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The Curious Incident of the Intertextual Debt in the *Frogs*[1]

Donna Zuckerberg
Eidolon

Only the most contrarian of Euripidean scholars would claim that intertextual engagement with the tragedies of Aeschylus is *not* a feature of the later tragedian's work. Fairly explicit references to the *Oresteia* in Euripides' *Electra*, *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, and *Orestes* make the existence of this engagement difficult to dispute. Consensus has been more difficult to find on the degree to which that intertextual relationship is a prominent theme in Euripides' *oeuvre*. On the higher end of that spectrum is a work such as Rachel Aélion's 1983 volume *Euripide héritier d'Eschyle*, a massive 750-page opus arguing that Euripides' career was substantially built upon refashioning Aeschylean material.[2] On the lower end are those who argue for the spuriousness of lines 518-44 of Euripides' *Electra* on the basis that what David Kovacs has called a "tasteless extra-dramatic hit at Aeschylus' *Choephori"* is not only fundamentally untragic but also textually insecure.[3] Most scholars fall somewhere between those two extremes.

Although the existence of this intertextual relationship is widely acknowledged, its nature is less clear. Was Euripides inspired by the creative genius of his predecessor? Was he haunted by the anxiety of influence, wrestling with his secondariness in his own genre? Or was he locked in a competition of sorts, as some scholars have envisioned it, with the deceased poet? In her now-classic study of Euripides' *Orestes*,
"The Closet of Masks," Froma Zeitlin frames the relationship in these terms: "Nor is this the first time that Euripides has done battle with the Aeschylean elephant both as an artist and as a thinker. In two other plays, the *Electra* and the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, he also assumes the stance of a fascinated antagonist/rival to Aeschylean solutions which he rejects, modifies, or alters."[4]

Since the two tragedians were not contemporaries, they were not true rivals in tragic competitions.[5] A "battle" in which Euripides and Aeschylus serve as "antagonists" could only ever be a metaphorical one played out through Euripides' texts – until Aristophanes' *Frogs*, where the two tragedians are quite literally in competition with each other for the tragic throne in the underworld. In that comedy, Aeschylus and Euripides both attempt to convince the god Dionysus of the superiority of their artistry; whoever is judged to be the better tragedian will return with the god to Athens to instruct the city.

The Frogs competition covers a wide range of angles of tragic critique, from the tragedians' favorite tropes to vocabulary choices to choral meters. But Zeitlin's metaphorical competition with Aeschylus that exists within Euripides' texts – that is, his extensive intertextual engagement with the works and legacy of Aeschylus – does not play any discernible role in *Frogs*. In fact, it is never even mentioned. Instead, Aristophanes stresses the differences between the two tragedians, and the question of Euripides' secondariness to Aeschylus is not raised.

In this essay, I argue that the absence of any mention of Euripides' adaptations of Aeschylus, like the night-time silence of the dog in Arthur Conan Doyle's "Silver Blaze," is a striking omission that deserves our attention. Aristophanes was a keen critic of Euripides' tragedy and often mocked him for his characteristic quirks and tropes. Why, then, did he fail to refer to Aeschylus' influence on Euripides' later works?

The only statement in the *Frogs* that could be construed as a reference to Euripides' adaptations of Aeschylus is the character Euripides' statement at the beginning of the competition that he has "examined [Aeschylus] for a long time" (*Frogs* 836–9):

> ἐγᾦδα τοῦτον καὶ διέσκεμμαι πάλαι, ἄνθρωπον ἀγριοποιὸν
> αὐθαδόστομον, ἔχοντ᾽ ἀχάλινον ἀκρατὲς ἀπύλωτον στόμα,
> ἀπεριλάλητον κομποφακελορρήμονα.
>
> I know this man and I've watched him for a long time. He's a creator of savage characters, stubborn-mouthed, with an unbridled, uncontrolled, ungated mouth, uncircumlocuious, brag-bundle-voiced.[6]

But it is clear from the context that Euripides means only that he is very familiar with Aeschylus' works and therefore qualified to critique them, just as Aeschylus is equally qualified to critique Euripides. (How Aeschylus came to be so knowledgeable about Euripides is never made clear in the play.)

