

Topical and Philosophical Comedy in Epicharmus

Amid the philosophical forgeries and fragments (of mostly mythological content) attributed to the Sicilian comic poet Epicharmus, one set of fragments and testimonia offers evidence for more immediate, topical comedy than has been recognized so far.

A short dialogue features two characters talking about behavior at symposia, with one character articulating how drunkenness leads to violent behavior and thence to legal trouble and finally to punishment (fr. 146 PCG = Olson A15). This fragment expresses, in a compressed form, causality between unrestrained symposiastic behavior and punishment for that behavior meted out by established legal institutions (in contrast, for example, to punishment resulting from judgment by a ruler). Combined with indirect testimony, this fragment makes a case that Epicharmus devoted a substantial portion of a comedy to dramatizing philosophical, civic and political tensions.

The sententious paradigm in this fragment, declared, for all we can tell, entirely in a sympotic context, has a more elaborate parallel. A fragmentary commentary on Plato's *Theaetetus* on papyrus and a comment from Plutarch (both quoted for fr. 136 PCG) record that Epicharmus addressed the philosophical debate of flux and identity in one of his comedies. The philosophical issue is about αὐξησις "growth," and whether change over time makes an individual a being distinct from who they were at an earlier time. The unknown commentator summarizes Epicharmus' dramatization this way: one man invites another to a symposium; when the guest refuses to pay his share, he argues that he was no longer the same man who accepted the invitation. The host in turn beats the guest, and, when indicted for battery, argues that he was no longer the man who did the beating. Such a sequence, even if only reported, would require a long enough speech to explain who the two men are, relate the invitation, subsequent refusal, the violence and dialogue after the violence. Frr. 146-47, moreover, indicate that Epicharmus did stage sympotic scenes and dialogue therein (cf. frr. 144, 161, 163, 175, 184 and 219). A fully staged version of the events would have the meal, potentially the invitation earlier in the play, certainly the slapstick, and potentially also a separate subsequent scene in a court playing out the indictment. Plutarch's reference to the plot is briefer but might add the additional element of someone refusing to pay back a debt by the same reasoning (he is no longer the same individual who incurred the debt).

The Epicharmic forgery preserved in Diogenes Laertius (3.11) on the same topic (= fr. 276 PCG) strips away the sympotic, financial and forensic contexts. Thus we have an example of how the forger makes the same point in compressed dialogue form. This gives an example of the mechanism scholars have suspected, that the later forgeries were inspired by some statements in Epicharmus' authentic comedies, which gave rise to his reputation as a philosopher. The forgery clarifies the difference between the forged philosophical dialogues and Epicharmus' method as a playwright. In addition, the testimonia establish that there was tradition, precedent, and potential for a comic poet to stage satire of communal and even political institutions through staging a sympotic situation (cf. Aristophanes' *Wasps* with both satire of the court system and a sympotic scene and Kerkhof 2001 171-73). Understanding this tradition and mechanism can be further valuable for assessing and analyzing fragments of later comedies, many of which, because they are preserved through Atheneaus, have a sympotic context.