

Comedy and Transgression in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*

In 1963, Herington proposed that Aeschylus' *Oresteia* was substantively influenced by comedy and cited a number of parallels in Aristophanes to support his claims. However, scholars (e.g. Taplin 1996) immediately disputed these assertions on chronological grounds, since our first play by Aristophanes postdates the *Oresteia* by 33 years and could not have directly influenced Aeschylus. In this paper, I revisit the parallels adduced by Herington, as well as a related proposal by Sommerstein (2002), in the light of recent scholarship on early Old Comedy, especially concerning the first generation of comic poets (Chionides, Magnes and Ecphantides; c. 486-450s BCE) and the second generation of comic poets (Cratinus, Crates, Telecleides, Hermippus, Callias, and Pherecrates; 440s-420s BCE). Aiming to avoid Herington's methodological pitfalls, this paper argues that Aeschylus was engaging in paracomedy (the adoption of comic elements into tragedy), and that even with our incomplete knowledge about early comedy, paracomedy played a substantial role in the *Oresteia*, particularly with regard to the characterization of the Furies and Clytemnestra.

Herington's and Sommerstein's proposed parallels between the *Oresteia* and comedy appear in plot, chorus, and language, and all the features are rare in tragedy and common in comedy, leading us to evaluate them in terms of paracomedy. Our knowledge of first and second generation comic plots is sorely lacking, and thus we should suspend judgment about paracomedy for most of Herington's proposed plot elements: episodic prologue, antagonistic chorus, location change, and audience participation. Another of Herington's parallels involves contemporary politics being essential to the plot, and while the inclusion of political themes became prominent in second generation comic poets, we have no evidence about its presence in

first generation comic poets, and therefore it is safer to refrain from considering politics as a potential source of paracomedy.

However, three parallels seem securely paracomical: the use of sexual and vulgar language throughout the trilogy, the happy torchlight procession that concludes *Eumenides*, and the constant characterization of the chorus as animals. I submit that these comic aspects are intentionally included to imbue certain characters with a sense of transgression. Clytemnestra uses sexual innuendo when she calls Cassandra a “pole-rubber, someone who gives handjobs” (*histotribēs*, *Agamemnon* 1443) and a “side-dish, side-piece” (*paropsōnēma*, *Agamemnon* 1447), characterizing her as someone who violates generic boundaries and transgresses tragic decorum. Alongside her consistent portrayal as one who transgressively acts and speaks like a man, this contributes to the overall feeling that Clytemnestra is dangerous, a sentiment that culminates in her violent murder of Agamemnon. Furthermore, the chorus of Furies employs all three paracomical features described above. Constantly described in animalistic terms and with the vulgar bodily language of vomiting, belching, shitting, bleeding, digesting (e.g. *Eumenides* 52-53), the Furies are cast as hideous and horrifying and represent a transgressive threat to the democratic ideals that Aeschylus is attempting to cultivate over the course of the *Oresteia*. Aeschylus marks the transformation from the Furies to the Semnai Theai through costume, when they are given red cloaks, the sign of *metic* status in the procession in the Great Panathenaia. With the final torchlight procession interpreted in this way, the threat is eliminated and the ugliness of paracomedy purged from the trilogy, leaving only tragedy and democracy. While we cannot accept every instance of paracomedy that Herington had suggested, there is still good evidence that Aeschylus used paracomedy strategically in the *Oresteia* to characterize Clytemnestra and especially the Furies as major threats to normative structures in Athenian

society. Aeschylus was certainly aware of the different codes associated with tragedy and comedy, and it is no accident that the ugly and coarse elements of comedy disappear at the end of the trilogy – there is simply no place for ugliness, vulgarity, transgression, or bestiality in the democratic world that Aeschylus creates. Thus this paper contributes significantly to the recent trend in scholarship about paracomedy and generic interactions in Greek tragedy (Jendza 2015, Zuckerberg 2016).

Bibliography

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