

THE DRAMATIC SYNOPSIS ATTRIBUTED TO ARISTOPHANES OF BYZANTIUM

This is, in effect, an extended footnote to *CQ* 34 (1984), 271.¹ There, having occasion to discuss the ‘Aristophanic’ synopsis of Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, I expressed doubt about the value of such synopses in general; and I must now seek to justify this aspersions.² I am not claiming any expertise in the study of Hellenistic scholarship, and shall largely be leaving it to others to decide what conclusion to draw from the facts I am pointing out; but my note will have served its purpose if it stimulates discussion.

This applies especially to my remarks on the language of the synopses, since I hardly know what kind of Greek to expect from Aristophanes of Byzantium. On the one hand, the systematic affectation of Atticism in scholarly discourse dates from a later period than his; and papyri have shown that usages regarded as Koine often go back some way before Polybius in the colloquial Greek of Egypt. On the other hand, there is a limit to the colloquialism to be expected from Aristophanes γραμματικός, author of Ἀττικά Λέξεις; and I take it that at any rate a usage not recorded until after Polybius must arouse some suspicion.

I shall be considering the synopses (plot summaries) in isolation from the other contents of the hypotheses.³ This might seem an artificial procedure, but I think it will prove justified in practice. For Aesch. *Sept.*, for instance, we have one of the worst synopses, embedded amid copious ‘Aristophanic’ material, while for Eur. *Alc.* we have one of the best, in a hypothesis that is otherwise much interpolated.

A synopsis is *prima facie* the work of Aristophanes if it is attributed to him in a manuscript, or if it resembles others that are so attributed, or if it occurs in the same hypothesis as material of a recognisably ‘Aristophanic’ type. Several which fulfil these criteria, however, can rapidly be dismissed from consideration. For Soph. *O.T.* and *Phil.*, all the surviving plays of Aristophanes Comicus except *Thesm.*, and Men. *Dyscolus* and *Hero*, we possess hypotheses of poor quality in iambic trimeters; this is the type of hypothesis most regularly attributed to Aristophanes by our manuscripts,⁴ but few now accept the attribution.⁵ Of the prose hypotheses to plays of Aristophanes Comicus and Menander, several include didascalic material sometimes thought to be derived from Aristophanes, but none of them is attributed to him in the manuscripts,⁶

¹ I am most grateful to Dr James Diggle for valuable criticism.

² The main literature on the hypotheses of Aristophanes of Byzantium is A. Nauck, *Aristophanis Byzantini grammatici Alexandrini fragmenta* (Halle, 1848); F. W. Schneidewin, *De hypothesisibus tragoediarum graecarum Aristophani Byzantio vindicandis* (Göttingen, 1853); Raddatz in *RE* ix.1.415–21; T. O. H. Achelis, *Philol.* 72 (1913), 414–41, 518–45; *ibid.* 73 (1914), 122–53; D. L. Page, *Euripides: Medea* (Oxford, 1938), liii–lv; G. Zuntz, *The Political Plays of Euripides* (Manchester, 1955), 131, 139–41; R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship* i (Oxford, 1968), 192–6; A. W. A. M. Budé, *De hypotheseis Griekse tragedies en komedies* (The Hague, 1977), 33–9.

³ I am following Page in using ‘synopsis’ to mean a summary of a play’s plot, with any attendant mythological material (i.e. a ὑπόθεσις in the usual Greek sense), and ‘hypothesis’ to mean a whole preface to a play, which may include a synopsis as well as didascalic material etc.

⁴ Ten out of 14 are so attributed by at least one MS. Exceptions: *Phil.*, *Clouds*, *Lys.*, *Hero*.

⁵ An exception is W. J. W. Koster in *Charisteria F. Novotný...oblata* (Prague, 1962), 43–50; Budé (n. 2), 40–7, is agnostic. At any rate, if the attribution were right, we should no longer be able to think of Aristophanes as a businesslike or reliable scholar.

⁶ A prose hypothesis to *Birds* is so attributed in MS U, but this is considered to be a mere slip by Tzetzes (Koster [n. 5], 44).

and none includes a synopsis of the laconic kind which is considered typical of the 'Aristophanic' synopses of tragedy.⁷ Hyp. Aesch. *Ag.* consists of a very long and obviously late synopsis followed by didascalic material of 'Aristophanic' type, and a similar pattern occurs elsewhere.⁸ For Soph. *El.* the 'Aristophanic' material is preceded, not by a synopsis, but by a stray scholion.

