τοῖς παθήμασιν

The subordination of tragedy to comedy in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousai* and *Frogs*

The relationship between comedy and tragedy is a complex one, but tragic elements appear frequently on the comic stage.[1] This close relationship between comedy and tragedy is reflected by the existence of the words παρατραγῳδέω[2] and εὐριπιδαριστοφανίζειν.[3] When comedy appropriates tragic material, it does so, unsurprisingly, in a subversive manner.[4] However, we may go further and say that comedy often subsumes its tragic subject-matter into a comic code-model. It does not simply incorporate tragedy as the subject of jokes; rather, it does so in such a way that the tragic elements are subordinated to the comic in various ways. This approach to tragedy is present in the extended episodes of Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousai* and *Frogs* which explicitly parody, but it is also established in the prologue of each play. By subordinating tragedy to itself in this way, comedy polemically expresses both its antagonism and its superiority to the more stately art form.

A key moment which helps to establish our understanding of *Thesmophoriazousai's* attitude to tragedy comes somewhat after Agathon's extensive lyric passage. While Euripides tries to persuade Agathon to sneak into the Thesmophoria on his behalf, Agathon responds with a gnomic maxim which is at least superficially suited in tone to tragedy:

> τὰς συμφορὰς γὰρ οὐχὶ τοῖς τεχνάσμασιν
> φέρειν δίκαιον, ἀλλὰ τοῖς παθήμασιν. (198-9)

This, however, is immediately subverted by Mnesilochus to make a crude, and quintessentially comic, sex joke. The joke also plays on a double meaning, that of τοῖς παθήμασιν, a favoured type of humour in Aristophanes.[5] In this way, Mnesilochus subordinates Agathon's tragic statement to a comic paradigm. This subversion, though, becomes even more pointed if we see a metatextual dimension to Agathon's pronouncement.

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[1] Dover (1972), 73; Zeitlin (1981), 172; Silk (2000), 49; Miles (2009), 3.
[2] First attested in Strattis *Phoinissai*, fr. 50; see Miles (2009), 198-9 and especially 198 n. 237.
[3] Attested in Kratinos fr. 342; see Miles (2009), 4, 31-3.
[4] Dover (1972), 73. Cf. also Nietzsche's rather extreme formulation of the relationship between Aristophanes and Euripides (Nietzsche (1872), 17): 'Der sicher zugreifende Instinct des Aristophanes hat gewiss das Rechte erfasst, wenn er Sokrates selbst, die Tragödie des Euripides und die Musik der neueren Dithyrambiker in dem gleichen Gefühle des Hasses zusammenfasste und in allen drei Phänomenen die Merkmale einer degenerirten Cultur witterte.'
[5] Dover (1972), 63-5.

The play has been seen as at least partly a response to Euripides' recent escape-tragedies,[6] which were a substantial departure from the classical tragic model (and Mnesilochus later emphasises that he is imitating the 'new' (καινήν) Helen,[7] perhaps referring once again to the play's innovation). Thus Agathon's statement applies not only to Euripides' personal situation, but also to his tragedies – as we might perhaps expect, given that the trouble with the women was caused by his depictions of them on the stage.[8] Agathon advises Euripides to leave his innovative 'cunning ruses' (τοῖς τεχνάσμασιν) and return to the passive sufferings (τοῖς παθήμασιν) which form the traditional model of tragedy. This statement, already problematized though its presentation in the mouth of Agathon, a sexually deviant character, is immediately subverted into a sex joke. Aristophanes presents Euripides with a morally loaded choice (οὐχὶ...δίκαιον) between two tragic alternatives. Before Euripides can choose, though, the preferred option is replaced by the comic one embodied in Mnesilochus' pun, strongly implying the superiority of comedy.