It is easy to imagine what a joke about Euripides' adaptation of Aeschylean material would have looked like. Aeschylus could have said that Euripides, for all his supposed novelty, never had an idea that did not originally come from Aeschylus' own work; Euripides could have responded with a modified version of his claim at *Frogs* 939–43 that when he received tragedy from Aeschylus, it was "swollen with heavy words" (οἰδοῦσαν ὑπὸ κομπασμάτων καὶ ῥημάτων ἐπαχθῶν, 940), and that he slimmed it down (ἴσχνανα, 941). But we never see that type of interaction. As it exists in the play, Euripides' declaration refers to the two tragedians' very different approaches to tragic poetics and vocabulary, not to Euripides' use of Aeschylean material and content.

Why did Aristophanes not refer to Euripides' Aeschylean intertexts in the *Frogs*? One reason might be that Aristophanes did not believe that this trend in Euripides' later plays was particularly prominent or noteworthy. Attic tragedy was a heavily intertexual genre, and perhaps borrowing from another poet's works was so *de rigeur* as not even to merit a mention, Aeschylus himself claimed that his tragedies were just scraps from Homer's feast (*Deipnosophists* 8.347e). One could argue that the extent of Euripides' debt to Aeschylus has been exaggerated by scholars poring obsessively over the few tragic texts that remain to us.

This argument is not implausible when applied to some of the smaller and more speculative instances of Aeschylean intertextuality in Euripides' works.7 Still other references maybe have been noticed only by the most educated and literate members of Euripides' audience – for example, the swipe at Aeschylus' long descriptions of the Argive army and the signs on each of the generals' shields in the *Seven Against Thebes* at *Phoenissae* 751–2, when Eteocles tells Creon that, because the enemy is already at the gates, there is no time to list them all by name.8 But, as a literary critic, Aristophanes would indisputably have been part of the most educated echelon of Athenian theatergoers and attuned to even subtler resonances.9

In any case, it seems indisputable that three of Euripides' plays – the *Electra*, I*phigeneia in Tauris*, and *Orestes* – are part of an extensive Euripidean program of responses to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Isabelle Torrance has argued that these references work on a metapoetic level to establish Euripides' place in the greater tragic tradition:10

> The competitive nature of Greek dramatic performance and the confines of appropriate mythological material necessarily entail conditions in which tragic poets are deeply conscious of their posteriority vis-à-vis previous successful poetic treatments from their common pool of myths… Through intertextuality, metaphor, word-play, and the language of optics, Euripides invites the audience to consider the difficulties the tragic poet faces in composing a new drama while, by necessity, following in the footsteps of great predecessors. Inevitably, not all members of the audience will respond to these invitations. That does not mean they are not there.

Although Torrance allows that Euripidean audiences may not have been attuned to these subtle intertexts, Aristophanes seems to assume a fairly sophisticated and literate audience for the *Frogs* – his chorus even makes the (somewhat implausible) claim that everyone in the theater has read copies of the tragedians' works (1109–18).11

Furthermore, it is these very plays that scholars agree that Euripiedes certainly interacted with – the *Seven Against Thebes* and the *Oresteia* trilogy – that are used throughout the *Frogs* to confurm Aeschylus' superiority over Euripides. Aeschylus brags that he made the Athenians warlike and noble by composing the *Seven*, a play "full of Ares" that made men "in love with being fierce" (*Frogs* 1021-2). This effect is contrasted with Euripides' ragged beggar-heroes, who supposedly taught the rich men of Athens how to pretend to be poor and therefore avoid having to pay liturgies (1063-6). Aeschylus and Euripides also take apart, word by word, the opening lines of the *Choephoroe* (1125-74), and Euripides mocks Aeschylus' version without acknowledging the influence the play had on his own three versions of Orestes' story.

