

MYTHOLOGICAL BURLESQUE, PARODY, AND LITERARY GAMES, FROM EPICARMUS TO ARISTOPHANES

COMEDIA MITOLÓGICA, PARODIA Y JUEGOS LITERARIOS, DE EPICARMO A ARISTÓFANES

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ABSTRACT: The literary history of mythological comedy, from Epicharmus, the inventor of the genre, to the Attic dramatists, is permeated by intertextual relations and cross-references between individual authors. Cratinus took over the Epicharmean form of myth burlesque and combined it with political satire of Athenian public life. Cratinus' mythical plays owe to Epicharmus a number of comic themes and dramaturgical patterns: the portrayal of the cannibalistic Cyclops as a gourmet, the games of disguise and role-playing, the sophisticated meta-literary exploitation of the epic tradition and of the spectators' Homeric knowledge. Aristophanes avoided full-scale myth burlesque in his acme, but he included individual vignettes of mythical parody in his complex polyphonic plots. The scene of the three gods' embassy at the finale of the *Birds* employs all the typical techniques of mythological comedy.

KEYWORDS: Epicharmus, Cratinus, Aristophanes, myth, intertextuality.

RESUMEN: La historia literaria de la comedia mitológica, desde Epicarmo, el inventor del género, hasta los dramaturgos áticos, está impregnada de relaciones intertextuales y referencias cruzadas entre autores individuales. Cratino retomó la forma epicarmiana de burla del mito y la combinó con la sátira política de la vida pública ateniense. Las obras míticas de Cratino deben a Epicarmo una serie de temas cómicos y patrones dramáticos: la representación del cíclope caníbal como un *gourmet*, los juegos de disfraz y de rol, la sofisticada explotación meta-literaria de la tradición épica y de los conocimientos homéricos de los espectadores. Aristófanes evitó el mito burlesco a gran escala en su *acmé*, pero incluyó viñetas individuales de parodia mítica en sus complejas tramas polifónicas. La escena de la embajada de los tres dioses al final de *Aves* emplea todas las técnicas típicas de la comedia mitológica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Epicarmo, Cratino, Aristófanes, mito, intertextualidad.

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1. EPICHARMUS AND CRATINUS: LITERARY FUN AND POETIC GAMES

The late Geoffrey Arnott wrote once that he would willingly give a couple of his teeth and what was left of his hair, in exchange for the discovery of a papyrus with the full text of a Greek mythological comic play (Arnott 1972, 73-74). It is a pity that the goddess Tyche is rarely moved by the spirit of scholarly self-sacrifice. I know of passionate colleagues who would offer even more; they would be willing to bet their own soul and sign a blood contract with Mephistopheles, if only they could read Sappho's lost poems or the total of Aeschylus' tragedies. In my own university lectures, I like to repeat that I would gladly part with all my belongings in return for laying my hands on three lost works of ancient literature: the mysterious book by Heraclitus; the complete poems of Archilochus; and the ten volumes of the Alexandrian edition comprising the forty or so plays by Epicharmus.

The Sicilian Epicharmus was the first Greek author who created comic drama of true poetic value and high literary standards. Although his oeuvre only survives in fragments, the excellent quality of his comic writing is evident in every verse that Fortune has preserved. Epicharmus invented the two basic genres of comic play which dominated the subsequent history of the Greek theatre, up to the end of the Hellenistic period. On one hand, he produced humoristic sketches of everyday life and social customs, portraying a range of amusing types which were destined to become staple figures of the stage, from the flatterer and the rustic to the braggart and the conceited philosopher. On the other hand, he developed the genre of mythological burlesque, the full-scale travesty of traditional myths about gods and heroes, which usually entails parody of the corresponding high-brow literary genres. In Epicharmus' mythical plays, in particular, the preferred intertexts were the Homeric canon and the poems of the epic cycle¹.

Epicharmus wrote about two dozen mythological plays. Half of them focused on the adventures of Heracles and Odysseus, the two heroes who were bound to become the favourite protagonists of Greek myth burlesque. The rest travestied a range of other mythical figures, from Hephaestus and Dionysus to Medea and the Argonauts, from Deucalion and Prometheus to grotesque monsters such as the Centaurs and the Sphinx². Epicharmus' myth burlesques may have sprung from the folk background of the Doric popular farce. However, the Sicilian dramatist gave an elaborate poetic form to those folk improvisations and elevated them to high artistic accomplishment. His mythological plays, like all the remains of his writing, stand out for their refinement, intellectual sophistication, and excellent literary quality. Epicharmus composed complex and erudite parodies of the Homeric style and the mannerisms of the epic cycle. His verses are full of brilliant witticisms and intricate verbal humour. His mythical heroes, such as the memorable title-figure in *Odysseus the Deserter*, are portrayed with acute moral observation and skillful ethological effects. The stuff of myth is dexterously combined with amusing exploitation of contemporary social mores and city life. The Epicharmean mythical characters may humorously allude to abstruse ideas of Pythagorean or Eleatic philosophy, which were en vogue in the world of Magna Graecia at the time. They follow the etiquette of urban upper-class symposia and indulge in gourmet gastronomy, a domain for which Greek Sicily was perennially famous. In every respect, Epicharmus was the inventor of mythological comedy as a literary genre, and he bequeathed his invention to posterity.

¹ See Willi 2008, 176-192; Konstantakos 2015a, 64-75.

² See Kerkhof 2001, 116-129; Casolari 2003, 19-22, 47-59, 205-209.

Epicharmus' scripts doubtless became known to Athens in the middle decades of the fifth century and influenced the development of mature Attic comedy³. Among other themes and materials, the Athenian playwrights must have learned from Epicharmus the form and poetics of full-scale mythological burlesque, which was keenly cultivated on the Attic stage throughout the second half of the fifth and the early decades of the fourth century. From Pherecrates and Hermippus to Plato Comicus, Theopompus, Strattis, and the poets of Middle Comedy, the Epicharmean model of mythical comic drama was reworked and expanded with virtuosity. Cratinus, the master of political comic theatre, introduced an innovative variation by combining the Epicharmean form of mythological travesty with sustained political invective and satirical critique of Athenian leaders and public affairs. In Cratinus' politicised myth burlesques, such as the *Dionysalexandros* and the *Nemesis*, the mythical scenario and its traditional heroes were used as allegories for the historical circumstances and the political conflicts of Athens in the turbulent years of Periclean hegemony.