This suggestion is affirmed by the events in the second half of the play, where this very scenario plays out on stage – Mnesilochus and Euripides try various ruses to no avail, and it is only when Euripides brings on the slave-girl, who stands for the crudely sexual solution hinted at by Mnesilochus' joke in the prologue, that the latter is able to make good his escape. The more traditional tragic code which Agathon presents as preferable to such ruses is of course no use to Mnesilochus – submitting himself to his sufferings is not an option for him. This point is closely tied to a key difference between comedy and tragedy, the practical application which comedy claimed for the solutions it presented on stage, and another way in which the tragic is presented as inferior to the comic in *Thesmophoriazousai* (and also in *Frogs*).

When Agathon makes his excuse to avoid doing as Euripides asks, Mnesilochus, true to form, interprets it in an explicitly sexual way:

Αγ. δοκῶν γυναικῶν ἔργα νυκτερήσια
κλέπτειν ὑφαρπάζειν τε θήλειαν Κύπριν.
Μν. ἰδού γε κλέπτειν· νὴ Δία, βινεῖσθαι μὲν οὖν.
ἀτὰρ ἡ πρόφασίς γε νὴ Δί' εἰκότως ἔχει. (204-7)

[6] Taafe (1993), 98; Dutta (2007), 71.
[7] Ar. *Thesmo.* 850.
[8] Henderson (2000), 447-8.

The excuse which Agathon makes is couched somewhat elevated, tragic diction, which is particularly evident in the metonymic use of the goddess Cypris at line 205. The metre of Agathon's couplet is also suitable for tragedy. While this in itself is not especially unusual in comedy, it follows two lines which show freer metre typical of comic iambic trimeters (violation of Porson's Law in 202, resolutions in the first foot of 203), while Mnesilochus' lines in response also include resolutions, particularly marked in the first foot of 207, thereby highlighting the strictly tragic metre of Agathon's couplet. The content of Agathon's excuse, though, is sexual, and therefore comic, so Mnesilochus has no choice but to accept it, although he rephrases it to bring it the explicitness which all but defines Old Comedy.[9] Thus Mnesilochus once again subverts the (quasi-)tragic and thereby affirms the superiority of comedy to tragedy. Euripides seems to accept this without further argument, and expresses his dismay,[10] but Mnesilochus has a solution – a comic one, which involves some presumably crude stage business as he is depilated by Euripides. It is worth noting, too, that Mnesilochus submits quasi-sexually to Euripides here, thereby overcoming events τοῖς παθήμασιν – in his own crudely comic interpretation of those words. As we have seen Aristophanes establishes in the prologue a pattern in which tragedy is subverted by and subordinated to comedy, a pattern which will have an important impact on any audience's understanding of the tragicomedy in the second half of the play.

We may read Critylla's interruptions of Mnesilochus and Euripides' tragic scenes in a similar fashion. As well as failing to understand the tragic paradigm in which Mnesilochus and Euripides are operating, she also subverts it by bringing it back to the comic situation which frames it. Her interruptions are comic in their lack of understanding, and they also frequently refer to living Athenians (Phrynondas 861, Proteas 876, 883, Critylla 897), which was only possible in comedy.[11] Thus Critylla constantly subverts the tragic by interrupting with comic elements. In his influential study of tragedy and comedy, Oliver Taplin identified each genre's stance towards interruption as a key difference between them.[12] Comedy welcomes interruption, at least in some forms (such as laughter), whereas to tragedy interruption, which would break the pathos, is anathema. Thus all of these interruptions are at

[9] Dover (1972), 39-40.
[10] The word he uses, τρισκακοδαίμων, is a Liebslingswort of Aristophanes, but never occurs in tragedy, suggesting that Euripides has partially submitted to the comic paradigm. On the other hand, its use at Aesch. 1.59 indicates that it could potentially have genuine emotional effect, in which case we might see Euripides as lamenting in a serious, quasi-tragic manner here, only for Mnesilochus to subvert that once again to a comic paradigm.
[11] Taplin (1986), 166-7; the feature was common enough to acquire its own technical term, ὀνομαστὶ κομῴδειν.
[12] Taplin (1986), 173.