Significantly, although his primary critique is Aeschylus' repetitive word use, he also remarks on how κατέρχομαι is an especially infelicitous choice to indicate Orestes' return from exile, because he comes back in secret (1167-8). Orestes' quiet, fugitive return is also singled out as a significant point in Euripides' *Electra* when Electra argues that Orestes would never have returned home secretly out of fear of Aegisthus (*Electra* 524-6). The Arisophanic Euripides seems to be interested in commenting on the same Aeschylean plays – and even the same momemnts in those plays – that the real Euripides adapted and apporpriated.

This unmarked similarity between Euripides and Aristophanes' Euripides – whom we might call "Euripides" – may have been a factor in how scholars have understood the tone of the intertexual relationship between Euripides and Aeschylus. Some scholars have assumed that Euripides' references to Aeschylus are parodic or mocking, using a kind of sly humor to knock the dead Aeschylus down a peg and insinuate Euripides' superiority.12 Critics of this view tend to point out that, taken in context, scenes such as Electra's rejection of the Aeschylean proofs of Orestes' return are not really very funny.13 This tonal confusion seems almost inevitable, however, in the light of the potential slippage between rewritings of the *Oresteia* in the plays of Euripides and mocking commentary on the *Oresteia* done by "Euripides" in the *Frogs*.

Aristophanes can be seen as an active participant and intermediary in the intertexual "rivalry" between Aeschylus Euripides, rather than a passive commentator on it. The comedian played a significant role in creating a sense of opposition between Aeschylus as the venerable classic and Euripides as the creative upstart – a duality already clear in the *Clouds*, where being the sort of person who prefers Euripides to Aeschylus is a sign of an extreme lack of taste and discernment (1363-78). This dichotomy goes as far back as Aristophanes' first extant comedy, the *Acharnians*, where Diaeopolis is very explicit in his ragged beggar-heroes.14 When Euripides wrote the *Orestes*, Aristophanes would have been positioning him as the anti-Aeschylus for several decades.

Zeitlin calls the *Orestes* a "palimpsestic" text, and it is not difficult to see why when one looks at the complexity of its allusive mechanics.15 Consider, for example, one of the play's most famous moments, when Orestes holds Hermione hostage on the roof of the *skēnē* with a knife to her throat. The hypothesis of the play notes that the *Orestes* has a rather comic conclusion (τὸ δρᾶ&α κω&ικωτέραν ἔχει τὴν καταστροφήν), which could reger to its similarity to the much-mocked hostage-taking in Euripides' lost *Telephus*, in which Telephus uses a knife to hold the infant Orestes hostage. That identification might seem to be a stretch, considering that three decades separate the *Orestes* from the *Telephus'* performance in 438 BCE, but it becomes more plausible when one considers how that particular tableau had become a recurring joke in Aristophanes' mockery of Euripides over the years.16 The ending of the *Orestes* therefore reshapes elements of both Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and of Aristophanes' own Euripidean mockeries. In moments such as this, the distinction between Euripides and "Euripides" becomes more difficult to articulate.

The final reason we might have expected to see a reference to Euripides' intertexual debt to Aeschylus in the *Frogs* is that the poets of Old Comedy cared a great deal about intertexual debts in general, along with joke theft, plagiarism, and concerns about being derivative rather than original. Aristophanes, Cratinus, and Eupolis often accuse each other of stealing their ideas and staunchly defend their own originality and genius. These anxieties come through in much of the "trash talk" that existed beteen various comedians, but they are most clearly visible in the rivalry between Aristophanes and Eupolis, the so-called "war between the poets."17 These accusations of plagiarism are now seen by scholars as primarily part of a performance of exaggerating one's own originality by countering rivals' bragging expressions of how unique and unprecedented their comic genius is.18 Nobody "owned" the idea of mocking Cleon, so it could not truly be plagarized. Instead, comedians constantly accused each other of being creatively parasitic while borrowing and remodeling material from each other 's works.19