In spite of his strong attachment to political drama, Cratinus also produced a few plays which appear to have fully conformed to the Epicharmean model: these comedies focused on the humorous dramatisation of mythical stories and characters, aiming at virtuoso parody and pure literary fun, without any visible trace of political invective. The best documented example is the *Odysseēs*, «Odysseus and Company», an ingenious comic reworking of the Homeric story of the Cyclops. The extant fragments of this comedy offer many hilarious parodies of the Homeric narrative and style, but contain no element of satire against public figures or references to the political affairs of Athens. A treatise on the history of ancient comedy from late antiquity, the *Περὶ διαφορᾶς κωμωδιῶν* ascribed to Platonius, confirms and supplements this picture. As Platonius notes, the *Odysseēs* did not entail any attacks against specific personalities but was dedicated to ridiculing the Homeric *Odyssey*⁴. Although Platonius' treatise otherwise displays some errors and historical inaccuracies, this particular piece of information seems to have been drawn from an earlier and reliable source, probably a Hellenistic scholar with access to the text of Cratinus' play. In combination with the testimony of the preserved fragments of the comedy, Platonius' statement deserves serious attention.

Epicharmus had composed a play on the same theme, the *Cyclops*, which may have been the source of inspiration for Cratinus' *Odysseēs*⁵. The two works share at least one significant element in common: in both of them the monstrous cannibal Polyphemus was transformed into a refined gourmet and connoisseur of high gastronomy. In the most famous passage of Cratinus' comedy (fr. 150), the Cyclops plans to cook Odysseus' companions as though delicious dishes of seafood, and displays notable expertise in the culinary methods and condiments of fine cuisine.

ἀνθ' ὧν πάντας ἐλὼν ὑμᾶς ἐρίηρας ἐταίρους,
φρύξας χάψησας κάπανθρακίσας κώπτήσας,

³ See Cassio 1985, 38-43; Willi 2015, 109-117, 136-145.

⁴ *Prolegomena de Comoedia* I, 51-52 Koster: οἱ γοῦν Ὀδυσσεῖς Κρατίνου οὐδενὸς ἐπιτίμησιν ἔχουσι, διασυρμὸν δὲ τῆς Ὀδυσσεΐας τοῦ Ὀμήρου. Attempts to interpret characters and motifs of the *Odysseēs* as symbols of Athenian leaders and political realities (e.g. Or-

naghi 2004, 204-218; Bianchi 2017, 106-108) are unpersuasive, given Platonius' clear statement and the absolute lack of political indications in the surviving fragments and testimonia of the play.

⁵ Cf. Kerkhof 2001, 156-160; Revermann 2013, 111-112.

εἰς ἄλμην τε καὶ ὀξάλμην κᾶτ' ἐς σκοροδάλμην
 χλιαρὸν ἐμβάπτων, ὃς ἂν ὀπτότατός μοι ἀπάντων
 ὑμῶν φαίνεται, κατατρώξομαι, ὃ στρατιῶται

«In return for this, I will seize all of you trusty companions and fry you, stew you, broil you on the coals, and roast you, and then dip you into pickle-sauce and vinegar-pickle and garlic-pickle moderately hot; and whoever of you seems to me nicely cooked, I shall nibble him up, dear soldiers.»

Cratinus' Cyclops enumerates diverse cooking techniques, from deep-frying in the pan and baking in the oven to grilling on coals and stewing in the casserole, and is familiar with a range of salty broths and piquant sauces. He expounds all this specialised knowledge with the authority of a trained cook and the appetite of a gourmand. He also possesses a sensitive palate, capable of recognising the quality and vintage of choice wine (fr. 146, οὐπω ἴπιον τοιοῦτον οὐδὲ πίομαι Μάρωνα, «I have never drunk nor shall I drink such a Maronian wine»). In other passages of the play, the Cyclops also seems to have described nice dishes of fish and pork (fr. 154: τέμαχος ὀρφὸν χλιαρὸν, «a moderately hot slice of grouper»; fr. 155: δέλφακας μεγάλους, «large pigs»).

Similar motifs are found in the remains of Epicharmus' *Cyclops*. The Epicharmean Polyphemus appears to have been fond of tasty offal and tripe, sausages and ham, and to have indulged in the pleasures of drinking. The following fragments (fr. 70, 71, 72) should be placed on his lips:

ναὶ τὸν Ποτειδᾶν, κοιλότερος ὀλμοῦ πολὺ

«By Poseidon, this wine-bowl is much more concave than a mortar.»

χορδαί τε ἀδύ, ναὶ μὰ Δία, γῶ κωλεός

«The sausages are delicious, by Zeus, and the tenderloin.»

φέρ' ἐγγέας ἐς τὸ σκύφος

«Here, pour into the cup.»

It seems that the plays of Epicharmus and Cratinus were based on the same fundamental comic invention, the portrayal of the cannibalistic Cyclops as a devotee of high gastronomy and culinary art⁶. They provide the ultimate precursors of the type of Hannibal Lecter, as known from modern horror literature, that is, the monstrous character who sublimates his anthropophagy into refined gourmandism and gastronomic luxury. It is plausible to connect the plays of Epicharmus and Cratinus in a direct line of literary genealogy and influence.

Modern scholars usually assume that Cratinus' *Odysseēs* must have been performed in the years from 440 to 437 BCE, while the notorious decree of Morychides was in force in Athens (see the bibliographical overview in Bianchi 2017, 28-29). This decree forbade or restricted the mockery of public figures on the comic stage. The underlying scholarly assumption is that Cratinus, who was a militant political author and dedicated most of his plays to sharp criticism against the Athenian leadership of his time, would never have composed a comedy without political focus unless he

⁶ On this motif cf. Mastromarco 1998, 34-40; Casolari 2003, 148-153.

were forced by state censorship. This view, however, seems too rigid and simplistic. A gifted artist may experiment with the materials and conventions of his genre purely out of desire to broaden the range of his art or to test its generic limits. If the *Odysseis* is read as a deliberate artistic experiment of Cratinus, as a conscious exercise in Epicharmean style and poetics, the play might be dated at any moment of its author's long theatrical career.

