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COMIC *OPSIMATHIA* IN ARISTOPHANES' *CLOUDS*

It has plausibly been argued[1] 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 identified[2] as representing a comic version of Aeschylean theodicy, with particular emphasis on that quintessential feature of Aeschylus' theology πάθει μάθος[3]. Now that conception has rightly been seen[4] as 'related' to the tragic motif of ὀψιμαθία, 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

[1] By C. Macleod, *The Comic Encomium and Aristophanes Clouds 1201-11*, "Phoenix" 35, 1981, 142-4 = *Collected Essays* pp. 49-51. Hereafter 'Macleod'.

[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 ὅταν (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[6] in *Clouds* 1206, μάκαρ ὦ Στρεψίαδες, set in Strepsiades' own mouth, it is striking to find something so closely equivalent on Agave's lips as πρῶτον ἐμὸν τὸ γέρας· / μάκαιρ᾽ Ἀγαυὴ κλῃζόμεθ᾽ ἐν θιάσοις (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. ὦ καλλίπυργον ἄστυ Θηβαίας χθονὸς / ναίοντες, ἔλθεθ᾽ ὡς ἴδητε τήνδ᾽ ἄγραν / Κάδμου θυγατέρες θηρὸς ἣν ἠγρεύσαμεν κτλ.), given that Strepsiades anticipates praise from (1209) οἱ φίλοι χοἱ δημόται (note also the implications of his earlier τί κάθησθ᾽ [1201], addressed to the audience and contrasting with Agave's ἔλθετε). In his reference to praise, Strepsiades uses the word ἐγκώμιον (1205)[7] and we recall that the chorus of the *Bacchae* say of Agave δέχεσθ᾽ ἐς κῶμον εὐίου θεοῦ (1167) and tell her to her face (1172) ὁρῶ καί σε δέξομαι σύγκωμον[8].

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) ἐμάνητε, πᾶσά τ᾽ ἐξεβακχεύθη πόλις, to which she replies Διόνυσος ἡμᾶς ὤλεσ᾽, ἄρτι μανθάνω. It is noteworthy that, when Strepsiades emerges from his infatuation, he should say (1476) οἴμοι παρανοίας. ὡς ἐμαινόμην 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 *opsimathia* 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, λισσόμεσθά σ᾽, ἠδικήκαμεν.
– ὄψ᾽ ἐμαθέθ᾽ ἡμᾶς, ὅτε δ᾽ ἐχρῆν, οὐκ ἤδετε.
– ἐγνώκαμεν ταῦτ᾽, ἀλλ᾽ ἐπεξέρχῃ λίαν.

The same reaction from an ὀψιμαθής ("what you say is right, but it is

[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 νικᾷς and Dover on 1205) note the chorus' words to Agave at *Ba*. 1200 σὴν νικηφόρον / ἀστοῖσιν ἄγραν ἣν φέρουσ᾽ ἐλήλυθας (cf. the messenger at 1146 (of Dionysus) τὸν καλλίνικον, ᾧ δάκρυα νικηφορεῖ ~ the chorus at 1161f. τὸν καλλίνικον κλεινὸν ἐξεπράξατε / ἐς γόον, ἐς δάκρυα). On the ἐγκώμιον as a victory song see further the remarks of M. Heath, *Receiving the κῶμος: 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

ὀψέ γε φρονεῖς εὖ, τότε λιποῦσ' αἰσχρῶς δόμους

to which she retorts

ὀρθῶς ἔλεξας, οὐ φίλως δέ μοι λέγεις[9].

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):

ὤμοι, πονηρά γ', ὦ Νεφέλαι, δίκαια δέ.

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:

ὤμοι δείλαιος

ὅτε καί σε χυτρεοῦν ὄντα θεὸν ἡγησάμην

...

οἴμοι παρανοίας· ὡς ἐμαινόμην ἄρα

ὅτ' ἐξέβαλλον καὶ τοὺς θεοὺς διὰ Σωκράτη (1473ff.).