But Aristophanes' rivals did not only accuse him of stealing from them: they also accused him of excessive borrowing from Euripides. A scholion on Plato's Apology notes Aristophanes' comic rivals "made fun of him for ridiculing Euriipides while at the same time imitating him" (ἐκωμῳδεῖτο δ᾽ ἐπὶ τῷ σκώπτειν μὲν Εὐριπίδην, μιμεῖσθαι δ᾽ αὐτόν) and mentions that Aristophanes responded to this criticism in his *Women Claiming Tent-Sites* by claiming that, although he shared stylistic similarties with the tragediam, Euripides was far more vulgar than he was.20 Aristophanes' long-standing habit of parodying Euripides, it seems, had opened him to criticism for derivative.

It is not clear that tragedians had the same level of obsession with originality. But the importance of originality as a criterion for greatness in the *Frogs* contest is marked at the very beginning of the duel, when Dionysus warns the two contestants not to say anything that someone else might say (μήθ᾽ οἷ᾽ ἂν ἄλλος εἴ.οι, 906). For the most part, Aristophanes allows his "Euripides" character to be original, with newfangled, made-up gods (890) and a new, more realistic style of tragedy that contrasts with Aeschylus' old-fashioned gradnuer. When Euripides is subjected to insinuations about lack of creativity, the specific claim is not that he borrowed too much from greater predecessors but rather that he used a ghostwriter. Both Dionysus and Aeschylus refer to Cephisophon (*Frogs* 944, 1408, 1452-3), whom later biographers of Euripides cliamed was a slave who wrote Euripides' plays with him and for whom Euripides' wife left him.21 But allegations that Euripides' cleverest lines may have not been written by him do not amount to accusations that one's entire career is that of a second-rate parodist. Surprisingly, Aristophanes spared Euripides the criticism that he himself could not avoid: that by creatively adapting and responding to another playwright's work he had put himself permanently in the shadow of his more original predecessor.22

In summary, we should be surprised not to hear this intertextual dog barking in the *Frogs*. The extant to which Aristophanes was aware of and implicated in concerns about originality and influence, coupled with his positioning of Euripides and Aeschylus as rivals and his possible complicity in Euripides' own extenensive appopriation of Aeschylus' works, suggests that a joke about that intertextual debt would have been natural for us to expect.23

We will never know whether the audience in the Theater of Dionysus noticed or cared about the joke's absence, and any hypothesis about why Aristophanes did not make such a joke would be little more than speculation. Unklike Sherlock Holdmes, I will not be using the silence of the dog to solve any mysteries: there is always a degree of uncertainty in arguments from silence. But as with the silent Aeschylean characters whom Euripides mocks at *Frogs* 911-20, silence can sometimes be an effective communicator.

