

A Brief History of Mythological Comedy from Epicharmus to Alexis

Monographs on two luminaries of the fifth-century comic stage, Eupolis (Storey 2003) and Cratinus (Bakola 2010), have revealed several ways in which Aristophanes' extant corpus has skewed our understanding of classical comedy. Yet his engagement with myth, largely via Euripidean tragic intermediaries, remains so influential in critical discourse that a fourth-century comedy sharing the name of a tragedy is often assumed to be a parody thereof.

My paper challenges that assumption through a study of the dozens of preserved titles of Greek mythological comedies produced from one of its earliest attested, prolific practitioners (Epicharmus in the late sixth century) down to one of its last (Alexis in the early third century). Analyzing the titles diachronically and synchronically, I offer a brief history of this type of comic production and make two arguments. First, trends in the popularity of certain types of myths (e.g., affairs of Zeus) suggest that the poets reacted to shifts in audiences' tastes, not necessarily recent tragic productions. Second, the clustering of comic titles, without any tragic parallel, around particular kinds of myths shows that the comic poets had a body of myth that was primarily their domain. Myths of the births of gods, for example, seem to have fallen outside of the purview of tragedy, and the comic poets were the primary purveyors of these myths on the Athenian stage.

This paper thus extends the excellent discussion of Bowie (2010) and contributes to a number of more recent studies of ancient comedy that incorporates extensive discussion of fragmentary texts. I think especially of the work of Farmer (2017) and Sells (2018) on parody in the comic fragments, both of whom engage with Rau's (1967) influential study of Aristophanic paratragedy. My project, however, decenters even further the preserved canon of

comedy and thus allows us to appreciate mythological comedy in new ways not manifest in the topical plays of Aristophanes or even the domestic farces of Menander.

Bibliography

Bakola, E. 2010. *Cratinus and the Art of Comedy*. Oxford.

Bowie, A. M. 2010. "Myth and Ritual in Comedy." In *Brill's Companion to the Study of Greek Comedy*, edited by G. W. Dobrov. Leiden and Boston.

Farmer, M. 2017. *Tragedy on the Comic Stage*. Oxford.

Rau, P. 1967. *Paratragoedia: Untersuchung einer komischen Form des Aristophanes*. Munich.

Sells, D. 2018. *Parody, Politics, and the Populace in Greek Old Comedy*. London.

Storey, I. 2003. *Eupolis, Poet of Old Comedy*. Oxford.