In his politicised mythological travesties, in which the mythical scenario is used as a parable for contemporary Athenian history and public life, Cratinus also borrows techniques and themes from Epicharmus' mythical dramas. A characteristic element common to the two poets is the amusing game of roles and disguises, which their cunning heroes enact on stage. The plot of Epicharmus' play *Odysseus Automolos* («Odysseus the Deserter») combined elements from various spying missions which the resourceful Ithacan king carried out in the epic repertoire: the so-called *Doloneia* (*Iliad* 10) in which Odysseus and Diomedes set out at night to infiltrate the Trojan camp; and two episodes from the *Little Iliad*, a poem of the epic cycle, in which the Ithacan hero disguised himself as a beggar and slipped into Troy, in order to meet Helen, kill some enemies, or steal the cult image of Athena (*Little Iliad* fr. 8-11; see also the summary of Proclus' *Chrestomatheia* 4, p. 122 West)⁷. Similarly, in Epicharmus' play Odysseus changed his appearance and pretended to be a beggar or a poor swineherd, so as to penetrate into the Trojan side and collect information⁸. Part of Odysseus' description of his experience is preserved in fr. 99:

δέλφακά τε τῶν γειτόνων
τοῖς Ἐλευσινίοις φυλάσσων δαιμονίως ἀπόλεσα,
οὐχ ἐκόν· καὶ ταῦτα δὴ με συμβολατεύειν μ' ἔφα
τοῖς Ἀχαιοῖσιν προδιδόμειν τ' ὠμνυέ με τὸν δέλφακα

«And when I was guarding a pig of my neighbours' for the festival of the Eleusinia, I lost it by divine chance, against my will. Therefore, he said I was engaged in barter with the Achaeans, and swore I was betraying the pig.»

In Cratinus' *Dionysalexandros* the god Dionysus adopted the same pattern of behaviour⁹. As testified by the papyrus hypothesis of the play, Dionysus wore the clothes of the shepherd Paris and took the latter's position as arbiter in the beauty contest of the three goddesses (P. Oxy. 663.10-23, test. i Kassel-Austin)¹⁰.

παραφανέντα τὸν
Διόνυσον ἐπισκῶ(πτουσι) (καὶ)
χλευάζου(σιν)· ὁ δ(ὲ) πα-
ραγενομένων () αὐτῷ
παρὰ μ(ὲν) Ἥρα[ς] τυραννίδο(ς)
ἀκινήτου, πα[ρ]ᾶ δ' Ἀθηνᾶς
εὐψυχί(ας) κ(α)τ(ὰ) πόλεμο(ν), τῆς

⁷ The most illuminating discussions of *Odysseus Automolos* are found in Cassio 2002, 73-82; Casolari 2003, 47-54, 205-207; Willi 2008, 177-191; Jouanno 2012, 250-252; Konstantakos 2015a, 64-75; Favi 2017; Favi 2019; Napolitano 2020.

⁸ Cf. Casolari 2003, 51-53; Willi 2008, 183-188; Favi 2017, 20-28.

⁹ Cf. Revermann 2006, 299-302; Bakola 2010, 253-270.

¹⁰ Cf. also fr. 39 and 40 from the play, which also refer to Dionysus and his pastoral disguise.

δ' Ἀφροδί(της) κάλλιστό(ν) τε κ(αί)
 ἐπέραστον αὐτὸν ὑπάρ-
 χειν, κρίνει ταύτην νικᾶν.
 μ(ε)τ(ά) δ(ὲ) ταῦ(τα) πλεύσας εἰς
 Λακεδαίμο(να) (καί) τὴν Ἑλένην
 ἐξαγαγὼν ἐπανέρχεται
 εἰς τὴν Ἴδην.

«When Dionysus appears, they make fun of him and mock him. After Hera offers him unshakable royal power, Athena offers him bravery in war, and Aphrodite offers that he be the most handsome and attractive man, he judges her the winner. After this, he sails to Sparta and abducts Helen, and returns to Ida.»

In both plays the comic effect is generated when the archetypal figure of the mythical tradition (the great hero or god) dons the humble vestments of a poor workman (a shepherd or swineherd) in order to put his cunning plan to practice. In the following part of his comedy, Cratinus pushed this artifice one stage further, turning his protagonist into a complete laughing stock. After Dionysus had stolen Helen from Sparta, he was pursued by the wrathful Achaeans. Then the cowardly god dressed up as a ram, so as to hide and escape from his persecutors; he threw the woolly fleece of a sheep on his back, stood on all fours, and bleated «baa baa», like an animal of the flock. The scene is poignantly summarised in the hypothesis (P.Oxy. 663.23-33):

ἀκού(ει) δ(ὲ) με-
 τ' ὀλίγον τοὺς Ἀχαιοὺς πυρ-
 πολ]εῖν τὴν χώ(ραν) (καί) [ζητεῖν
 τὸν Ἀλέξαν[δ(ρον). τὴν μ(έν) οὖν Ἑλένη(ν)
 εἰς τάλαρον ὡς τά[χιστα
 κρύψας, ἑαυτὸν δ' εἰς κριο[ν
 μ(ε)τ(α)σκευάσας ὑπομένει
 τὸ μέλλον.

«Shortly thereafter he hears that the Achaeans are burning down the country and looking for Alexander. He hides Helen as quickly as he can in a cheese basket, disguises himself as a ram, and waits for what will happen next.»

The side-splitting image of the god hidden under the sheep's fleece is supplemented by two fragments of the play. In fr. 45 (ὁ δ' ἡλίθιος ὥσπερ πρόβατον βῆ βῆ λέγων βαδίζει, «the idiot is going about like a sheep and crying baa baa»), the speaker, probably Paris, has discovered the god's masquerade and makes fun of his grotesque animal behaviour. In fr. 48 (νακότητος ὥσπερ κωδάριον ἐφανόμην, «I appeared shorn, like a fleece»), Dionysus himself is wryly reflecting on his failed travesty.

