitude on precisely what the *criteria* might be in determining a work's claim to classicism. And it is through the fan, as this scene makes clear, that we acquire the fullest insight into these criteria.

The narrative of Pluto's slave bears close analysis in this regard: in the first place, it is noteworthy that Euripides' plays are made to appeal to what we would call a "special interest group" of reprobates and criminals. This is obviously a joke by which the poet projects onto a putative audience some of the more lurid aspects of Euripidean plots, but even this absurdity implies that poets rely initially on groups of people who cathect to their work with a kind of zealotry based on shared critical values. It is noteworthy, for example, that Euripides' underworld fan-club are said to respond

specifically to a list of technical features, namely his “argumentative speeches and his twistings and weavings” (οἱ δ' ἀκροώμενοι || τῶν ἀντιλογιῶν καὶ λυγισμῶν καὶ στροφῶν). Of course, a disreputable crowd such as this would respond to such things because they would find them useful in pursuing their criminal activities, but the scene is of particular interest because it highlights the moment when a poet is imagined to be little known or understood (however delusionally here in the case of Euripides) except to a small, but vociferous group of devotees who can actually articulate a theoretical basis for to their affection.

This passage also shows, I suggest, that a fan’s devotion to a poet can be extremely powerful even without the assistance of texts, or even the ability to recite from his work. The love of this crowd for Euripides is irrational (ὑπερεμάνησαν), and their affection, while no doubt inflamed by the poet’s actual verses, takes on a life of its own that need not rely on an ability to know them in any detail. In fact, the passage seems to imply that this particular audience of reprobates was experiencing Euripides for more or less the first time.¹³ They know immediately what they like about the work—plots

¹³ Euripides is described here as having given “displays” of his poetry to his crowd of adulators in the underworld: ὅτε δὴ κατῆλθ' Εὐριπίδης. ἐπεδείκνυτο (771). The participle οἱ δ' ἀκροώμενοι, (“on hearing...” 774) describes their response, i.e., they went crazy as soon as they heard his sophisticatedly tinged verses, with their twists and turns. We should probably not require Aristophanes to be terribly explicit in a passage like this about when precisely this crowd actually became Euripidean fans, but it is worth noting that he does not describe them as a group who had already been fans when they were alive. The humor of the passage does seem to lie in the conceit that Euripidean poetry was so potentially pernicious that it could convert a gaggle of criminals instantaneously into fervent fans.

crafted in a style that reminds them of their own unsavory proclivities, and modes of discourse that can assist them in their criminal ways. This is all raucous parody and gentle social satire, but through it all we catch a glimpse, however distorted for comic purposes, of the role poetic connoisseurship must have played in establishing the reputation of tragic poets.

Another passage in Aristophanes where the process of literary reputation-making is alluded to with rather remarkable self-consciousness is the opening of *Thesmophoriazusae*. Here, as I would like to argue, Aristophanes associates paratragedy in particular with the question of a poet's popularity, as if to suggest (even if the claim was comically inflated) that tragic poets owe a debt of gratitude to comic poets for offering them another venue for the performance of their verses. The play opens with Euripides paying a visit, along with his Inlaw, to the tragic poet Agathon, to ask him if he would impersonate a woman at the Thesmophoria and so defend Euripides and his drama. The women of Athens, as the plot runs, were up in arms about Euripides' allegedly unflattering depictions of them in his plays, and were planning to kill him for it. Agathon, of course, was routinely depicted as effeminate, and jokes abounded about his sexual relations with men.¹⁴ So the conceit was simply that Agathon would be the logical person to infiltrate the women's assembly and speak in Euripides' defence. The play opens with Euripidean parody put into Euripides' own mouth; the initial dialogue with the Inlaw

¹⁴ See Sommerstein 1994: 159, ad v. 29.

features an amalgamation of Euripidean lines—some identifiable, others merely inferred¹⁵—which amount to a comic hodge-podge of sophistic near-nonsense:

- EY. οὕτω ταῦτα διεκρίθη τότε.
Αἰθήρ γὰρ ὅτε τὰ πρῶτα διεχωρίζετο
καὶ ζῶ' ἐν αὐτῷ ξυνετέκνου κινούμενα.
ὦ μὲν βλέπειν χρὴ πρῶτ' ἐμηχανήσατο
ὄφθαλμὸν ἀντίμιμον ἡλίου τροχῶ.
ἀκοῆ δὲ χοάνην ὦτα διετετρήνατο.
KH. διὰ τὴν χοάνην οὖν μήτ' ἀκούω μήθ' ὀρῶ:
νὴ τὸν Δί' ἥδομαί γε τουτὶ προσμαθῶν.
οἷόν γέ πού 'στιν αἰ σοφαὶ ξυνουσίαι.
EY. πόλλ' ἂν μάθοις τοιαῦτα παρ' ἐμοῦ.
KH. πῶς ἂν οὖν
πρὸς τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς τούτοισιν ἐξεύροίμ' ὅπως
ἔτι προσμάθοιμι χωλὸς εἶναι τὼ σκέλει: (13-24)

INLAW: How do you mean, distinct?

EURIPIDES: This is how they were separated originally. When in the beginning the Sky became a separate entity, and took part in begetting living, moving beings within itself, it first devised the eye “in imitation of the solar disc”, whereby they should see, and as a funnel for hearing made the perforations of the ears.

INLAW: So because of this funnel I'm not to hear or see? By Zeus, I'm delighted to have learnt that! What a wonderful thing it is, I must say, this intellectual conversation!

EURIPIDES: Oh, you could learn a lot more things like that from me.

INLAW: Then is there any chance, to add to these blessings, that you could discover a way for me to learn how to-be lame in both legs? [Tr. Sommerstein]

Two things are noteworthy here: first, the Inlaw is made to be basically clueless about Euripidean poetry—he cannot follow Euripides' line of thought, which is meant to replicate, comically, Euripides' actual verses; clearly the Inlaw is not a fan. Second, though, Euripides claims that he could educate him in all sorts of Euripidean niceties, if (or so he implies, for the subject is immediately dropped) he keeps listening to him repeat his own poetry within a comedy. When the Inlaw expresses his delight in Euripides' “intellectual conversation”(αἰ σοφαὶ ξυνουσίαι, 21), Euripides replies: “Oh, you could learn a lot more things like that from me” (πόλλ' ἂν μάθοις τοιαῦτα παρ' ἐμοῦ). This

¹⁵ See Sommerstein 1994: 158-59, and Prato 2001: 142-46.

seems, at any rate, to be a jocular acknowledgement that his poetry has an active, even propaedeutic, afterlife within comic drama.

Agathon too is made to quote his own poetry, or something that must have sounded very much like it, and one gets the distinct impression that we are witnessing the actual formation of a literary reputation as we listen to him. For Agathon, we must remember, had by this time only been performing for about five years (compared to Euripides' multi-decade professional career by 411), and was, to judge from this passage, comparatively unknown. Indeed, one of the reasons Euripides calls on him to begin with, aside from his effeminacy, was because Agathon would be able to operate incognito, whereas everyone would recognize Euripides. The scene beginning at line 29 plays this up in typically comic fashion:

EY. ἐνταῦθ' Ἀγάθων ὁ κλεινὸς οἰκῶν τυγχάνει
ὁ τραγωδοποιός.
KH. ποῖος οὗτος Ἀγάθων: 30
ἔστιν τις Ἀγάθων—
μῶν ὁ μέλας, ὁ καρτερός:
EY. οὐκ, ἀλλ' ἕτερός τις.
KH. οὐχ ἑώρακα πώποτε.
μῶν ὁ δασυπύγων:
EY. οὐχ ἑώρακας πώποτε:
KH. μὰ τὸν Δί' οὐπω γ' ὥστε κάμ' εἰδέναι.
EY. καὶ μὴν βεβίηκας σύ γ', ἀλλ' οὐκ οἶσθ' ἴσως. 35
ἀλλ' ἐκποδῶν πτήξωμεν, ὡς ἐξέρχεται
θεράπων τις αὐτοῦ πῦρ ἔχων καὶ μυρρίνας,
προθυσόμενος, ἔοικε, τῆς ποήσεως.
ΘΕΡΑΠΩΝ
εὐφημος πᾶς ἔστω λαός,
στόμα συγκλήσας· ἐπιδημεῖ γὰρ 40
θίασος Μουσῶν ἔνδον μελάθρων
τῶν δεσποσύνων μελοποιῶν.
ἔχέτω δὲ πνοᾶς νήνεμος αἰθήρ,
κύμα δὲ πόντου μὴ κελαδεῖτω

EURIPIDES: This is there the famous Agathon has his residence, the tragic poet.

INLAW: What Agathon is that?

EURIPIDES [*declaiming*]: There is one Agathon

INLAW: You don't mean the bronzed, muscular one?

EURIPIDES: No, a different one; haven't you ever seen him?

INLAW: Not the one with the bushy beard?

EURIPIDES: You *haven't* ever seen him!

INLAW: I certainly haven't – at least not that I know of.

EURIPIDES: And yet you've fucked him—but perhaps you're not aware of the fact! [*The door opens*] Let's crouch down out of the way, because a servant of his is coming out with fire and a myrtle wreath—to make an offering. I suppose, for his master's poetry.

SERVANT: Let all the people close their lips and speak fair; for the holy band of Muses is residing and composing song within my master's halls! Let windless heaven restrain its blasts, let the blue waves of the sea make no noise

Euripides opens by stating that they have arrived at the house of the “famous” Agathon (Ἀγάθων ὁ κλεινός). It is probably true enough that he was, as Sommerstein puts it, the best known of a “younger generation” of poets.¹⁶ We may remember that the setting of Plato's *Symposium* was a party in Agathon's honor after his first victory at the Lenaea in 416. But it is unclear how well his actual work would be known, despite the likelihood that he was developing a following of fans. That is, the processes of repeatability, of contexts in which his poetry could be reproduced verbatim or stylistically replicated were clearly still inchoate. This no doubt explains the joke that follows. After Euripides refers to the “famous” Agathon, his Inlaw again appears clueless: “Which Agathon are you referring to?” (ποῖος οὗτος Ἀγάθων:). To this Euripides replies: “There is a *certain* Agathon...” (ἔστιν τις Ἀγάθων—). This may all actually be mere playfulness, and it could well be that no one at the time could *really* be unaware that “the famous Agathon” referred to Agathon the poet. But the joke can really only work if it is at least imaginable that there was a time when Agathon might have plausibly be confused with others of the same name.¹⁷

¹⁶ Sommerstein 1994: 159, ad v. 29; Austin and Olson 2004, 61 ad loc.

¹⁷ One might argue, I suppose, that the scene is funny because Agathon was already so universally famous that only a totally clueless person, such as the kinsman would wonder who the famous Agathon

There follows a scene in which Agathon's servant appears, and prepares us for the entrance of his master, by offering a pastiche of Agathonian verse, clearly in parody of Agathon's actual verse. The servant here speaks as a fan, both imitating his master's style and explaining it in literary-critical terms:

ΘΕ. πτηνῶν τε γένη κατακοιμάσθω.
θηρῶν τ' ἀγρίων πόδες ὑλοδρόμων
μὴ λυέσθων· —
ΚΗ. βομβαλοβομβάξ.
ΘΕ. μέλλει γὰρ ὁ καλλιεπῆς Ἀγάθων
πρόμος ἡμέτερος—
ΚΗ. μῶν βινεῖσθαι: 50
ΘΕ. τίς ὁ φωνήσας:
ΚΗ. νήνεμος αἰθήρ.
ΘΕ. δρυόχους τιθέναι δράματος ἀρχάς.
κάμπτει δὲ νέας ἀψίδας ἐπῶν.
τὰ δὲ τορνεύει. τὰ δὲ κολλομελεῖ,
καὶ γνωμοτυπεῖ κἀντονομάζει 55
καὶ κηροχυτεῖ καὶ γογγύλλει
καὶ χοανεύει—
ΚΗ. καὶ λαικάζει.