least potentially subversive to the tragic paradigm on this additional level. The interruptions of Echo, like those of Critylla, break the tragic mould – and one which she herself sets up, at that. Her first lines establish a tragic paradigm which Mnesilochus is supposed to maintain, but then she breaks it almost immediately, reminding Mnesilochus of the festival setting:

ἥπερ πέρυσιν ἐν τῷδε ταὐτῷ χωρίῳ
Εὐριπίδῃ καὐτὴ ξυνηγωνιζόμην. (1060-61)

This comic touch is also used by Dionysus in *Frogs* ('πλεῖν ἢ ᾽νίαυτῷ πρεσβύτερος ἀπέρχομαι', 18). Echo then begins to play her tragic role, but almost immediately subverts it, forcing Mnesilochus to abandon the tragic paradigm and even acknowledge the theatricality of the situation ('ὦγαθ', ἔασόν με μονῳδῆσαι', 1077-8), another exclusively comic action. This paves the way for the humorous scene with the Scythian archer, which plays on language and dialect, another topos of humour in Old Comedy.[13] Thus we may read these scenes of interruption as a further subordination of tragedy to comedy in the play.

The *Frogs* interacts with comedy in a similar way. One of the most crucial moments for understanding the genre relationships in the play comes in the prologue, when Dionysus complains that no remaining poet was γόνιμος.[14] When Herakles asks for clarification, Dionysus responds with three purportedly Euripidean examples which, one must assume, meet this criterion as far as Dionysus was concerned. Each of these three examples seems to lack the dignity proper to tragedy. The first, αἰθέρα Διὸς δωμάτιον, deliberately misquotes Euripides' *Melanippe*. The diminutive δωμάτιον replaces the poetic οἴκησιν of the original, comically undercutting its tragic effect.[15] Once again, Dionysus, the representative of tragedy, is producing comedy despite himself; this time, though, he is doing this by subverting material drawn from tragedy. The second example almost certainly turned on the stylistic incongruity of the phrase Χρόνου πόδα,[16] although Dionysus is not misquoting here. The third example is another allusion to the fateful line 612 of Euripides *Hippolytos*. Here Dionysus' attempted quote is particularly 'clumsy'[17], with one trimeter turned into not-quite-two. The meter of the Dionysus' version is also markedly comic as opposed to tragic, showing a great degree of freedom in the trimeters. Dionysus' version also uses markedly prosaic words such

[13] Colvin (1999), 302; this is not exclusive to Aristophanes, cf. e.g. Strattis *Phoinissai* fr. 49.
[14] Ar. *Ra*. 96ff.
[15] Stanford (1962), 80; Habash (2002), 11.
[16] Stanford (1962), 80.
[17] Dutta (2007), 221.

as ἰδίᾳ[18] in what is supposed to be a tragic context. Thus all of the Dionysus' presentation of these examples is deeply flawed when considered as tragedy.

Why, though, does Dionysus choose to quote this line of Hippolytus in particular? I would argue that, as with the escape tragedies in *Thesmophoriazousai*, this line is to be an example of Euripidean innovation in tragedy. Far from being a ῥῆμα γενναῖον (97),[19] as Dionysus initially claims, this phrase is audacious (παρακεκινδυνευμένον, 99). Aristophanes attacks this innovation both here and at line 1471, where he uses Euripides' own line against him. The two phrases misquoted at 100-2 are also appropriated at *Thesmophoriazousai* 272ff. Euripides offers an oath by αἰθέρ', οἴκησιν Δίος, which Mnesilochus rejects as meaningless. In doing so, he mentions an Athenian by name, which tragedy could not do, but comedy could, thereby subordinating the tragic to the comic once again. He accepts Euripides' second oath, but warns him to keep the oath by inverting Euripides' own *Hippolytus* 612, an even more controversial line. Thus, within the space of five lines, Mnesilochus has rejected Euripidean innovation in favour of tradition, and tragedy in favour of comedy – not once, but twice.

