

ARISTOPHANES AND THE *PROMETHEUS BOUND*

It has been acknowledged ever since H. T. Becker's dissertation on Aeschylus in Greek comedy¹ that Aristophanes' plays can provide us with a *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the *Prometheus Bound*.² The evidence is clearly presented by Becker and shows that there are a large number of echoes, particularly in the *Knights*³ and later in the *Birds*.⁴ Of these latter the most interesting occurs at *Birds* 1547, a line spoken by Prometheus himself, μισῶ δ' ἅπαντας τοὺς θεοὺς ὡς οἶσθα σύ which is certainly meant to parody *PV* 975, ἀπλῶ λόγῳ τοὺς πάντας ἐχθαίρω θεοὺς, a line also spoken by Prometheus. It makes explicit what is surely implicit in all Aristophanic imitation, that what we have here is not just a play but a particular context that is so well known that the reference is meant to be picked up not just by the fictional 'you' to whom it is addressed but by the audience, too; in short we may infer that the line of the *Prometheus Bound* was already a classic quotation.

But so far all this, although generally agreed, has done nothing to show whether or not Aristophanes regarded Aeschylus as the author of the *Prometheus Bound*. And unfortunately, as is well known, Aristophanes never does tell us in so many words. At no point in any of his extant plays does he make any direct mention of the *Prometheus Bound* or of Aeschylus in connection with it. And this may be thought to be the end of the matter. However, if we cease to be blinded by this reasonably obvious fact and turn our hopefully undamaged eyes elsewhere, in particular towards at least some of the vocabulary which Aristophanes employs in connection with Aeschylus, and then take into account what we have already established, namely that the play was already well known, then we can, if we proceed with circumspection, say something both about Aristophanes' view of the authorship of the play and perhaps even about the authorship itself.

As far as time is concerned, one of the first passages that might tell us something occurs at *Clouds* 1367, where Aristophanes describes Aeschylus as being φόβου πλέων ἀξύστατον στόμφακα κρημνοποιόν. Now obviously much of the point of this is to describe Aeschylus himself in the sort of verbiage with which people at that date associated the plays of Aeschylus. We are in fact immediately struck by the ponderousness of the words. But how Aeschylean is the description in fact? Neither φόβος nor στόμφαξ is Aeschylean at all. And there is certainly nothing especially Aeschylean about πλέως. The imitation of tone does not, therefore, have to be based

¹ Attention was drawn to Aeschylean echoes long before. One of the first to have done so was Theodor Kock in his second edition of the *Birds* (1876), and was followed by W. H. van de Sande Bakhuyzen in his *De Parodia in Comediis Aristophanis* (Utrecht, 1877). But H. T. Becker's *Aischylos in der griechischen Komödie* (Darmstadt, 1914) did this more systematically than any of his predecessors and still remains, in my view, the best treatment of the subject. It is also worth seeing A. de Propriis, *Eschilo nella critica dei Greci* (Turin, 1941), A. Wartelle, *Histoire du texte d'Eschyle dans l'antiquité* (Paris, 1971) and M. Griffith, *The Authenticity of Prometheus Bound* (Cambridge, 1977).

² See M. L. West, 'The Prometheus Trilogy', *JHS* 99 (1979), 141, for some possible evidence that at least the *Prometheus Unbound* may be parodied in Cratinus' *Ploutoi*, which may mean that 429 is the *terminus ante quem* for the 'trilogy' as a whole.

³ *Knights* 758 seems to come from a combination of *PV* 308 and *PV* 59; *Knights* 836 is derived from *PV* 613; *Knights* 924 with its unusual and highly specific image ἱπούμενος – unaccountably not mentioned by Griffith – is almost certainly based on *PV* 365. Any of these echoes on their own might have been an accident. Added together they rule out that possibility.