SERVANT: Let the tribes of birds be lulled to sleep, let the feet of the beasts that range the woods be bound fast in stillness—

INLAW: Boom didi boom di boom!

SERVANT: For Agathon of the lovely language, our suzerain, is about—

INLAW [*louder*]: Not about to be fucked, is he?

SERVANT: Who is it that spoke?

INLAW: Windless heaven.

SERVANT: —to lay the stocks on which to commence a play. He is bending new verbal timbers into shape, now gluing songs together, now fashioning them on the lathe, and coining ideas and creating metaphors and melting wax and rounding out and casting in a mould—

INLAW: And sucking cocks. [Tr. Sommerstein]

The language may come across as mannered, and the description of his poetics a little overblown (cf., for example, 53-57), but one can certainly get some real sense of what his

was; but Euripides' response gives no indication that his Kinsman's reaction was terribly out of line (no quip such as "you complete fool! How could you possibly not know that the the famous Agathon must refer to the poet?"). Rather he explains matter-of-factly and patiently that he is referring to an Agathon different from the one the Kinsman mentions.

poetry must have been like. Euripidean dramaturgy is likewise reenacted self-consciously later on in the same scene, when Euripides reveals his plan to the Inlaw of having Agathon dress up as a woman (88-92). The Inlaw loves his plan, saying (93-4), “An elegant idea, that, and very much in your style! When it comes to scheming, we absolutely take the cake!” (τὸ πρᾶγμα κομψὸν καὶ σφόδρ’ ἐκ τοῦ τρόπου ἢ τοῦ γὰρ τεχνάζειν ἡμέτερος ὁ πυραμοῦς). Once again, comedy reenacts tragedy and so abets the process by which tragic poets cultivate and maintain their stature.

Since Agathon was a poet whose reputation was still in the process of consolidation, it would make sense that Aristophanes spend so much time parodying his poetry. Agathon is brought on in the middle of composing a choral song of some sort, and the show-piece is as much Aristophanes’ as it is Agathon’s. But it is interesting that Aristophanes draws attention to Agathon’s unstable notoriety: “Quiet now,” he says, “he’s getting ready to sing a lyric” (σίγα· μελωδεῖν γὰρ παρασκευάζεται. 99). The Inlaw responds: “What *is* that tune he’s warbling his way through? “Anthill Passages” or what?” (μύρμηκος ἀτραπούς. ἢ τί διαμινυρίζεται. 100). It is clear enough that “anthill passages” refers to the twists and turns that characterized Agathon’s melodic style, which seemed to share affinities with dithyrambic poetry.¹⁸ But is the Inlaw’s cluelessness mere disingenuousness for comic purposes, or does he represent a segment of the Athenian audience who would likewise be relatively unfamiliar with this style? If the latter, the ensuing parody certainly goes far in giving the audience a sense of what Agathon’s poetry

¹⁸ Sommerstein 1994: 164, ad loc.; further discussion and bibliography in Prato 2001: 166-68.

might have been like, for there follows an extended performance by Agathon in which he assumes the roles of chorus and respondent. The diction is high-flown, and doubtless accompanied by an appropriately outré melodic line.¹⁹ The Inlaw's response once again indicates that he is still in the process of figuring out who Agathon really was and what his poetry was like: "...how delightful that song was! How feminacious, how fully tongued, how frenchkissy!" (ὡς ἦδὺ τὸ μέλος. ὦ πότνια Γενετυλλίδες. ἢ καὶ θηλυδριῶδες καὶ κατεγλωττισμένον...). He then adopts an explicitly Aeschylean mode in asking him further questions about his identity:

καὶ σ'. ὦ νεανίσκ'. εἴ τις εἶ. κατ' Αἰσχύλον
ἐκ τῆς Λυκουργείας ἐρέσθαι βούλομαι. 135
ποδαπὸς ὁ γύννις: τίς πάτρα: τίς ἢ στολή:
τίς ἢ τάραξις τοῦ βίου: τί βάρβιτος
λαλεῖ κροκωτῶ: Τί δὲ δορὰ κεκρυφάλῳ:
τί λήκυθος καὶ στρόφιον: ὡς οὐ ξύμφορα.
τίς δαὶ κατόπτρου καὶ ξίφους κοινωνία: 140
σύ τ' αὐτός. ὦ παῖ. πότερον ὡς ἀνὴρ τρέφει:
καὶ ποῦ πέος: ποῦ χλαῖνα: ποῦ Λακωνικαί:
ἀλλ' ὡς γυνὴ δῆτ': εἶτα ποῦ τὰ τιτθία:
τί φῆς: τί σιγᾶς: ἀλλὰ δῆτ' ἐκ τοῦ μέλους
ζητῶ σ'. ἐπειδὴ γ' αὐτὸς οὐ βούλει φράσαι: 145

And now, young sir, I want to ask you in the style of Aeschylus, in words from the Lycurgus plays, what manner of woman you are. "Whence comes this epicene? What is its country, what its garb?" What confusion of lifestyles is this? What has a bass to say to a saffron gown? Or a lyre to a hairnet? What's an oil-flask doing with a breast-band? How incongruous! And what partnership can there be between a mirror and a sword? And what about yourself, young 'un? Have you been reared as a man? Then where's your prick? Where's your cloak? Where are your Laconian shoes? Or as a woman, was it? Then where are your tits? What's your answer? Why aren't you saying anything? Or shall I find you out by your song, seeing that you don't want to tell me yourself? [Tr. Sommerstein]

Two poetic styles, in other words, interact with each other here. The classicized Aeschylean mode will have been familiar to the audience, and its incongruous application

¹⁹ There is even a stage direction in the R ms at line 129, *oluluzei*, indicating that his song was to end in a ritual wail. On such "intrusive" stage-directions, see Austin and Olson 2004, 97 ad loc.; also 85 ad v. 99.

to questions of Agathon’s sexual behavior would have surely raised a smile. Agathon’s style, however, was less familiar, hardly yet “classicized” (if it ever was, in fact), and it is significant that the Inlaw seeks biographical information from Agathon himself. His question, “shall I find you out by your song” seems to imply that audiences would routinely rely on the parodies of tragedy within comedy for at least some measure of familiarity with tragic poets. Indeed, the main point that Agathon then proceeds to make, that poets must essentially *become* whatever it is they write about, seems to acknowledge just how powerful a force paratragedy might be in establishing (or suppressing) a poet’s reputation:²⁰

	διὰ τοῦτ' ἄρ' αὐτοῦ καὶ κάλ' ἦν τὰ δράματα. ὅμοια γὰρ ποεῖν ἀνάγκη τῇ φύσει.	
KH.	ταῦτ' ἄρ' ὁ Φιλοκλέης αἰσχροῶς ὦν αἰσχροῶς ποεῖ. ὁ δὲ Ξενοκλέης ὦν κακὸς κακῶς ποεῖ.	
	ὁ δ' αὖ Θεόγνης ψυχρὸς ὦν ψυχρῶς ποεῖ.	170
ΑΓ.	ἅπασ' ἀνάγκη. ταῦτα γάρ τοι γνοῦς ἐγὼ ἐμαυτὸν ἐθεράπευσα.	
KH.	πῶς. πρὸς τῶν θεῶν:	
EY.	παῦσαι βαύζων· καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ τοιοῦτος ἦν ὦν τηλικούτος. ἠνίκ' ἤρχόμην ποιεῖν	

AGATHON: [*here speaking about the tragedian Phrynichus*] ...he was an attractive man and he also wore attractive clothes, and *that's* why his plays were attractive too. One just can't help creating work that reflects one's own nature.