There is also another notable parallel between Epicharmean poetics and Cratinus' mythological parodies: namely, the conscious, playful, and sophisticated meta-literary exploitation of the Homeric epic tradition. The audiences of both dramatists, in the highly developed cultural centres of wealthy Syracuse and classical Athens, were deeply familiar with the poems of Homer, which constituted the foremost reference texts of Greek spiritual life, the all-acknowledged source of learning and wisdom for the Hellenic world. All the spectators would have known the myths and the plots of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, down to small details. Anyone who had attended school would have been taught portions of the two Homeric epics, and the better educated citizens would have been

able to recall to memory or recite by heart famous Homeric passages. Thus, both Cratinus and Epicharmus exploit the familiarity of their public with the Homeric texts; they playfully allude to the spectators' knowledge of the epic canon, in order to create erudite literary jokes. In some scenes of their plays, the mythical heroes speak as though they have themselves read the Homeric poems. They seem to be profoundly versed in the canonical epic text; they know in detail the total story of their own adventures, as narrated in Homeric poetry, and they display conscious awareness of the traditional traits and idiosyncrasies of their character, as presented in the epic narrative.

For example, in a scene from Cratinus' *Odysseēs* the Ithacan hero offers the Cyclops the fatal wine to drink, and accompanies his offer with the following words (fr. 145):

τῆ νῦν τόδε πίθι λαβὼν ἤδη, καὶ τοῦνομά μ' εὐθὺς ἐρώτα

«Here, take and drink this, and then ask me straightaway my name.»

This is not fully consistent with the evolution of the plot in the traditional Homeric episode. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus at first simply proposes to the Cyclops to drink from the wineskin, which the hero has brought along in the Cyclops' cave (9.345-350). Polyphemus drinks, and only then, after he has tasted the wonderful wine, he takes the initiative and asks Odysseus for his name, promising to regale him with a worthy gift in exchange (9.353-356). By comparison to the Homeric model, Cratinus' Odysseus is more impatient and in a hurry to proceed with the all too familiar plot. He wants to advance the traditional epic story more quickly, to make it evolve and move faster towards its universally known end. Evidently, he wishes to put into practice his famous plan for the deception of the monster as soon as possible. For this reason, the comic Odysseus inverts the Homeric sequence of events and anticipates the Cyclops; Odysseus now insinuates himself to his monstrous host in advance the idea of the question concerning his name¹¹. Thus, the Cratinean Odysseus winks at the audience in a suggestive and conniving manner; he calls to the spectators' minds, with an almost conspiratorial complicity, their deep-rooted knowledge of the classic text of the Homeric episode. It is as though Odysseus were exhorting the Cyclops: «Drink of this wine now – and afterwards we all know what you have to do: Ask me my name, of course!»

Another passage of Cratinus' comedy (fr. 151) comes from the parodos of the Chorus, close to the beginning of the action. The Chorus, as indicated by the title, was made up of Odysseus' companions, who now pace in the *orchestra* and introduce themselves to the audience as connoisseurs of the epic myth:

σίγα νυν πᾶς, ἔχε σίγα,
καὶ πάντα λόγον τάχα πεύση·
ἡμῖν δ' Ἰθάκη πατρίς ἐστι,
πλέομεν δ' ἄμ' Ὀδυσσεὶ θείῳ

«Quiet now, keep quiet all of you, and you will soon hear the full story. Ithaca is our fatherland and we are sailing together with divine Odysseus.»

The Ithacan sailors, as they declare, are ready to tell the audience the whole *logos*. What do they mean by this ambiguous and polysemous term? At first sight, the *λόγος* refers to the events of the

¹¹ Cf. Mastromarco 1998, 37; Ornaghi 2004, 209; Bianchi 2017, 122-123.

past, the incidents that precede the plot of the play and form its background; this kind of information is a staple ingredient in the speeches of prologue figures or newly introduced Choruses at the beginning of the dramatic action. Nevertheless, the phrase πάντα λόγον might also imply, in this context, the entire story of Odysseus and his companions, as an integrated whole. The play has just opened; the Chorus is making its first appearance before the audience. Yet, Odysseus' men are in a position to give a full report of their adventures, from start to end; it might be assumed that they can do so because they have heard these adventures from the rhapsodes or have read about them in the text of the *Odyssey*, exactly as the audience has done (cf. Ornaghi 2004, 204-205, 208). Apparently, this kind of recherché literary irony, which presupposes detailed knowledge and recall of the parodied epic model, permeated Cratinus' script to a large extent.

Epicharmus was the first comic poet to introduce such allusive meta-literary games with the epic tradition. He was fond of this kind of erudite playfulness and pursued it as an emblematic technique of his refined comic writing. A characteristic example comes from an amusing scene of *Odysseus the Deserter*, transmitted by two overlapping papyri (fr. 97):

(ΟΔ.) ῥᾶστί κα τοῦτ' ἐργασαίμαν ἢ ὅτι
 ἀλλ' ὀρέω (τί, ῥζύρ', ἀνιῆς); τοῖδε τῶχαιοὶ πέλας
 ὡς ἔω πονηρ<ὀτ>ατος. (Β.) <ἀλλ' > ἀλιδίως πονηρὸς <εῖ>.
 (ΟΔ.) οὐ γὰρ ἔμπα[λίν] χ' ἀνύσαιμι' οὕτως ἀλοιῆσθαι κακόν
 – υ εἰνθὼν τεῖδε θωκησῶ τε καὶ λεξοῦ[...] ὡς
 ῥᾶδιν' εἴμειν ταῦτα καὶ τοῖς δεξιωτέροις ἐμεῦ[ς].
 (Β.) – υ –] ἐμὶν δοκεῖτε πάγχυ καὶ κατὰ τρόπον
 καὶ ἐοικότως ἐπεύξασθ', αἱ τις ἐνθυμῆν γ[α λῆ].
 (ΟΔ.) – υ –] γ' ὄφειλον ἐνθὲν ὑσπερ ἐκελήσ[– υ –
 – υ –]των ἀγαθικῶν κακὰ προτιμάσαι θ[υ –
 – υ κίν]δυνον τελέσσαι καὶ κλέος θεῖον λ[αβεῖν
 – υ –]ν μολῶν ἐς ἄστν, πάντα δ' εὔ σαφα[νέως
 πυθόμε]νος δίοις τ' Ἀχαιοῖς παιδί τ' Ἀτρείος φί[λω
 ἄψ ἀπαγ]γείλαι τὰ τηεῖ καὶ τὸς ἀσκηθῆς [

«(ODYSSEUS) ... I could very easily do this or any other thing. But I see —what is it, you wretch, why are you vexing me?— here are the Achaeans, close at hand, so that I be utterly miserable!

