COMIC OPSIMATHIA IN ARISTOPHANES’ CLOUDS

It has plausibly been argued¹ that a “recurrent feature of Aristophanic comedy is what may be labelled the encomium”, in which the chorus salute the hero; and that Clouds 1201-11 is very unusual in this respect, because “Strepsiades, as he himself points out, sings his own encomium” while “the chorus does not assume its usual role as encomiast”. Strepsiades, therefore “has to invent a pseudo-chorus of friends and demesmen into whose mouth he puts the encomium... This is a part of the dramatic preparation for the Clouds revealing” their true nature at vv. 1452-61. Strepsiades is thus aptly represented as “boast[ing] just before a change of fortune” when his son turns upon him, and “we actually see the triumphant hero discomforted, and that makes his boasting stand out the more vividly as the pride which comes before a fall”.

This very significant fall occurs when, as mentioned above, the chorus of clouds reveal that, all along, they have been leading Strepsiades on to his ruin. They make the revelation in language which has been identified² as representing a comic version of Aeschylus’ theodicy, with particular emphasis on that quintessential feature of Aeschylus’ theology πάθει μάθος³. Now that conception has rightly been seen⁴ as ‘related’ to the tragic motif of ὁμαθίᾳ, or “learning the truth too late”, and Strepsiades’ reaction to the volte face of the Chorus is itself a comic equivalent of this tragic motif (particularly at home in a play in which “learning”, and Strepsiades’ conspicuously unsuccessful attempts thereat has been so conspicuous a theme). The exact nature of this equivalence has yet to be traced in detail. Such a tracing is what I shall now attempt.

I begin on a general level. The best tragic example known to me of the required movement from boastful self-praise to grim self-awareness occurs with Agave in Euripides Bacchae 1165ff.⁵. She enters at 1168 ff. intoxicated

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² By P. Rau, Paratragodia (Zetemata 45 [1967]) p. 173f. He rightly stresses that Aristophanes is not parodying the Aeschylean theodicy but producing a comic version thereof. For examples of Aeschylus’ theodicy, involving the word ὁμαθίᾳ (which, pace Dover ad loc., is to be read in Clouds 1458), see my Appendix below.
³ On which see e.g. the bibliography in R. B. Rutherford, “JHS” 102, 1982, p. 149 n. 21.
⁴ By Rutherford as cited in the last note.
⁵ Since Bacchae was composed and performed after the revised version which we possess of Clouds (on its date see Dover’s Introduction to his commentary (Oxford 1968) pp. lxxxff.) we must conclude that it reflects a common pattern of Greek tragedy.
with her triumph. Given the implications of μακαρισμός in *Clouds* 1206, μάκαρ ὁ Στρεψίαδες, set in Strepsiades’ own mouth, it is striking to find something so closely equivalent on Agave’s lips as πρώτον ἐμὸν τὸ γέρας / μάκαρ’ Ἀγαύη κληζόμεθ’ ἐν θυάσισι (1179f.). And again, when Agave switches from lyric to trimeters, it is interesting to find her appealing to the citizens of Thebes to behold her triumph (1202ff. ὁ καλλιπήριγγον ἀθυτόν Ἡθῆκαις χθονός / ναϊντες, ἐξεθε’ ὡς ἱδητε την’ ἀγραν / Κάδμου θύγατερς θηρός ἦν ἠγεύσασεν κτλ.), given that Strepsiades anticipates praise from (1209) οἱ φίλοι ἤτοι δῆμοται (note also the implications of his earlier τι καθήσθη [1201], addressed to the audience and contrasting with Agave’s ἔλθητε). In his reference to praise, Strepsiades uses the word ἐγκώμιον (1205) and we recall that the chorus of the *Bacchae* say of Agave δέχεσθ’ ἐς κόμον εὐίου θεοῦ (1167) and tell her to her face (1172) ὁρῶ καὶ σε δέξωμαι σύγκωμον.

Such is the triumphal pride of Agave. If we now move on to the episode conveying her fall and discomforting, here too we find analogues with the downfall of Strepsiades. When Cadmus is bringing Agave gradually to her senses, he tells her (1295) εὑράντης πᾶσα τ’ ἐξεβιακεθήνη πόλις, to which she replies Διόνυσος ἡμᾶς ὀλέσσ’, ἀρτί μανθάνο. It is noteworthy that, when Strepsiades emerges from his infatuation, he should say (1476) οἶμοι παρανοίας, ὡς ἐμανώμην ἄρα. Agave’s madness was literal, Strepsiades’ not so, but the correspondences are nonetheless close.