Notes

1 An ealier verison of this paper was delievered at the 112th CAWS annual meeting in March 2016.
2 Although Aélion 1983 is a useful text, the author has been accused of overreaching; Llyod 1984 writes that she is "often tendentious" in her arguements about Euripidean allusions to Aeschylus.
3 The scholarship on this issue is extensive. See, e.g., Kovacs 1989, arguing vehemently for the spuriousness of this section (which he brackets in his Loeb edition of the play), and Davies 1998 for a fair treatment of both sides.
4 Zeitlin 1980, 53.
5 Although revivals of Aeschylus' tragedoes would probably have been performed in the same festivals as Euripides' works, the two are unlikely to have been in direct competition during Euripides' lifetime; see Biles 2006-7. Foley 2008, 17, has suggested that both Aeschylean revivals and Aristophanic mockery of tragedy might have led Euripides to "dabble in increasingly allusions to earlier tragedy."
6 All translations are my own.
7 See, e.g., Thalmann 1993 on the influence of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* on Euripides' *Hecuba*.
8 ὄνομα δ᾽ ἑκάστου διατριβὴ πολλὴ λέγειν, / ἐχθρῶν ὑπ᾽ αὐτοῖς τείχεσιν καθημένων (It would be a great waste of time to tell the name of each man when the enemy are set up at our very walls.
9 Revermann 2006, 101, argues that allusion in drama creates "various strata of connoisseurship, creating a theatre of what may be branded 'layered inclusion' which manages not to alienate any viewer."
10 Torrance 2013, 61-2
11 Revermann 2006, 119-20, uses this notorious moment to argue that the competence of theater audiences in Athens increased over the course of the fifth century, although he admits that "The arguement over whether and how much this particular remark is to be considered tongue-in-cheek is unlikely ever to cease" (120).
12 To list just a few examples, Hammond 1984, 382, calls the recognition scene "malicious ridicule" of Aeschylus, and Goldhill 1986, 247, also writes that the scene "mocks" Aeschylus.
13 See, for example, Writing 2005, 255: "there is more to the *Electra*'s recognition-scence than point-scoring; it is a serious demonstation of Euripides' awareness of his literary predecessors and the self-conscious highlighting of his own originality – *meta-tragedy* instead of paratragedy."
14 Platter 2007, 56-7, 150-1

15 Zeitlin 1980, 54.
16 Jendza 2015 argues that the use of swords in the *Orestes* is a response to Aristophanes' comic mockery in the *Thesmophoriazusae*. See Zuckerberg 2014 for a fuller treatment of the arguement that Aristophanic parody influenced Euripides' later works.
17 On this interaction seee especially Bakola 2008. The play that is the focus of this controversy is Aristophanes' *Knights*. A scholion on the play mentions that Cratinus accused Aristophanes in his *Pytinē*, showing that he wasn't a babbler; in it he attacks Aristophanes for using Eupolis' material" (ταῦτα ἀκούσας ὁ Κρατῖνος ἔγραψε τὴν Πυτίνην, δεικνὺς ὅτι οὐκ ἐλήρησεν· ἐν ᾗ κακῶς λέγει τὸν Ἀριστοφάνην ὡς τὰ Εὐπόλιδος λέγοντα, Cratinus, Pytine fr. 213 = Σ Kn. 531a). Eupolis, in a fragment from the Baptai (fr. 89 = Σ Cl. 554a), also claims to have collaborated with Aristophanes on the *Knight*, and Aristophanes responded to these insinuations in *Clouds* 551-6 by accusing Eupolis of more or less copying the *Knights* in his *Maricas*. It is hard to know to what extent we should take any of these concerns serioulsy; Heath 1990, 153, argues that despite similarities between the *Knights* and the *Maricas*, the latter was "certainly not a mindless reproduction."
18 Heath 1990, 152, argues for the construction of a "comic repertoire" from which all comedians could draw while accusing each other of plagiarism.
19 Ruffell 2011, 362-3, develops a brilliant conceptual model for this kind of interaction whereby comedians effectively play on each other's jokes.
20 Scholion Areth. (B) on Plato *Apology* 19C.
21 Lefkowitz 2012^2, 96-7, 101.
22 Farmer 2017, 193-4, notes the similarity in the kind of tragic borrowing done in Euripides' *Electra* and Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* but distinguishes between the two by framing Euripides' concern as one of the "belatedness" while Aristophanes' is on of "dependence."
23 It is equally unlikely that Aristophanes *did* acuse Euripides of plagiarizing Aeschylus in a lost play that made fun of the tragedian, such as the *Proagōn* or *Dramas*, and chose not to recycle the joke in the *Frogs*. The *Frogs* is full of jokes about Euripides recycled from earlier Aristophanis comedies. Euripides' ragged, crippled beggars appear in the *Archarnians* and *Peace* before the *Frogs*; his licentious female characters appear in the *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae* before the *Frogs*; his vegetable-selling mother is in the *Acharians, Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs*. We might say with Aristophanes' many mockeries of Euripides.

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