(B.) Well, you are quite miserable indeed.

(OD.) For I have no intention to hurry back. It is awful to be thrashed like this. I will rather go there; and I will sit down and make a speech that these things are easy even for people cleverer than I.

(B.) ... In my view, gentlemen, the curses you are calling down are fully fitting and reasonable, come to think of it ...

(OD.) ... I ought to have gone where I was ordered to ... prefer hardships over goods ... accomplish my dangerous mission and obtain divine glory ... after I came to the city and was informed of everything well and clearly, bring back a report about the situation there to the sublime Achaeans and the beloved son of Atreus, and being myself unharmed ...»

In this episode, Odysseus is returning to the Achaean camp after the failure of his spy mission, which he abandoned because of his cowardice. In Epicharmus' ludicrous version, the all-enduring and forbearing Homeric hero was turned into a scared and dodging little man. As soon as he received a smack from one of the enemies, Odysseus was daunted and disheartened, and as a result he gave his mission up and ran away in dismay. As he is returning to the Achaeans, Odysseus is conversing with a second character, who accompanies him or has met him on his way; possibly this is another Greek hero, for example, Diomedes or Thoas, who traditionally appear as Odys-

seus' companions in his undertakings in the epic repertoire¹². Anyhow, the Epicharmean Odysseus is full of anxiety about his impending meeting with his Achaean comrades, and rightly so. He has deserted his mission and now has to render account of his actions to the leaders of the army.

In this context, Odysseus sees the Greek camp before him, as he is approaching, and deplores his fate: «I see, here are the Achaeans, close at hand, so that I be utterly miserable!» (ὡς ἔω πονηρ<ότ>ατος, fr. 97.5). The second speaker gives a sarcastic reply to these cries of self-pity: «Well, you are very miserable indeed» (ἀλιδίως πονηρὸς <εἶ>). His answer betrays an ironical stance not only towards Odysseus but towards the epic tradition *in toto*. The second character's words may be read as a consciously humoristic and subversive allusion to the standard Homeric archetype of the long-suffering and much-enduring Odysseus. «But you are truly πονηρός» (in the authentic and original ancient sense: full of πόνος, tormented, overburdened with pains and misery) – this is what Odysseus' interlocutor tells the hero. In other words, «you are the πονηρός par excellence, the most wretched and miserable of all heroes». The protagonist of the *Odyssey* is literally the πονηρότατος of all characters in classical mythology, because he undergoes the greatest amount and the most grievous kinds of πόνοι (hardships, toils, evils) throughout the course of his story. The very word πόνος is repeatedly mentioned in the *Odyssey*, by several characters, as a keyword of Odysseus' fate and an emblematic synopsis of his character and his adventures¹³.

Thus, Epicharmus displays his skill in the learned *arte allusiva*, his mastery of erudite literary allusions. The dialogue between Odysseus and his fellow-wayfarer, in the course of their hesitant return to the Greek encampment, contains meta-literary games with the standards of the Homeric canon – games which forecast the artful epic parodies of Cratinus. Both these dramatists wrote for audiences which knew their Homer well. The patriarch of Attic comedy may well have learned this practice by studying Epicharmus' oeuvre.

The art of intertextual allusions took roots in the Attic comic theatre and was reused in the mythological plays of younger poets, produced decades after Cratinus, during the heyday of Athenian myth burlesque. An eloquent example is fr. 34 of Theopompus, who was active at the end of the fifth and the early decades of the fourth century, coming probably from his comedy *Odysseus*. The speaker is the Ithacan hero himself, as certified by Eustathius of Thessalonica (*Comm. in Od.* 1863.50-52), who cites the passage. Odysseus is describing an ornate garment he was presented with on some occasion:

χιτῶνά μοι
φέρων δέδωκας δαιδάλεον, ὃν ἦκασεν
ἄρισθ' Ὀμηρος κρομμύου λεπυχάνῳ

«You brought and gave me an elaborate cloak, which Homer excellently compared to the skin of an onion.»

¹² Thus, e.g., Cassio 2002, 77; Casolari 2003, 49, 52; Konstantakos 2015a, 67-68; Napolitano 2020, 330-333. Alternatively, it has been hypothesised that the second speaker is a Trojan character, who persecutes Odysseus and plagues him with blows and hostile remarks; see Kerkhof 2001, 127-128; Willi 2008, 181-188; Favi 2017. However, Odysseus is pictured very close to the Achaean camp (fr. 97.4). Would a Trojan aggressor dare venture so far from his own do-

main and risk being caught isolated in the enemies' area?

¹³ See e.g. *Od.* 12.116-117 (Circe to Odysseus): καὶ δὴ αὖ τοι πολεμήϊα ἔργα μέμηλε / καὶ πόνος. *Od.* 20.47-48 (Athena to Odysseus): ἐγὼ ... ἢ σε φυλάσσω / ἐν πάντεσσι πόνοις. *Od.* 23.249-250 (Odysseus on his own forthcoming adventures): ἔτ' ὄπισθεν ἀμέτρητος πόνος ἔσται, / πολλὸς καὶ χαλεπός, τὸν ἐμὲ χρὴ πάντα τελέσσαι.