Agave is not the only character to be signalised as achieving ὀψιμαθία near the end of the *Bacchae*. When Dionysus has revealed the truth to Cadmus, the following exchange takes place between god and mortal (1344-6):

- Διόνυσε, λισσὸμεσθά σ’, ἡδικήκαμεν.
- ὡς ἐμαθέθ’ ἡμᾶς, ὡτε δ’ ἔχρην, οὐκ ἤδετε.
- ἐγνόκαμεν ταῦτα, ἀλλ’ ἐπεξέρχετ’ λίαν.

The same reaction from an ὄψισθες (“what you say is right, but it is

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6 On μακαρισμός see e.g. Macleod p. 142 = p. 49 and n. 1, and for its use as a motif in the relevant scene of the *Bacchae* see Seaford’s commentary on v. 1171 thereof.

7 See Macleod as in last note. Since ἐγκώμιον regularly refers to a victory celebration (cf. *Clouds* 1211 νικάς and Dover on 1205) note the chorus’ words to Agave at *Ba*. 1200 σῆν νικηφόρον / ἀστοίνιν ἄγραν ἐν τῷ πείρᾳ ἔλλυθις (cf. the messenger at 1146 (of Dionysus) τὸν καλλικικον, ὁ δέ χείρα νικηφορεῖ ~ τοὺς ἐκ 1161f. τὸν καλλικικον κλεῖν’ ἐξεπραμάτει / ἐς γόον, ἐς δικρα). On the ἐγκώμιον as a victory song see further the remarks of M. Heath, *Receiving the κώμος: the context and performance of epinician*, “AJP” 109, 1988, 183f.

8 On the “repeated use” here of “discordant epinician and komastic terms.... Tragic poetry at its most disturbing”, see Heath as cited in the previous note p. 195.
very painful”) is to be found in another Euripidean drama which exploits the same motif. At *Orestes* 99 Electra tells Helen

όψε γε φρονεύς εὖ, τότε λιπούσι’ οίσχρώς δόμους
to which she retorts

όρθως ἐλέεσας, οὐ φίλως δὲ μοι λέγεις̣.

It can be no coincidence that, when the cloud-chorus reveal their theodicy to Strepsiades, the latter replies with the same terms, though in reverse (1462):

ώμοι, πονηρά γ’, ὁ Νεφέλαι, δίκαια δὲ.

We should be guilty of simplistic schematism, if we suggested that the sequence “painful but right” (instead of “right but painful”) is to be explained merely by the line’s appearance in a comedy rather than a tragedy. But opsimathia is an inherently ambiguous experience and can be expressed in more ways than one.

Strepsiades’ grasping of the truth is staggered over two stages: first the reply to the chorus just cited. Then the more considered reaction once his son has declined to help him rout Socrates:

όμωι δεῖλαιος

ὀτὲ καὶ σε χυτρεούν ὄντα θεόν ἡγησάμην

... οὐμοι παρανοίας—ὡς ἐμακνόμην ἄρα

δί’ ἐξέβαλλον καὶ τοὺς θεούς διὰ Σωκράτη (1473ff.).

Here too there are tragic analogues to be cited. In particular, the use of the particle ἀρα with the imperfect to convey enlightenment is highly idiomatic. We may compare the ingenious adaptation of the opsimathia motif at Sophocles *Philoctetes* 1081ff. (‘adaptation’ because the gloom of apparent realisation will be dispelled by the further peripeteia with which the play ends): ώ κοίλας πέτρας γύαλον / θερμόν καὶ παγετότες, ὃς σ’ οὐκ ἐμέλλον ἄρα, ὃς τάλας, / λειψειν οὐδέποτε, ἀλλὰ μοι / καὶ θησκοντι συνειση. Compare besides the enlightenment expressed by Heracles in a lost tragedy of unknown authorship appropriately quoted by the opsimathes

9 Willink’s commentary *ad loc.* (Oxford 1986) does not see the point, nor does West’s (London 1986).

10 Cf. Denniston, *GP*, p. 36f., West on Hes. *Op.* 11. A further instance of such a use of ἀρα (this time with the aorist; note that both ἐξέβαλον or -βάλλον are readings at Aristophanes *Clouds* 1477 and both {see Dover *ad loc.*} are possible) is Soph. *Phil.* 978ff. Here, the titular hero, realising too late the role that Odysseus has played in separating him from his bow, cries out: οὔμοι’ περιβαμ φιπόλαλ. Then, immediately on the heels of these idiomatic exclamation and verbs, he proceeds to say of his enemy, δ’ ἦν ἄρα / ὃ ξυλαβᾷν με κύπουνοφιάς ὁπλῶν.
Brutus before his suicide on the battle-field of Philippi:

οὗ τλήμου ἄρετί, λόγος ἃρ ἧσθ', ἐγὼ δὲ σε
ως ἔργον ἤσκουν, ςυ δ' ἃρ' ἐδούλευσες τύχη

(TrGF 2 F 374 = TrGF 1.88 F 3)

Staying with the figure of Heracles in tragedy, we may move on to another set of comparisons which involve the exclamations οἶμοι (1462), οἶμοι (1473), and οἶμοι παρανοίας (1476), and the self-pitying adjective δειλαίος (1473). These too can be matched from scenes where an opsimathes realises the truth too late. Thus Heracles at Trach. 1143ff. exclaims οὐκον υδα οὐκετ' ἐστι μοι.

Likewise Aegisthus, in Sophocles’ Electra, when confronted by Clytemnestra’s corpse and Orestes her murderer, cries out οἶμοι, τῇ φής, άνθρωποι; μόνος ὀλοκληρωμένος; (Aj. 791),

And Sophocles’ Tecmessa, when alerted by the messenger that Ajax’s straying outside his hut will have fatal consequences, cries:

οἶμοι, τάλανα (800), οἶμοι, πεντάκται τοῦ θεοῦ τὸ θέσφατον.

Finally, Euripides’ Cyclops, in the satyr play of that name, learning of his blinder’s identity (696):

οἶμοι, παλαιὸς χρησμός ἐπεράνεται.

The effect here is already more or less parodic: cf. Aristophanes’ Knights 1243 οἶμοι κακοδαίμονον οὐκετ’ οὐδὲν εἰμ’ ἐγὼ

11 On the close similarities between the world-views of Herodotus and of Greek, especially Sophoclean, tragedy, see, for instance, Rutherford (as cited in n. 3 above) p. 148 n. 18 and my commentary on Soph. Tr. 1171-2. C.H. Whitman, Aristophanes and the Comic Hero (Harvard 1964) p. 129 observed of the chorus’ words at 1452ff. that they “recall Herodotus’ story [1.158f.] of how the oracle at Branchidae once nearly tempted the Cumaens to destruction”. He also compares more generally the luring of Xerxes into war with Greece at the beginning of Herodotus Book Seven, and it is true that the same verb used of Croesus’ ensnarement (ἐπάραμεν) is also used of Mardonius’ action in 7.9 γ and 10.ε.
Greek: γὰρ οἱ Λοξίας ~ 1456 τι δῆται ταῦτα ὦ μοι τὸτε ἠγορεύετε, 1.91.4 (Κροέσος) ἐωτόν Αἴτιον ἀποφαινέτω ~ 1454 σαυτῷ σὺ τούτον Αἴτιος. Herodotus make Croesus himself later refer to the oracle’s revelation as παθήματα ἀχάριστα μαθήματα (1.207.1) and we have already seen the connection between the dictum πάθει μάθος and the concept of ὀμμαθία. The motif of the misunderstood oracle is elsewhere in tragedy (especially Sophoclean tragedy) associated with opsimathia, as at Trachiniae 1172 τὸδ ἦν ὑπ’ οὐδ’ ἄλλο πλήν θανεῖν ἐμὲ (spoken by Heracles) where we encounter the idiomatic ἁρπαξτα παρ’ εὐλημμενὸν verb used of (too late) enlightenment.

Perhaps what best confirms Strepsiades’ role as comic rather than tragic ὀμμαθιαί is his successful transformation at the end into an instrument of divine vengeance in his own right. His final four verses (1506-9) begin by castigating Socrates and his pupils because τοὺς θεοὺς ὑβρίζετε and we recall that Dionysus in the Bacchae counters Cadmus’ protest ἀλλ’ ἐπεξέρχη λίαν with the retort (1347) καὶ γὰρ ὑμῶν θεὸς γεγός ὑβριζόμην. Furthermore, Strepsiades’ closing words in the play (διώκει, πάει, βάλλει, πολλάν οὐνέκει, / μάλιστα δ’ εἰδόξες τοὺς θεοὺς ὡς ἥδικουν) cannot but remind us that Cadmus’ confession of guilt to Dionysus (1344) has as climax the word ἰδικήκαμεν.