INLAW: Ah, that's why Philocles who's ugly writes ugly plays, and Xenocles who's a wretch writes wretched ones, and Theognis too, being a cold character, writes frigid ones.

AGATHON: It's absolutely inevitable, and it's because I recognized that fact that I gave myself this treatment.

INLAW [*misunderstanding him*]: What treatment was it, in heaven's name?

EURIPIDES [*to Inlaw*]: Stop yapping now. I was like that too at his age. When I was just beginning to compose.

One has the sense, in fact, that Agathon’s concern for how he appears as a function of his poetry arises specifically because he is relatively inexperienced. This, at any rate, seems

²⁰ A much discussed passage (146-70), especially line 156, where Aristophanes has Agathon use the term *mimesis* to describe a poet’s technique of representing in their work qualities they do not already possess; see Muecke 1982, Stohn 1993, Prato 2001: 182-83, and Austin and Olson 2004, 107-14.

to be the implication of Euripides' comment to the Inlaw at 173-4, that he "was like that, too, at his age, when I was just beginning to compose." He means, of course, that he too attended to his good looks, as Agathon does now, and we can only assume that he did this for the same reasons as Agathon, namely, because he was concerned that his poetry would be seen as a reflection of his character both in its original performance, and in the kind of comic afterlife it had in venues such as the performance of *Thesmophoriazusae*.

For Euripides now, it is too late to worry about his reputation; everyone recognizes him and conceptualizes him in a certain way, which is why he originally sought Agathon's help. Euripides' fame is more or less universal—he has become an Athenian classic of sorts—but his reputation has been compromised by what he regards as a gross misunderstanding of his intentions.²¹ And where has he acquired this reputation

²¹ Exactly what Euripides' reputation was among the Athenians has always been a matter of some controversy. He won proportionately fewer victories than Sophocles in his lifetime, and for one reason or another voluntarily left Athens for Macedonia towards the end of his life. And then, of course, there is the question of how to assess Aristophanes' recurrent mockery of Euripides. It strikes me as perfectly possible that a figure who has not won first prize often could still have been very popular. There's a perennially unstable relationship at work here between 'official critical notice' (in this case, the judges at Athenian dramatic festivals) and popular opinion. We might think of the enormous popularity of certain pop stars in our own era who are continually attacked by 'the critics'; or the reverse-- the critics' darlings who never seem to find a large popular following. And then there are works that are just risqué enough to prevent them from official critical acclaim, even though people love them. I suspect Euripides might have fallen into a category such as this. For a sober and thorough examination of the evidence for Euripides' reputation among his contemporaries, see Stevens 1956, who concludes (94) that Euripides "was chiefly famous as being, after Sophocles, the most distinguished dramatist of his day, unorthodox sometimes and

as a misogynist? Perhaps his plays were misunderstood from their first performances on the tragic stage, but it is also the case that *Thesmophoriazusae* itself fosters a parodic version of the serious Euripides, and it is hard to deny that comedy itself remains implicated in his complaints about how he is perceived. No amount of “treatments” of the sort Agathon seeks at this point in his career, in other words, will be able to alter the fixed reputation that he has already acquired from years of producing his own tragedies and watching the comic poets (or at least Aristophanes) create his own variations of them.

I conclude by discussing another easily overlooked passage in *Frogs* which, as I see it, shows Aristophanes having great fun with contemporary notions of classicism and fan-dom. At the beginning of the agon proper between the two tragedians, we find Aeschylus complaining to Dionysus in lines 866-70 as follows:

Al. ἐβουλόμην μὲν οὐκ ἐρίζειν ἐνθάδε·
οὐκ ἐξ ἴσου γὰρ ἐστὶν ἀγῶν νῶν.
Δι. τί δαί:
Al. ὅτι ἡ πόησις οὐχὶ συντέθνηκέ μοι.
τούτῳ δὲ συντέθνηκεν. ὥσθ' ἔξει λέγειν.
ὅμως δ' ἐπειδὴ σοὶ δοκεῖ. δρᾶν ταῦτα χρή. (866-870)

AESCHYLUS: I wasn't wanting to compete here, because we aren't fighting on level terms.