The mention of Homer entails a reference to a well-known passage from *Odyssey* 19. The Homeric Odysseus has been disguised as a beggar to enter his own *megaron* and spy on the suitors who are feasting there. He meets Penelope and introduces himself as a Cretan fortune-hunter brought low by the adversities of fate (19.165ff.). In this context, he presents an entire false tale, according to which he once met Odysseus in Crete, when the Ithacan king had moored on the island on his way to Troy (19.185-248). At that time, as the disguised hero claims, Odysseus wore a bright cloak which looked like the skin of a dry onion and glistened like the sun (19.232-234):

τὸν δὲ χιτῶν' ἐνόησα περὶ χροῖ σιγαλόεντα,
οἷόν τε κρομύοιο λοπὸν κάτα ἰσχαλέοιο·
τῶς μὲν ἔην μαλακός, λαμπρὸς δ' ἦν ἡέλιος ὄς.

«I noticed the glistening cloak around his skin, similar to the skin of a dried onion; it was so soft and brilliant like the sun itself.»

In Theopompus' amusing burlesque of the epic episode, the humour lies in the fact that Odysseus invokes the aforementioned Homeric description and ascribes it to Homer by name. This comic Odysseus, therefore, has read the *Odyssey* and knows the Homeric narration of his own adventures by heart. Another fragment from the *Odysseus* is also spoken most probably by the Ithacan hero; this time, Odysseus paraphrases some tragic verses by Euripides, as he acts out the role of the parasite in his palace (fr. 35: Εὐριπίδου τᾶριστον, οὐ κακῶς ἔχον, / τᾶλλότρια δειπνεῖν τὸν καλῶς εὐδαίμονα, «Euripides' excellent verse, not badly put at all, that the truly happy man dines at someone else's expense»). Theopompus' Odysseus must have been a prime connoisseur of ancient Greek literature, gifted with a literary memory comparable to that of an Alexandrian scholar (cf. Farmer 2020, 344-351).

Readers will no doubt recall the second part of the *Don Quixote*, a classic of intertextuality in the early history of the European novel. In this celebrated book, the daydreaming knight and his squire Sancho are supposed to have read the first part of Cervantes' work, which had circulated a decade before. They have also perused the piratical sequel which had been published by a certain Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda. They thus sit down to discuss and criticise the narration of their adventures and the presentation of their own characters in the novels which gave them life and subsistence in the first place¹⁴. This kind of intertextual *mise en abyme* was not an invention of the European novelists. It was first exploited by the masters of Greek comic drama in Sicily and Athens.

2. ARISTOPHANES AND HIS VIGNETTES OF MYTH BURLESQUE

Aristophanes' use of myth burlesque presents an intriguing case. The great comic poet definitively turned towards full-scale mythical drama at the end of his career, with his two last plays, *Cocalus* and *Aeolosicon*, produced during the late 380s. The former comedy travestied an episode from the cycle of myths regarding the famous craftsman Daedalus. After his escape from Crete, Daedalus took refuge in the court of King Cocalus at Sicily, to avoid the persecution of the Cre-

¹⁴ *Don Quixote*, part II, ch. 2 and 59; cf. the celebrated essay by Borges 1974, 667-669.

tan king Minos. The intrigue implemented by Daedalus in collaboration with Cocalus' daughters, so as to get rid of the annoying Cretan dynast, must have been amusingly staged in the Aristophanic scenario¹⁵. The *Aeolosicon* was a parody of a notorious Euripidean tragedy, the *Aeolus*, which dramatised the incestuous love affair between Aeolus' son Macareus and his sister Canace. In Aristophanes' version, the title hero was an amalgamation of the mythical Aeolus, lord of the winds, and Sicon, a typical comic cook; the *liaison dangereuse* between brother and sister must also have been treated in an appropriately burlesque spirit (see Orth 2017, 9-25). At the time when these two plays were produced, mythological comedy was enjoying its greatest vogue in the theatre of Athens. As transpires from titles and testimonia, almost two thirds of the plays presented in the comic festivals were myth burlesques (Nesselrath 1990, 189-204). The ageing Aristophanes evidently adapted to the trend that was prevalent in the new, dawning theatrical age of Middle Comedy.

On the other hand, during his heyday in the fifth century, Aristophanes does not seem to have been much preoccupied with mythological comedy. A few of his lost plays have been claimed by scholars as full-scale mythological travesties, chiefly on account of their titles, which point to mythical figures and their stories. In most cases, however, the remains of the plays *per se* are scant, the surviving materials are obscure, and the evidence for the central theme and overall orientation of the plot is inconclusive. The possibility cannot be excluded that the corresponding comedies were not dedicated *in toto* to the travesty of myth but combined mythological figures and story-patterns with ordinary human characters, themes of fantasy, and situations from contemporary Athenian life, as happens also in other Aristophanic scripts, such as the *Birds* and the *Frogs* (see below).

For example, the *Daedalus* has been considered as a burlesque of Zeus' amorous adventures with Leda (see fr. 193-194, which refer to the birth of a giant egg) and other heroines, in which Daedalus would have served as the god's assistant¹⁶. Given the scantiness of the material, however, this cannot be ascertained. Daedalus could equally well have appeared in a plot set in fifth-century Athens or elsewhere and have narrated his past adventures in Zeus' service. The *Danaids* is assumed to have centred on the legendary wedding banquet in which Danaus' daughters killed their husbands¹⁷. Nonetheless, it might also have been a play about women (like *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae*), with the mythical appellation of the title used metaphorically to denote rebellious females. Very little is known about the plot of the twin comedies called *Dramas or The Centaur* and *Dramas or Niobos*¹⁸. The very title *Dramata*, used for both of them, suggests a script focused on matters of the theatre and the life of the stage and perhaps entailing metatheatrical effects. The plot might have revolved around a theatrical festival or performance, in which the Centaur and Niobos (possibly a male travesty of the famous Aeschylean heroine Niobe) would have appeared as characters in a kind of play-within-the-play.

In the same vein, the title *Dionysus Shipwrecked* points to a fictitious, made-up plot, rather than to a known myth of the traditional mythical heritage. The comedy may have shown Dionysus travelling at sea and experiencing fictional adventures, coined as a whole by the comic poet, as happened also in Eupolis' *Taxiarchs* (see Storey 2003, 246-260) and Aristophanes' *Frogs*. The *Polyidus* is naturally associated with the homonymous mythical seer, who resurrected young Glau-

¹⁵ See Casolari 2003, 169-175; Pellegrino 2015, 220; Imperio 2023, 227-233.

