

### The Afterlife of *Acharnians*' Mysian Telephus

In the *agon* of *Clouds*, Better Argument says to Worse, evidently by way of an insult, “previously you wore beggar’s rags, asserting that you were Mysian Telephus, eating up Pandeletean opinions from your little pouch” (καίτοι πρότερόν γ’ ἐπτώχευες, / Τήλεφος εἶναι Μυσὸς φάσκων, ἐκ πηριδίου / γνώμας τρώγων Πανδελειεύς, 922-24). Worse replies, “Oh, the cleverness . . . of the thing you just said!,” (ὄμοι σοφίας . . . ἧς ἐμνήσθης, 925, 926), and the two continue their verbal battle. I argue that this brief reference to “Mysian Telephus” is of far greater import than its brevity might suggest, and that it is in fact to be connected to the very poetics of Aristophanic Old Comedy.

Aristophanes famously had a special relationship with Euripides (O’Sullivan 1992, Silk 2000), and the *Telephus* appears particularly often throughout our extant plays. Notably, it provides the framework for a pivotal moment in *Acharnians*, in which Dicaeopolis borrows this Greek-Mysian beggar-king’s rags from Euripides and then, clad in them, delivers a speech defending the private peace treaty he has made with the Spartans to the chorus of Acharnian farmers, in the course of which he comes to speak *as* Aristophanes. Dicaeopolis chooses the rags of Telephus as his disguise in *Acharnians* not simply because of this character’s wretchedness or even because their dramatic circumstances correspond closely, but above all because of the compelling parallels between the Telephus-myth and the situation in which the playwright Aristophanes found himself in 425 BCE (Foley 1988). As the disguised Dicaeopolis delivers his speech to the chorus, defending his private peace, Aristophanes simultaneously, concealed within Dicaeopolis-Telephus, addresses the Athenian citizenry, responding to an accusation supposedly made by Cleon that certain remarks contained in the *Babylonians* of 426 constituted treason against Athens (502-3). It is at this juncture that Aristophanes, now fully inhabiting Dicaeopolis,

makes his famous claim for the wisdom of his genre: “Old Comedy, too, knows what is just” (τὸ γὰρ δίκαιον οἶδε καὶ τρυγῳδία, 500).

The commentaries of *Clouds* are silent on lines 922-24, but I argue that they should be understood as a reference to *Acharnians*—the only place in Aristophanes where we have seen someone pretending to be Mysian Telephus and wearing his beggar’s rags. The specificity of the temporal adverb πρότερον, “previously,” invites us to supply a particular occasion, and *Acharnians*, performed only two years earlier, makes an excellent candidate. Most tellingly, however, the exchange of *Clouds* 922-26 is so telegraphic that the groundwork for what a reference to Telephus may mean must have been established elsewhere. I read the words of Better Argument as directed through Worse Argument at Dicaeopolis and, through him, at the poet Aristophanes himself. That some cryptic “cleverness” of precisely this type is warranted is confirmed by Worse Argument’s reply to Better (925, 926).

What would it mean, then, for Aristophanes to be lurking in this way within Worse Argument? This association might seem unexpected, unless we recall that Socrates is, after all, the representative of Worse Argument in *Clouds*, this being the very art he teaches in his Thinkery. Throughout the plays of Aristophanes, poets and intellectuals are consistently divided into two opposing camps: one pole is occupied by Cratinus and the tragedian Aeschylus, both characterized by a heavy, swollen style, and the other pole by Euripides, Socrates, and Aristophanes himself, all defined by a remarkable slenderness and compactness of expression, novelty, and, above all, wisdom. The single appearance of Mysian Telephus in the *Clouds* thus serves, I argue, to remind the audience that Aristophanes is, along with Euripides, allied with Socrates, despite the rather critical handling the philosopher is subjected to in this play. By recalling *Acharnians* Aristophanes also reminds his audience that a familiar and esteemed

playwright (*Acharnians* had won first prize) is behind this comedy, too, and the nods simultaneously at τραγωδία's ability, co-opted from τραγωδία, to speak what is just. Aristophanes relies, as always, on the most discerning members of his audience to follow this trail of Euripidean breadcrumbs that he lays throughout his plays.

#### Works Cited

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