Here too there are tragic analogues to be cited. In particular, the use of the particle ἄρα with the imperfect to convey enlightment[10] 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): ὦ κοίλας πέτρας γύαλον / θερμὸν καὶ παγετῶτες, ὥς σ' οὐκ ἔμελλον ἄρ', ὦ τάλας, / λείψειν οὐδέποτ', ἀλλά μοι / καὶ θνήσκοντι συνείσῃ. 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*[2], p. 36f., West on Hes. *Op*. 11. A further instance of such a use of ἄρα (this time with the aorist: note that both ἐξέβαλον or -βαλλον are readings at Aristophanes *Clouds* 1477 and both {see Dover *ad loc*.] are possible) is Soph. *Phil*. 978f. Here, the titular hero, realising too late the role that Odysseus has played in separating him from his bow, cries out: οἴμοι· πέπραμαι κἀπόλωλ'. Then, immediately on the heels of these idiomatic exclamation and verbs, he proceeds to say of his enemy, ὅδ' ἦν ἄρα / ὁ ξυλλαβών με κἀπονοσφίσας ὅπλων.

Brutus before his suicide on the battle-field of Philippi:

ὦ τλῆμον ἀρετή, λόγος ἄρ᾽ ἦσθ᾽, ἐγὼ δέ σε
ὡς ἔργον ἤσκουν, σὺ δ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ἐδούλευες τύχῃ
(*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 ὤμοι (1462), οἴμοι (1473), and οἴμοι παρανοίας (1476), and the self-pitying adjective δείλαιος (1473). These too can be matched from scenes where an *opsimathes* realises the truth too late. Thus Heracles at *Trach*. 1143ff. exclaims

ἰοὺ ἰοὺ δύστηνος, οἴχομαι τάλας.
ὄλωλ᾽ ὄλωλα. φέγγος οὐκέτ᾽ ἔστι μοι.
οἴμοι, φρονῶ δὴ ξυμφορᾶς ἵν᾽ ἔσταμεν.

Likewise Aegisthus, in Sophocles' *Electra,* when confronted by Clytemnestra's corpse and Orestes her murderer, cries out οἴμοι, ξυνῆκα τοὔπος (1479) and ὄλωλα δὴ δείλαιος (1482).

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

οἴμοι, τί φής, ἄνθρωπε; μῶν ὀλώμαμεν; (*Aj*. 791),
οἴμοι, τάλαινα (800), οἵ ᾽γώ, φίλοι (803).

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

αἰαῖ· παλαιὸς χρησμὸς ἐπεραίνεται.

The effect here is already more or less parodic: cf. Aristophanes' *Knights* 1243 οἴμοι κακοδαίμων· οὐκέτ᾽ οὐδέν εἰμ᾽ ἐγώ
and 1248f.

οἴμοι, πέπρακται τοῦ θεοῦ τὸ θέσφατον.
κυλίνδετ᾽ εἴσω τόνδε τὸν δυσδαίμονα.

One should further note the general resemblance between the deceived Strepsiades' complaint to the cloud-chorus and Croesus' complaint to Apollo's Delphic oracle in Herodotus (1.90f.). Not surprisingly, the similarities[11] extend to more detailed points of phraseology: Hdt. 1.90.3 (Κροῖσος) ἐπαρθεὶς τῷ μαντείῳ and 4 (Ἀπόλλω) τοῖσι μαντείοισι ἐπάρας Κροῖσον ~ 1457 ἄνδρ᾽ ἄγροικον καὶ γέροντ᾽ ἐπήρατε, 1.91.4 προηγρό-

[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 Cumaeans 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 (ἐπαίρω) is also used of Mardonius' action in 7.9.γ and 10.ε.

ρευε γάρ οἱ Λοξίας ~ 1456 τί δῆτα ταῦτ᾽ οὐ μοι τότ᾽ ἠγορεύετε, 1.91.4 (Κροῖσος) ἑωυτὸν αἴτιον ἀποφαινέτω ~ 1454 σαυτῷ σὺ τούτων αἴτιος. Herodotus make Croesus himself later refer to the oracle's revelation as παθήματα ἐόντα ἀχάριστα μαθήματα (1.207.1)[12] and we have already[13] seen the connection between the dictum πάθει μάθος and the concept of ὀψιμαθία. The motif of the misunderstood oracle is elsewhere in tragedy (especially Sophoclean tragedy) associated with *opsimathia,* as at *Trachiniae* 1172 τόδ᾽ ἦν ἄρ᾽ οὐδέν᾽ ἄλλο πλὴν θανεῖν ἐμέ (spoken by Heracles) where we encounter the idiomatic ἄρα plus imperfect verb used of (too late) enlightment[14].