¹⁶ Pellegrino 2015, 130-133; Bagordo 2022, 126-134.

¹⁷ Gil 1989, 77-78; Pellegrino 2015, 168.

¹⁸ Casolari 2003, 254-258; Pellegrino 2015, 179.

cus, the son of Minos. Nevertheless, the play might also have been a satire against contemporary diviners and oracle-mongers, who were at the peak of their activity in the years of the Peloponnesian war and are mocked in several Aristophanic plays¹⁹. The legendary Polyidus could have appeared in an Athenian setting in order to castigate these charlatans. The *Phoenissae*, presumably a parody of Euripides' tragedy of the same title, comprises references to fifth-century theatre and domestic life (fr. 571, 573, 575). It was apparently a play in the style of the *Thesmophoriazusae* and the extensive tragic parodies included in the *Acharnians* and the *Frogs*²⁰, rather than a proper myth burlesque such as the comedies of Epicharmus and Cratinus.

Overall, it is difficult to establish a cohesive and wilful preoccupation of Aristophanes with the genre of mythological comedy during the largest part of his career. On the basis of the extant remains of his oeuvre, it is impossible to detect a clear and unambiguous case of myth burlesque proper before the poet's final plays in the fourth century. This clearly contradistinguishes Aristophanes from other authors of Old Comedy, such as Cratinus or Aristophanes' near contemporary Plato Comicus²¹, in whose overall produce myth burlesques occupy a prominent place, immediately discernible even in the fragmentary materials that are preserved from their works.

The causes of Aristophanes' comparative lack of interest in purely mythical scenarios may lie in a complex combination of multiple factors. His artistic physiognomy and his attachment to other kinds of material (especially fantasy, utopian fiction, and political satire) will have played an important part. A certain «anxiety of influence» towards the master figure of Cratinus may also have been significant. In the age of mature Old Comedy, myth burlesque was par excellence a specialty of Cratinus, who took over the model of Epicharmean mythical drama and evolved it towards new and original directions. Cratinus, the first true genius of Athenian comic theatre, was a «father figure» for the poets of Aristophanes' generation; he represented a hugely influential paragon of comic art for the younger playwrights, who were virtually his pupils and epigones. Aristophanes, as is evident from his references to Cratinus in his plays, was struggling to break free from Cratinus' impact in order to establish his own, independent creative identity²². Under these conditions, it is reasonable that he would avoid the form of myth burlesque, which was so strongly associated with Cratinus' oeuvre. Perhaps it is not fortuitous that the greatest vogue and heyday of mythological comedy in Athenian theatre only began at the end of the fifth century, after Cratinus' death in the late 420s. The Attic poets were at last free to try their hand at a genre which was up to then branded by the daunting personality of the towering master of the past.

Nevertheless, even if Aristophanes did not produce full-scale mythological plays at the height of his career, he did not remain altogether indifferent to this amusing genre. In his extant comedies he sometimes includes individual episodes which revolve around gods or mythical heroes and display the typical features of myth burlesque, as known from the specimens of other dramatists. These particular episodes may be considered as small cameos or miniatures of mythical travesty, which have been incorporated into a more complex, multi-collective, and polyphonic comic composition. In general, Aristophanes likes to fuse various different genres, forms, and modes of the comic tradition in order to create his composite plots. Within the framework of a single play, he may string together individual scenes which reflect, as applicable in each case, the fairy-tale comic

¹⁹ Pellegrino 2015, 273; Torchio 2021, 236-237.

²⁰ Cf. Miles 2017, 188-198; Bagordo 2020, 165-166.

²¹ On whom see Rosen 1995, 123-136; Pirrotta 2009, 45-46, 55-56.

²² Concerning Cratinus' impact on Aristophanic comedy, and Aristophanes' concomitant «anxiety of influence» towards Cratinus, see Luppe 2000; Ruffell 2002; Bakola 2010, 16-29, 59-80; Biles 2011, 103-166.

fictions in the style of Crates and Pherecrates, the Epicharmean or Pherecratean comedy of characters and social customs, the political satire characteristic of Cratinus and Eupolis, or folk and sub-literary forms of comic spectacle, such as Megarian farces, phallic dances, and low-brow popular mime (see Konstantakos 2021; Konstantakos 2022, 133-136).

In the context of this assortment of generic scenes, the Aristophanic plays also include vignettes of myth burlesque, in other words, episodes which ridicule traditional divine and heroic characters following the typical techniques of mythical travesty. In the first part of the *Frogs*, Dionysus is disguised as Heracles in order to travel to the underworld; in the course of his journey, he experiences characteristic scenic routines in which the comic Heracles used to be involved in the mythological comedies produced by Aristophanes' contemporaries and epigones. For example, Dionysus, in the guise of Heracles, puts up at an inn and has a brawl with the innkeepers (*Frogs* 549-578); the same comic situation was staged in Plato Comicus' *Zeus Kakoumenos* (fr. 46-48) and afterwards in mythical travesties by Antiphanes (*Omphale*, fr. 174-176) and Eubulus (*Amaltheia*, fr. 6). Dionysus also suffers the standard mishap of the gluttonous Heracles of the comic tradition, who is cheated and loses the dinner he expected (*Frogs* 503-533). This was a staple motif of the primitive Megarian farce, which was taken over in Attic theatre and cleverly developed by Athenian playwrights in the late fifth and the fourth century. In all these cases, Aristophanes condenses into a single scene, extending to a few tens of verses, types of plot which were developed to considerable length in the myth burlesques of his colleagues and constituted the central dramatic core of entire comedies or of large portions of their action. Aristophanes constructs small miniatures of the genre of mythical travesty and incorporates them as separate acts into a more composite and kaleidoscopic dramatic design (Konstantakos 2020).