The *agon* of the *Frogs* is also a crucial example of the subordination of tragedy to comedy. At the most fundamental level, Aeschylus and Euripides are present onstage in a comedy presenting their tragedy for judgement, a framing which would tend to suggest this generic power relationship.[20] This is also evoked in more specific ways throughout the *agon*. In particular, each poet attacks the other with parody – a key feature of comedy[21] – and interruption, which was vital to comedy but anathema to tragedy.[22] This subordination of tragedy to comedy is also evoked through the reification of poetry, which begins even before the beginning of the scene, when Xanthias (who in Heiden's analysis stands for comedy in the play[23]) discusses the coming contest with another slave. The competition is presented in terms of physical weights and measures[24] typical of comic reification of abstract concepts.[25] This reification continues into the *agon* itself, for example Euripides' description of poetry's diet:

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[18] Stanford (1962), 81.
[19] In the strict sense of 'true to one's heritage', by which I understand in this context 'literary heritage'; neither Barrett's 'resounding' nor Dutta's 'memorable' approaches the sense here.
[20] Heiden (1991), 96.
[21] Dover (1972), 72ff.
[22] Taplin (1986), 173.
[23] Eg Heiden (1991), 98.
[24] Frogs, 797-801.
[25] Cf. Dover (1972), 46-8 (on personification).

Ευ. ἀλλ᾽ ὡς παρέλαβον τὴν τέχνην παρὰ σοῦ τὸ πρῶτον εὐθύς
οἰδοῦσαν ὑπὸ κομπασμάτων καὶ ῥημάτων ἐπαχθῶν,
ἴσχανα μὲν πρώτιστον αὐτὴν καὶ τὸ βάρος ἀφεῖλον
ἐπυλλίους καὶ περιπάτοις καὶ τευτλίοισι λευκοῖς,
χυλὸν διδοὺς στωμυλμάτων, ἀπὸ βιβλίων ἀπηθῶν·
εἶτ᾽ ἀνέτρεφον μονῳδίαις.

Δι. Κηφισοφῶντα μειγνύς. (939-44)

This subordination of tragic to comic is heighted by Dionysus' sly rejoinder, which undermines the seriousness of Euripides' speech, refers to a living Athenian (impossible in tragedy), and also alludes to sexual irregularity.[26] This sort of interruption did not occur in tragedies, except for those 'that were not liked, and were not succeeding'.[27] The reification continues after this scene and is at its strongest, both at a verbal and theatrical level, in the scene of the weighing of the lines. However, it is the ending of the debate where the subordination of tragic to comic surfaces most strongly. Despite the extensive *agon*, Dionysus is unable to make a decision between Aeschylus and Euripides on the basis of their tragic writings, and decides to use 'civic advice [the domain of comedy but not of tragedy] as its decisive criterion.'[28] Thus, at the end of a play about tragedy, it is a comic question which determines which tragedian will be resurrected. This is surely the ultimate subordination of tragedy to comedy.

Both *Thesmophoriazousai* and *Frogs*, then, go out of their way to set up the tragic as an element subordinated, often quasi-explicitly, to the comic. This polemical approach to tragedy is emphasised in a range of ways, encompassing both verbal humour and, perhaps to a lesser extent, comic business. Ultimately, the goal of comedy's engagement with and presentation of tragedy turns on its self-constructed rivalry with the tragic stage, however friendly this rivalry may have been in reality. By consistently subverting tragedy through the introduction of comic elements, comedy asserts its own superiority as a literary genre and as a civic institution.

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[26] Dutta (2007), 227. I follow von Velsen, Stanford (1962), and Barrett (1964) against Wilson's OCT in the attribution of this to Dionysus, which seems to me certain.
[27] Taplin (1986), 173.
[28] Heiden (1991), 105.

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