DIONYSUS: Why not, pray?

AESCHYLUS: Because my poetry hasn't died with me, whereas his *has*, so he'll have it here to recite. All the same, if that's what you want, that's what we must do.

disconcerting, one who roused disapproval in some quarters and was fair game for Aristophanes and his colleagues, but a dramatist whose plays everyone wanted to see...”

The comic inversions and paradoxes here are dizzying: Aeschylus find it annoyingly ironic that, precisely because he is so well regarded in contemporary Athens, he will not be able to compete on an equal footing with Euripides, because his poetry will remain on earth, and so will not be available to him for ready quotation. Aeschylus is really complaining here about one of the utterly comic side-effects of classicizing: that earthly immortality comes at the expense of immortality in the underworld—or something like that, since the whole scene obviously defies logic! (one might think, for example, that the fact that he already holds the chair of tragedy in Hades would be proof enough that his fame is assured there too—but it is perhaps best not to ask such questions of such a text!). The point is that Aeschylus is made here to contrast his own status as an Athenian “classic” with that of a poet whose reputation is so ephemeral that his verses will die with his body and so (as he implies) leave no lasting impression on earth—no hope, that is, of becoming a classic.

There may also, in fact, be an allusion here to Euripides’ famous bookishness, projecting onto him the assumption that he would have *texts* with him from which to recite (*legein*) his plays, while Aeschylus relied on some sort of tradition of recitation from memory; but what interests me here in particular is the way in which comedy itself once again becomes implicated in the process of reputation-making. The paradoxes do not end with Aeschylus’ remarks, for there is also the glaring contradiction of the comic playwright, Aristophanes himself, memorializing *through parody* in the here-and-now, performative time of *Frogs* a poet whose verses were said to have perished with him at his own actual death. This passage suggests to me, therefore, that the paratragedy for

which Aristophanes was so famous was one of the crucial mechanisms in Athenian culture for maintaining an active forum for public critical debate about the merits of its dramatic poets. As such, it complemented other forms of dissemination and iteration, such as symposiastic or pedagogical recitation, or the occasional re-performance of a play; but it was different from, and more effective in some ways than, those venues. For whereas, as I noted before, these tended to reproduce works that had already achieved some measure of classic status, comedy could interact with tragedy regardless of what its status might have been at a given time. Even if Aristophanes was more interested in Euripides or Aeschylus than he was in, say, Theognis or Xenocles, this interest was not a function, I would argue, of their status as “classics” or “non-classics.” He needed to draw on what would resonate with his audiences, and for this purpose, any number of tragic poets—good and bad—were fair game.

Moreover, because comedy is itself a *dramatic* form, produced in the same theater and festival context as tragedy, when it parodies tragedy it serves as a powerful mnemonic for the audience that the original performances of tragedies participated in an agon in which the audience (and more formally, the judges) were invited to compare several poets with each other. Symposiastic recitations may well have been competitive to some degree, but they presented verses wrested from their original context, as showpieces for the display of an individual’s skill. Comedy, by contrast, would be able to foster in the minds of its audience a consciousness that the tragedy it parodies was originally competing with other *tragedians*, not simply other recitations, thus assisting the processes by which literary partisanships develop and fans are formed. Thus

paratragedy gives the lie to the complaint Aristophanes puts into the mouth of Aeschylus, that the poetry of his rival Euripides cannot survive his death: for the very passage itself, and indeed the entire play, by virtue of its continual engagement with each poet, keeps very much alive the presence of each poet, and ultimately the kind of culture of literary debate in which their own words—whether exact or distorted—are more likely to be preserved. Aristophanes was, in a very real sense, the quintessential fan of tragedy, and paratragedy the means by which he did what all fans seek to do: to ensure that the objects of their devotion always retain their almost talismanic status and never fade from memory.

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