The same tactics can be observed in a famous scene from the finale of the *Birds*, the embassy of the three gods to the comic protagonist Peisetaerus (1565-1692). This episode is another vignette of mythological comedy introduced into a broader plot which is made up, as a whole, of original imaginary inventions and materials of disparate generic provenance. The starring characters are the three representatives of the Olympian gods, Poseidon, Heracles, and the barbarian Triballus, who come to Nephelokokkygia to negotiate reconciliation and peace with the birds. In this interlude of divine comedy, many of the usual dramatic conventions and thematic patterns of Attic mythological burlesque are assembled and merged into a synoptic generic pastiche.

The three gods come into contact and converse with an invented character, the comic hero Peisetaerus, who used to be an ordinary Athenian man at the beginning of the play, although by this point of the action he has been transformed into a half-human and half-avian crossbreed, and has been effectively established as ruler of the birds. This is not an unusual phenomenon in the scenarios of mythological comedy: the traditional gods and mythical figures may encounter and interact with common mortals, fictional personages, or fantastic beings, for the sake of comic effect. In Plato Comicus' *Zeus Kakoumenos*, Heracles takes shelter at an inn or a brothel and has dealings there with the master of the establishment and with a pretty female slave (fr. 46-47; Konstantakos 2020, 382-387). In another Attic myth burlesque, illustrated on an Apulian vase of the early fourth century (British Museum F 151), the Centaur Chiron is attended by a stock comic slave called Xanthias. In Pherecrates' *Myrmekanthropoi*, Deucalion and Pyrrha, the heroic couple of the Flood, became the rulers of a hybrid tribe of creatures which were half men and half ants²³.

²³ Quaglia 2003, 263-269; Franchini 2020, 129-132.

The two Olympian gods, Poseidon and Heracles, who are the main acting figures of the scene, are treated according to the standard techniques of mythological comedy. They are assimilated to well-known anthropological types of contemporary Athenian society or to stock figures of the comic stage. Poseidon is drawn as a conceited and pompous Athenian aristocrat, full of snobbery, intolerant of the lower classes, and distrustful of democratic institutions (cf. Hofmann 1976, 128-129). He haughtily reproves the uncouth Triballus, who is ignorant of the dress code and behaviour etiquette demanded by the occasion, and indignantly condemns the democracy which awards state offices to such low-brow persons (1567-1573). Heracles is presented as an inveterate glutton, as was usual in the comic tradition. Faced with the prospect of enjoying a good meal, he is ready to set all his duties aside and submit to the enemy (1603-1640, 1689-1692). Heracles is also assimilated to another typical character of the comic stage: he is an impetuous and prodigal son in a troubled relationship with his austere and close-fisted father, Zeus (1641-1675). He thus incarnates a comic archetype well attested already in fifth-century theatre, from the Pheidippides of the *Clouds* to the young lovers of Pherecrates' comedies (e.g. fr. 77, 78).

Both gods are dragged into the common everyday life and social culture of classical Athens (Hofmann 1976, 134-137). Their family relations with the rest of the Olympic pantheon are regulated according to the Athenian state laws of citizenship and inheritance. Heracles is proved to have no claim on the property of Zeus, his father, because he is an illegitimate child, born of a foreign woman. Zeus has never presented Heracles before the *phratiria*, so as to legitimise him as his genuine offspring and establish his rights as a trueborn citizen. In the event of Zeus' death, Athena will become an *epikleros*, an heiress of her father's property in the absence of a genuine male child; according to the provisions of Attic law, she will then be obliged to marry her closest blood relative – in her case, her own uncle Poseidon (1648-1670). The all-powerful gods are subjected to the commonplace vicissitudes and the petty experiences of ordinary bourgeois householders, such as one would meet in every Athenian neighbourhood. This is the essential comic effect of Attic mythological comedy, from Cratinus to the mid-fourth century (Konstantakos 2014).

A number of typical themes of Athenian mythological comedies are also reflected in this scene, which thus resembles an anthology of snapshots from contemporary myth burlesque. Heracles' strained and mistrustful relationship with his father Zeus recalls the central situation in Plato Comicus' *Zeus Kakoumenos*, in which the prodigal and lustful Heracles must have caused harm to his divine father in some way. Similarly, in a myth travesty illustrated on an Apulian vase (Hermitage GR-2129), Heracles enters Zeus' temple and greedily eats the food offerings deposited there for the supreme god, while Zeus watches him and angrily gesticulates from his throne (Konstantakos 2015b, 186-192). At the end of the Aristophanic scene, Heracles enacts another standard routine: he tries to stay back and lay hands on the delicious birds which Peisetaerus has been roasting on the spit; but Poseidon forcefully drags him away, and Heracles loses the opportunity to enjoy this feast (1689-1692). Thus, the episode closes with the age-old theme of Heracles cheated of his dinner, which has already been signalled as a perennial favourite of mythical travesties.

Even the central theme and framework of the scene, the embassy of three members who are dispatched to negotiate with a strong opponent in order to put an end to a harmful conflict, may recall another famous mythical episode: the embassy sent by Agamemnon to placate Achilles in the *Iliad* (9.182-657). The Homeric delegation also consists of three men, Odysseus, Ajax, and Phoenix, who may correspond, as though reflected in a ridiculous and distorted manner, with the three divine envoys to Peisetaerus. The deceitful and rhetorical Poseidon would be the equivalent of Odysseus, the wily speaker. Ajax, the blunt soldier, is caricatured in the impetuous and brutish Heracles. As for Phoenix, the exiled stranger, he is ludicrously vulgarised in the figure of the al-

ien, barbarian Triballus, with the addition of an extra comic reversal: while Phoenix delivers the longest and most eloquent speech in the Iliadic scene (9.434-605), the Aristophanic Triballus can barely speak and only stammers a few lines of gibberish.

If the Iliadic embassy is indeed the most distant model of the burlesque scene of the *Birds*, Aristophanes is thereby looking back to the Homeric travesties of Epicharmus and Cratinus, who used to base their mythical plays on materials from the epic canon, especially from the poems concerning the Trojan War and its aftermath. With this Aristophanic glance towards the ultimate roots of mythological comedy as a literary form, the game of intertextuality comes full circle.

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