⁴ *Birds* 685 ff. is derived from *PV* 547 ff.

upon a scholarly pastiche of the original author's diction. So we must be careful about going beyond what the evidence shows us. However, that said, the case *is* different with ἀξύστατος, which is an exceptionally uncommon word and is not found elsewhere in the whole of Aristophanes' extant corpus. It does occur at *Agamemnon* 1467 for perhaps the only time before its appearance in this context here.⁵ There can be no reasonable doubt then that this word at least has been deliberately unearthed from the poet's work to recall and mock the poet. What about the last word in the line? Here the position is alas a little more complicated. κρημνός is found both in Sophocles⁶ and Euripides⁷ and may have been dragged in here merely to make the context sound vaguely tragic and therefore pompous.⁸ However, if we felt that a reference to Aeschylus might be expected to contain something more specifically Aeschylean than this, it might be worth while examining where in the Aeschylean corpus this too appeared. For there is just a little evidence to suggest that Aristophanes thought of the word as in some sense Aeschylean. This is shown by his re-use of a similar idea at *Frogs* 928–9, where once again it is the words of his Aeschylus (and only Aeschylus, not any other tragedian) that are described as ἱππόκρημνα, another compound form of κρημνός, suggesting there must have been an association in his mind between cliffs and the diction of Aeschylus. Now in the extant Aeschylean corpus – and it is admittedly important to bear in mind that Aristophanes had access to rather more of it than we have – I suppose one's mind would go automatically to the *Prometheus Bound*. It is the only complete play where κρημνός is used in either a simple or a compound form, κρημνός being used twice, at line 5 in the form of ὑψηλόκρημνος and at line 421 in the form of ὑψίκρημνος. But, as I have said, we have to remember that ours is a very incomplete selection of Aeschylus' plays, and the word and its derivatives may, for all we know, have appeared in any and every one of the lost plays. And it does in fact appear at fragment 28. However, on the basis of our existing knowledge, and on the assumption that Aristophanes considered Aeschylus to be the author, we might reasonably say that the *Prometheus Bound* is a very likely source for the image. For it is not merely a purely verbal feature of the play, but a striking allusion to its highly unconventional setting and the unique position of its principal character. And it is surely material of this kind which Aristophanes will have been looking to share with his audience rather than any recondite allusion to an unfamiliar context which one might legitimately look for in a later writer.⁹

The κρημνός image is striking because it occurs twice in connection with Aeschylus and in two different plays. If, however, we confine our attention to the *Frogs* there is another, in some ways even more striking, piece of evidence. For at 837, which again describes Aeschylus in pseudo-Aeschylean vocabulary, we find the following three-word line:

ἄνθρωπον ἀγριοποιὸν αὐθαδέστομον

which, being amongst the first lines about Aeschylus in the play, is obviously meant to give us a general outline of him as a writer. And it does this, firstly by being a three-word line,¹⁰ secondly by its choice of vocabulary, in particular by its deploying

⁵ Where it is used with ἄλγος (perhaps part of the point here).

⁶ *Ajax* 72; *Scyth.* frg. 493.1.

⁷ *IT* 1373; *Hippolytus* 124; *Phoenissae* 1315.

⁸ A point which might be underlined by Aristophanes' very similar use of the word at *Knights* 626 ff., a play which, however, shows, as we have seen, some evidence of familiarity with the *PV*.

⁹ See K. J. Dover on Aristophanes, *Clouds* 1367: 'It is debatable... how far popular literary judgements are founded on subliminal perception of statistics rather than on a few memorable passages.'

¹⁰ See W. B. Stanford, 'Three-word iambic trimeters', *CR* 54 (1940), 8–10 and M. Griffith, op. cit. 91 ff.