We may close this investigation with two Shakespearean parallels. The first is a perhaps surprising instance of opsimathia in a play that is (appropriately enough) neither tragedy nor comedy. The speaker is Caliban in Shakespeare’s Tempest (V.i.294ff.), where, however, the motif is

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Given the contents of the previous note, it is very tempting to compare the implications of ἀχάριστα μαθήματα here with those of the famous image at Aesch. Ag. 182f. διτμόνον δὲ πρὸ χάρις βίας / σέλμα σεῦν τιμῶν the most frequently cited Aeschylean theodicy, and one that follows directly on a reference to πάθει μάθος (177) and the phrase καὶ παρ’ ἀκοντισὶ ἥλθε σωφρονέιν (179f.). In other words, Herodotus’ ἀχάριστα μαθήματα confirms Turnebus’ χάρις βίας (prob. Page’s OCT, Lloyd-Jones etc., -αως codd., def. Fraenkel, West’s Teubner etc.), where “this χάρις... would normally be described as a χάρις ἀρχισ” (Lloyd-Jones, “JHS” 76, 1956, 62 = Academic Papers I, 253).

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Connections between Shakespeare’s play and the conventions of New (as opposed to Old) Comedy or its Plautine derivative have been traced by, for instance, Bernard Knox, The Tempest and the Ancient Comic Tradition, “English Stage Comedy” (English Institute Essays, 1956) p. 54ff. = Word and Action pp. 357ff. and Wolfgang Riehle, Shakespeare, Plautus and the Humanist Tradition (Cambridge 1990), pp. 262ff. (note p. 282 n. 178 against Knox’s main thesis).
given a more serious depth by the Christian connotations of the key word ‘grace’

\[
I'll \ be \ wise \ hereafter, \\
And \ seek \ for \ grace. \ What \ a \ thrice-double \ ass \\
Was \ I, \ to \ take \ this \ drunkard \ for \ a \ god, \\
And \ worship \ this \ dull \ fool! \\
\]

Otherwise it could almost be Strepsiades speaking of the Aristophanic Socrates. But for a reminder of the original tragic overtones of opsimaethia we turn to Shakespeare’s Macbeth, whose hero has been lured by the three witches to his ruin in a way even more disastrous than Strepsiades by the cloud-chorus:

\[
And \ be \ these \ juggling \ fiends \ no \ more \ believ'd \\
That \ palter \ with \ us \ in \ a \ double \ sense; \\
That \ keep \ the \ word \ of \ promise \ to \ our \ ear \\
And \ break \ it \ to \ our \ hope... \quad \text{(V.ix.19ff.)} \\
\]

Strictly speaking, an opsimaethes is one who learns the truth too late (scil. to help) and it may be seen as emblematic of the difference between tragedy and comedy that Strepsiades in fact learns the truth just in the nick of time, so that he is able to put his newly won knowledge to use by turning on his would-be teachers. There is a comic irony, however, in that Strepsiades, who has so conspicuously failed to learn from Socrates in the course of the play, should finally learn a different type of lesson from the gods and so defend the gods whom Socrates denied.

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17 See, for instance, John Wain, The Living World of Shakespeare (London 1964) p. 234 = Penguin edition p. 261: “the word ‘grace’ is one to whose overtones we have been especially alerted by The Winter’s Tale [V.iii.7, 27, 122], and there is no need to give it a theological meaning to believe that Caliban will end the play in a better state than he is in at the beginning”.

18 See my remarks in “CQ” 52, 2002, 24ff.

19 On the theme of learning in Clouds see Dover’s commentary pp. lviiff.

20 A final suggestion: when the chorus address Strepsiades they remind us of the etymology of his name. Is this a nod in the direction of the ‘tragic’ etymology of such names as Aias (Soph. Aj. 430), Pentheus (Eur. Bacch. 367), or Prometheus (PV 85 ff.)?
APPENDIX: ARISTOPHANES CLOUDS 1458

Χο. ἕμειξς ποιούμεν ταῦθ’ ὅταν τινά
γνώμεν πονηρῶν ὅντ’ ἐφαστήν πραγμάτων,
ἐκὼς ὅν αὐτόν ἐμβάλομεν εἰς κακόν 1460
ὅπως ὅν εἰδῆ τοὺς θεοὺς δεδοικέναι.

