

The Curious Case of the Intertextual Debt in the *Frogs*

In their contest for the tragic throne in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Aeschylus and Euripides use many arguments to justify their supremacy, from criticizing each other's choice of plots to their lyric meters. But one argument is notable for *not* being made: aside from a brief reference to Euripides having "examined [Aeschylus] for a long time" (διέσκεμμαι πάλαι, *Frogs* 836), no character refers to Euripides' frequent habit in the later part of his career of borrowing and reshaping material from Aeschylus' *oeuvre*. In this paper I explore why the lack of reference to Euripides' intertextual debt to Aeschylus is surprising and argue that it points toward a crucial aspect of the dynamics of dramatic appropriation.

Biles 2006-7 and Foley 2008 argue that Euripides' tetralogies may have been in direct competition with posthumous reperformance of plays by Aeschylus. As early as the *Clouds*, Aristophanes also depicted Euripides as an anti-Aeschylus, contrasting his innovative style with the deceased tragedian's conservatism. This opposition led to Euripides defining his style against Aeschylus' increasingly as his career went on, culminating in the extensive engagement with Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in his *Orestes*.

Many of Euripides' plays contain references to the tragedies of Aeschylus, catalogued fully in Aélion 1983. Most obviously, the *Orestes* and *Iphigenia in Tauris* position themselves as a prequel and sequel to Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, but there are also other moments of engagement, including the much-discussed reshaping of the recognition scene in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* in Euripides' *Electra* and the brief allusion to Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* in the *Phoenissae* when Eteocles tells Creon that since the enemy is already at the gates, it would be a waste of time to mention the generals by name (*Phoenissae* 751-2).

In this context, the competition between the two playwrights for the throne of tragedy in

the *Frogs* becomes a kind of dramatization of an implicit struggle between Euripides and Aeschylus in Euripides' late plays. But Aristophanes never mentions this intertextual engagement with Aeschylus during Euripides' lifetime in the *Frogs*. Instead, the two tragedians appear as competitors who are equally knowledgeable about and able to critique each other's works. Although one could easily imagine a debate over whether Aeschylus should be credited more for his originality or Euripides for improving on Aeschylean originals, no such discussion of the importance of hypotext and hypertext (to use the terminology of Genette 1982) occurs.

The lack of reference to Euripides' intertextual debt to Aeschylus is especially surprising in light of the attitude in Old Comedy to dramatic influence. For rival comedians, building on each other's works or borrowing jokes was often rhetorically construed as an attack.

Aristophanes and Eupolis were caught up in a complex rivalry that included accusations of both plagiarism and collaboration, studied in Sidwell 1993 and more recently in Kyriakidi 2011 and Ruffell 2011. Comedians were very sensitive to intrageneric textual appropriation.

That Aristophanes chose not to make a joke about Euripides' engagement with Aeschylus may not have bothered – or even been noticed – by the audience in the Theater of Dionysus. But it suggests an unwillingness in the *Frogs* to confront what it means to build on another poet's work. This refusal is also visible in the comedy's intentionally ill-defined stance toward its own relationship to the older, more established genre of tragedy and which genre is more useful to the city.

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