Perhaps what best confirms Strepsiades' role as comic rather than tragic ὀψιμαθής is his successful transformation at the end into an instrument of divine vengeance[15] 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᾽ ἐπεξέρχῃ λίαν with the retort (1347) καὶ γὰρ ὑμῶν θεὸς γεγὼς ὑβριζόμην. Furthermore, Strepsiades' closing words in the play (δίωκε, παῖε, βάλλε, πολλῶν οὕνεκα, / μάλιστα δ᾽ εἰδὼς τοὺς θεοὺς ὡς ἠδίκουν) cannot but remind us that Cadmus' confession of guilt to Dionysus (1344) has as climax the word ἠδικήκαμεν.

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.)[16], where, however, the motif is

[12] 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. δαιμόνων δέ που χάρις βίαιος / σέλμα σεμνὸν ἡμένων the most frequently cited Aeschylean theodicy, and one that follows directly on a reference to πάθει μάθος (177) and the phrase καὶ παρ᾽ ἄκοντας ἦλθε σωφρονεῖν (179f.). In other words, Herodotus' ἀχάριστα μαθήματα confirms Turnebus' χάρις βίαιος (*prob*. Page's OCT, Lloyd-Jones etc., -αιως codd., *def*. Fraenkel, West's Teubner etc.), where "this χάρις... would normally be described as a χάρις ἄχαρις" (Lloyd-Jones, "JHS" 76, 1956, 62 = *Academic Papers* I, 253).

[13] As above n. 3.

[14] See further my commentary *ad. loc*.

[15] Cf. R. M. Harriott, *Aristophanes Poet and Dramatist* (London 1988) p. 174f on "deities who punish" (as in Aesch. *Eum*. 780ff.) and Strepsiades' role here.

[16] 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'[17]:

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 *opsimathia* we turn to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*[18], 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... (V.ix .19ff.)

Strictly speaking, an *opsimathes* 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[19], should finally learn a different type of lesson from the gods and so defend the gods whom Socrates denied[20].

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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

Xo. ἡμεῖς ποιοῦμεν ταῦθ᾽ ὅταν τινά
γνῶμεν πονηρῶν ὄντ᾽ ἐραστὴν πραγμάτων,
ἕως ἂν αὐτὸν ἐμβάλωμεν εἰς κακόν 1460
ὅπως ἂν εἰδῇ τοὺς θεοὺς δεδοικέναι.

I have printed v. 1458 with the reading of R V E^{pc} N Θ: by contrast, E^{ac} K M^{ac} Npl Vb3 Vvi *X* have ἄν τιν᾽ οὖν, M^{pc} Vsl ὅταν τιν᾽ οὖν. Porson conjectured ὄντιν᾽ ἄν, which Dover[21] – from whom I take this information about MSS readings – adopts in his text. He notes that ἄν 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'Regan[22]. 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 *Paratragodia*[23] 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 ἀλλ᾽ ὅταν σπεύδῃ τις αὐτός, χὠ θεὸς συνάπτεται. An even closer analogue, strangely overlooked by Rau, is the famous sentiment expressed in Aeschylus' *Niobe (TrGF3* F 154A.15f. Radt): θεὸς μὲν αἰτίαν φύει βροτοῖς / ὅταν κακῶσαι δῶμα παμπήδην 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").

[23] *Zetemata* 45 (1967) 173f. On πάθει μάθος see further, e.g., R. B. Rutherford, "JHS" 102, 1982, p. 149 n. 21.

δὲ δαίμων ἀνδρὸς εὐτυχοῦς τὸ πρὶν / μάστιγ᾽ ἐρείσῃ τοῦ βίου παλίντροπον, / τὰ πολλὰ φροῦδα καὶ καλῶς εἰρημένα and from the *Tyndareus* (F 646.4ff.) ἐν γὰρ βραχεῖ καθεῖλε κὠλίγῳ χρόνῳ / πάμπλουτον ὄλβον δαίμονος κακοῦ δόσις, / ὅταν μεταστῇ καὶ θεοῖς 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. οἷς γὰρ ἂν σεισθῇ θεόθεν δόμος, ἄτας / οὐδὲν ἐλλείπει γενεᾶς ἐπὶ πλῆθος ἕρπον, provides an example of a similar theodicy[24] 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 Rau[25] 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.

[24] For the "Aeschylean tone" of the ode as a whole see, for instance, Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: an Interpretation* (Cambridge 1980) p. 168 n. 46.

[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.