I have printed v. 1458 with the reading of R V E N Θ: by contrast, E K M Npl Vb3 Vvi X have ἄν τιν’ οὖν, Mpc Vsl ὅταν τιν’ οὖν. Porson conjectured ὅτιν’ ἄν, which Dover21 – from whom I take this information about MSS readings – adopts in his text. He notes that ὅν τιν’ οὖν “is not Attic”; and that ὅταν τινά is “grammatically sound” and “though metrically abnormal”, still “possible” (he cross-refers to his note on v. 185 of this play for the relevant sequence). “The real objection”, he proceeds, “is stylistic. The Chorus speaks and Strepsiades replies, solemnly. If ὅταν τινά is right, it is not only an isolated snatch of comic rhythm in a passage (1452–64) otherwise uniform in avoiding resolutions and abnormal diaeresis, but an exaggerated one and – for communication of the sense – wholly unnecessary”. Since Dover wrote, his view has been challenged, and ὅταν τινά preferred, by Daphne O’Regan22. Her reasons do not seem to me adequate, but I am grateful to her discussion for having provoked me into further reflection at the end of which I have evolved what I believe to be a better ground for preferring ὅταν τινά.

Before Dover’s commentary appeared, but too late for him to benefit from its discussion of the Aristophanic passage, Peter Rau’s Paratragodia23 had observed that the relevant lines read like a comic version of the πάθει μάθος principle so characteristic of Aeschylus’ theodicy. One example of this theodicy cited by Rau casts light on why Aristophanes might have used a mode of expression stigmatised by Dover as “wholly unnecessary” “for communication of the sense”: Pers. 742 ἄλλ’ ὅταν σπεύδῃ τις αὐτός, χώθεις συνάπτῃ. An even closer analogue, strangely overlooked by Rau, is the famous sentiment expressed in Aeschylus’ Niobe (TrGF3 F 154A.15f. Radt): θέσης μὲν αἰτίαν φύει βροτοὺς ὅταν κακόσαι δῶμα παμπηήθην θέλῃ.

A similar collocation in the like context of a tragic theodicy can be found in two fragments of Sophocles: from the Teucer (TrGF 4 F 576.4ff. Radt) ὅταν

21 Oxford 1968. The following quotation is from p. 263f.
22 Rhetoric, Comedy and the Violence of Language in Aristophanes’ Clouds (Oxford 1992) p. 121f. (“In fact, the intrusive rhythm is the sense, or rather the mood; its purpose is to be exaggerated and jarring, making it the last in a series of passages stressing the mocking, comic theatricality of the end of the play”).
δὲ δαίμων ἄνδρός εὐτυχοὺς τὸ πρὶν / μάστιγ έρείςη τοῦ βίου παλίν-
τροπον, / τὰ πολλὰ φροῦδα καὶ καλὸς εἰρήμενα and from the Tyndareus
(F 646.4ff.) ἐν γὰρ βραχεί καθείλε κωλίγω χρόνῳ / παμπλουτὸν ὀλίβων
δαίμονος κακοῦ δόσις, / ὅταν μεταστή καὶ θεοὶς δοκῇ τάδε. I conclude
that Aristophanes may well have used the simple-seeming word ὅταν to give
the required ‘flavour’ of a theodicy.

An extant Sophoclean play, Ant. 583f. ὅλω γὰρ ἀν σεισθή θεόθεν δόμος,
ὅτας / οὐδὲν ἐλλείπει γενεάς ἐπὶ πλῆθος ἔρπον, provides an example of a
similar theodicy24 expressed by means of a relative clause, and it might be
argued that this is close enough in meaning to Porson’s emendation of the
Aristophanic verse to justify it. But the fact remains that some MSS of the
Clouds do read ὅταν τινά and that the general context has been associated
with the notion of an Aeschylean theodicy for reasons quite independent of
this reading. That the latter produces “an isolated snatch of comic rhythm”
might be thought perfectly appropriate: as Rau25 observes of the more
general effect of the Aristophanic passage, it is not a parody, but a comic
version, of the tragedian’s theodicy. And Greek tragedians seem to have
found their theodicy well conveyed by describing what happens whenever
god(s) would bring mortal(s) low in punishment for acts of folly.

M. D.

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24 For the “Aeschylean tone” of the ode as a whole see, for instance, Winnington-Ingram,
25 As cited above n. 23, p. 174: “die Aristophanische Theodizee ist also nicht durch
formale und geistige Elemente der Aischyleischen Theodizee gebrochen, bezieht ihr Vorbild
nicht in den komischen Kontrast ein; sie parodiert ihr Vorbild nicht, sondern ist dessen
komische Version”. Perhaps the first part of this formulation requires some modifying if we
regard ὅταν as a “formal element” of the tragic theodicy.