

Don't Lay a Finger on my Morsimus: Tragic Fandom in Greek Comedy

The comic poet Plato's fragmentary comedy *Skeuai* ("Theatrical Equipment") gives us a fascinating backstage glimpse into the world of tragic poetry: we see a tragedian comparing his own portrayal of Electra to Euripides' scandalous treatment of the heroine (F 142), an argument about the decline in tragic choral dancing from a distant golden age (F 138), and a character forthrightly insulting the tragedian Melanthius as "a babbler" (F 140). Perhaps the most striking fragment of this delightfully metatheatrical comedy shows an argument between two tragedy-fans obsessed with the rival tragedians Sthenelus and Morsimus (F 136): "You just touch my Morsimus with the tip of your finger, / and I'll trample your Sthenelus in an instant!"

In an important article of 2006, Ralph Rosen argued that fandom was a crucial element in the formation of the tragic canon in late fifth-century Athens. Aristophanes, Rosen argued, gives us several depictions of tragic fandom in his plays, most notably the argument between Pheidippides and Strepsiades in *Clouds* over whether Euripides is better than Aeschylus, and Dionysus' discovery in *Frogs* that Euripides' fans in the underworld are all thieves and con-men. In this paper I expand this notion of tragic fandom beyond these two examples to discuss several instances of the phenomenon elsewhere in Aristophanes and in the fragments of Old and Middle Comedy. Plato and Aristophanes inaugurated this tradition of portrayals of tragedy-fans, but the tropes and devices they developed become the model for entire comedies in the fourth century, like Axionicus' *Phileuripides*, Philippides' comedy of the same name, and Alexis' *Philotragoidos* (see Scharffenberger 2011, Hanink 2014).

Several of these tragedy-fans are depicted in comedy as insane, so insane that they are willing to destroy their own lives or even die to get close to the artists who obsess them. Modern critics of media fandom have labeled this trope in fictional portrayals of fandom "the

pathological tradition,” and often trace its origins to mid-twentieth century phenomena like “Beatlemania” (Jenson 1992, Duffett 2013). In this paper, I show that the origins of the tradition of pathological fandom lie instead with Greek comedy, and in particular, with a comedy that is seldom read as particularly concerned with tragedy: Aristophanes’ *Wasps* (cf. Wright 2013). Philocleon, I will argue, is a fan of the ancient tragedy of Thespis and Phrynichus – in the chorus’ words, a *philoidos*, “a man obsessed with tragic song.” This obsession leads him to conceive of his own life as a tragedy, with disastrous consequences.

The comic poets are very self-conscious about their participation in this tradition. Axionicus alludes to *Wasps* in a fragment of his *Phileuripides* to establish his play as part of a long history of pathological tragedy-fans in Greek comedy. Plato’s argument between fans in *Skeuai* outdoes Aristophanes’ depiction of such an argument in *Clouds* by showing fans of minor, unimportant tragedians in place of devotees of Aeschylus and Euripides (Kaimio and Nykopp 1997), and by redirecting the violence from the arguing fans onto the poets themselves. It is only when we read the extant plays of Aristophanes together with the fragments of his contemporaries and successors that we can understand how the poets play off one another’s depictions of fandom to create ever more hilarious tragedy-fans, whose absurd obsessions, in turn, become mockery of the very tragedians these characters would die to see.

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