of some of those compound adjectives of which Aeschylus, unlike both his predecessors and successors,¹¹ was so fond, and thirdly perhaps by the choice of the elements inside these words. Thus both *ἀγριο-* (*Persians* 614 etc.) and *-ποιον* (*Seven against Thebes* 398) are found in the Aeschylean corpus. But more interesting than these is the last adjective, which contains both an *αῦθαδο-* and *-στομος* element. Let us take the latter first. *-στομew/ος* is found in a number of Aeschylean plays. It occurs once in the *Persae*, twice in the *Seven*, three times in the *Supplices* and once in the *Agamemnon*. Aristophanes could obviously have derived the idea from any or all of these as well as from some no longer extant play. But it is used even more in the *Prometheus Bound* – almost as many times, in fact, as in all the rest added together, occurring as it does six times, at lines 180, 327, 661, 674, 803 and 953. More important still, predicated as it is both of Prometheus (twice) and – as is the way in this play – of his enemies too (once), it seems to be used not merely as one of the play's dominant images, but an image giving moral definition to the play in the same way as words suffixed with *-κτονew* and *-κτονος* do to the later stages of the *Oresteia*. This in itself is interesting, but we should also note that the root is compounded with *αῦθαδο-*, a verbal element which may not even have existed before the *Prometheus Bound*, and is certainly not found anywhere else in the extant Aeschylean corpus. At the same time the *αῦθαδο-* element is highly characteristic of the *Prometheus* both numerically (*αῦθάδης* and words formed from it occur at 64, 79, 436, 907, 1012 and 1036) and in the way that it too is meant to pinpoint a salient feature of its leading character,¹² perhaps even having been coined specifically for this play. In the light of these observations there cannot, I think, be any serious doubt that Aristophanes was drawing upon the *Prometheus Bound* as much as other Aeschylean plays – actually rather more – to build up his picture of Aeschylus. And there is some additional evidence for this as early as the very next line of the *Frogs*, where, despite Stanford's legitimate comment *ad loc.* that with all the privatives here the line sounds Euripidean, two of the adjectives also seem to have had a particular connection with the *Prometheus Bound*. *ἀχάλινος* is not found in Aeschylus, but *χαλινός* is one of his favourite words and is found at *Pers.* 196, *Sept.* 123, 207, 393, *Ag.* 238, 1066 and *Pr.* 672. But it appears perhaps most memorably in the phrase *χαλινοῖς ἐν πετρίνοισιν* at *PV* 562, where it forms not merely a powerful phrase in itself but also spotlights again that bondage which, as the (later?) title shows, is easily the most dominant feature of the play both visually and imaginatively speaking. And *ἀκρατής*, the very next word to it – a word which was anything but common in literary contexts during the Fifth Century, is *only* found in the whole Aeschylean, and pseudo-Aeschylean, corpus at *PV* 884, where in making Io describe her own oncoming madness he makes her call herself *γλώσσης ἀκρατής* which is about as close to the words *ἀκρατές* . . . *στόμα* here as anything I could imagine short of exact verbal repetition.

Surely all this is sufficient to show that in one of his very earliest pictures of Aeschylus in the *Frogs* Aristophanes is using the *Prometheus Bound* as one of his source-books. In addition there is one other passage in the *Frogs* which, even taken on its own, shows undoubted borrowing from the *PV*. This also involves the word *αῦθάδης* and occurs at 1020, where Dionysus scolds Aeschylus for one of his 'Aeschylean silences':

Αἰσχύλε, λέξον μηδ' αὔθαδως σεμνυνόμενος χαλέπανε.

¹¹ See G. C. Richards, 'Greek Compound Adjectives with a Verbal Element in Tragedy', *CQ* 12 (1918), 15 ff.; D. M. Clay, *A formal analysis of the vocabularies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides* (Minneapolis and Athens, 1958 and 1960), and M. Griffith, *op. cit.* 147 ff.

¹² Like the *-στομος* root, it too is projected in an oddly 'Freudian' way by the principal sufferer from the condition on to those whom he dislikes with whom he comes into contact.

Here, too, as with the last instance, we have not merely the general reflection that *αὐθάδης* is not a word which one would ever have dreamed of associating with Aeschylus without the aid of the *PV*, but a shrewd idea of where Aristophanes got his association between *αὐθαδία* and silence, which are not at first sight obviously connected concepts. For at *PV* 436, where Prometheus apologises somewhat oddly for his silence, he too brings in the notion of *αὐθαδία*:

μή τοι χλιδῇ δοκεῖτε μῆδ' αὐθαδίᾳ
σιγᾶν με.

And though there are some difficulties in understanding why the apology is necessary or the idea of *αὐθαδία* is so gratuitously dragged into it,¹³ there cannot, I think, be any doubt that it was this passage – and perhaps the very oddity of it – that led Aristophanes too to link the two ideas together and associate both of them with Aeschylus in particular.

This is, I think, the decisive part of my case. But if one once grants that the *PV* is a vital ingredient in Aristophanes' picture of Aeschylus, other echoes, too, might be found, some already spotted by Becker, who, indeed, on page 81 of his dissertation comments on their possible bearing on the authenticity issue. Thus, as we have already seen, Io was an essential ingredient in the picture of Aeschylus at 838. And it is also possible she suggested a detail in the picture earlier at 816 when we are forewarned that Aeschylus *μανίας ὑπὸ δεινῆς ὄμματα στροβήσεται* – a phrase that may recall the striking description of Io at *PV* 882, *τροχοδινεῖται δ' ὄμμαθ' ἐλίγδην*, both passages sharing, in addition to their verbal similarity, both a bovine element (Io being a heifer and Aeschylus being compared a little earlier to an angry bull – *ταυρηδὸν ἐγκύψας κάτω* (804)) and madness. Again the adjective *ἵπποβάμονα* at 821 may go back to *PV* 805 rather than *Supplices* 284 on the purely statistical grounds that, if we exclude this passage and some words which may come from a number of different contexts, the *PV* is cited about ten times in Aristophanes for every once that the *Supplices* is (see the index to Becker). Finally the characterisation of Aeschylus' style at 939 ff.:

ἀλλ' ὥς παρέλαβον τὴν τέχνην παρὰ σοῦ τὸ πρῶτον εὐθὺς
οἰδοῦσαν ὑπὸ κομπασμάτων καὶ ῥημάτων ἐπαχθῶν

may be an echo of the *PV* as Becker *ibid.* p. 55 suggests. For if any specifically Aeschylean echo is intended, as opposed to a mere 'heavy' sound derived from tragedy in general, *κόμπασμα* is found at *PV* 361 (though also at *Septem* 794, another play of which Aristophanes is fond) whilst *ἐπαχθής* is found within the extant Aeschylean corpus only at *PV* 49. Now obviously these last are nowhere near such weighty evidence as the lines cited earlier. But if they are meant to refer to the *PV*, they suggest that Aristophanes – and perhaps his audience, too – had a surprisingly detailed knowledge of the play and in particular of what seem to us to be rather unimportant contexts. And this is enough, I think, to make it virtually certain that Aristophanes regarded the *Prometheus Bound* not merely as a part of the Aeschylean corpus but as one of its most important parts, citing the play, as he does, far more than any other.

Now, of course, this is not to say that the play is by Aeschylus. All the same, assuming my contention is correct, it does pose two problems for those who have come to believe that the play is patently not by Aeschylus. Firstly, how could a play well enough known to be one of Aristophanes' principal targets amongst the Aeschylean

¹³ cf. O. Taplin, 'Aeschylean silences and silences in Aeschylus', *HSCP* 76 (1972), 83–4, for a recent discussion of the issue.

corpus – indeed, as we have seen, *the* principal target – have come to be regarded as the work of Aeschylus, especially in a city so tightly knit, so well informed and obviously humming with gossip as Athens, and especially when it would have been such a slight to the honour of the man or family of the man who did write the play for it to have been so wrongly attributed? For if, as we have seen, it was well known, not to say notorious (cf. *Birds* 1547), it could hardly have slid its way unobtrusively into the corpus. Secondly, how did Aristophanes with his unrivalled knowledge of all those other plays to which we now have no access (approximately 30 in all, according to Becker) come to make such a crass error as to suppose that a play so obviously different from the rest of Aeschylus was nevertheless written by him?

Obviously a scholar can only work with the materials to hand. But we should perhaps do well to reflect that statistical work on the Aeschylean corpus derives its material from what amounts to no more than four plays (the *Oresteia* being merely one play from the point of view of date and, to a great extent, of content and tone, too), all written during a period of little more than a decade and a half of a creative life which perhaps lasted something like forty years in all; moreover, it cannot take account of that musical and choreographic element which must still have been an integral part of the live performances of Aristophanes' time. I have felt for some time that, despite the genuine insights it has given us into so many aspects of the play, the statistical approach is perhaps more limited in scope than, in our enthusiasm, we tend to suppose.

If Aristophanes, who had at least some sensitivity to the passing fads of language,¹⁴ who spoke Attic Greek himself, who had had a lifetime's experience of the living tragic theatre, who had keenly studied the tragic texts for material for his own plays and who was, above all, a distinguished wordsmith in his own right, could have supposed the play was by Aeschylus, perhaps with us, too, a little more humility is called for.

*The School of Classics,
The University of Leeds*

EVERARD FLINTOFF

¹⁴ cf. C. P. Snow, *The Affair* (London, 1960), p. 117: "'How did you know I was here at all?' 'Ah ha! I have my spies. I have my spies.' (How in the world, I wondered, did the old man pick up jargon of the forties and fifties like that phrase etc.)". We do not credit Aristophanes with much verbal sensitivity if we suppose this to have been beyond him. But for two possible examples of an attempt to catch the tone of a particular generation, both within the same play, see *Clouds* 973 ff. for a parody of the older generation's mania on young boys, and *Clouds* 1087–1104 for a spirited and perhaps never bettered parody of the Socratic elenchus.