This leaves us with 14 tragic synopses as deserving closer investigation: Aesch. *Pers.*, *Sept.*, *Eum.*, *P.V.*; Soph. I *Ant.*, II *Phil.*, *O.C.* (a fragment); Eur. II *Alc.*, II *Med.*, *I.T.*, II *Phoen.*, II *Or.*, II *Bacch.*, II *Rhes.*⁹ This is still a disparate corpus. The synopses vary greatly in length (from 12 words for *Sept.* to 63 for *Rhes.*)¹⁰ and in style. Most are in past tenses, but that of *P.V.* is in the present, that of *Rhes.* is in a mixture, and those of *Sept.*, *Phil.* and *Phoen.* consist only of nouns and words dependent on them. (Nor would we find significantly greater uniformity if we confined ourselves to synopses specifically attributed to Aristophanes in the manuscripts: *Eum.*, *Ant.*, *O.C.*, *Med.*, *Phoen.*, *Or.*, *Bacch.*, *Rhes.*)

The best way to proceed will perhaps be to examine the differences more closely. As they stand in the manuscripts, the best synopses, and so the most likely to be authentic, are, in my judgement, those of *Alc.*, *Or.* and *Bacch.* Even these three are not faultless. That of *Alc.* tells us the name of Alcestis' father but not that of her husband. That of *Or.* omits important characters and incidents; this was doubtless unavoidable if such a complex play was to be summarised so briefly, but μέλλων φονεύειν 'Ελένην καὶ Ἑρμιόνην does represent a severe telescoping of events.¹¹ That of *Bacch.*, perhaps more disturbingly, tells us only that Pentheus is killed by his aunts, not by his mother.¹² If Koine usages are to count as faults, we may certainly object to τοῦ ἰδίου ἀνδρός, meaning simply 'her husband', in hyp. *Alc.*,¹³ and probably to ἀποθεωθεῖς (unattested before Polyb. 12.23.4)¹⁴ in hyp. *Bacch.* However, the three contain no positive errors of fact or grammar, and all are written in a similar style; past tenses are used, and extreme compression is achieved (the length ranging from 19 words to 32) by skilful use of participles. How do the remaining eleven measure up to these standards?

Pers. Wildly misleading. The writer tells us unequivocally that the Battle of Plataea preceded Xerxes' return to Asia; he very strongly implies that it also preceded the

⁷ For the hypotheses of comedy see L. Radermacher, *Aristophanes' 'Frösche'*² (Vienna, 1954), 74–85, as well as Achelis and Budé (n. 2).

⁸ E.g. Eur. *Hipp.*, *Andr.*; and we shall see that *I.T.* really belongs in the same category. Editors are not consistent on whether to regard a typically Byzantine synopsis followed by 'Aristophanic' material as one hypothesis or two.

⁹ This list corresponds with that of Page (n. 2), liii, except that I have added *O.C.* and *I.T.* and omitted Eur. *Supp.*, for which we have a scrap of 'Aristophanic' material but no *synopsis* of any kind. Except for *O.C.*, I am referring to hypotheses printed in the Oxford Classical Texts of the tragedians (for many plays there also exist late hypotheses which these editions ignore), and using the numeration given or implied there.

¹⁰ Achelis 1914 (n. 2), 146, and Zuntz (n. 2), 131, claim that Aristophanic synopses do not normally consist of more than two 'enuntiata' or 'sentences', but do not explain how they define these terms. Several synopses which they seem to regard as authentic contain more than two points at which a full stop *could* be placed.

¹¹ The dubious grammar of κατακριθεῖς θανάτῳ could easily be remedied, if necessary, by θανάτου (Wecklein) or θάνατον.

¹² For the use of μή in μὴ βουλομένου Πενθέως there are adequate parallels (Kühner–Gerth⁴ ii.201).

¹³ J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh, 1908), i³ 87–90; Mayser, *Grammatik der gr. Papyri* i²(2).65, ii(2).73–4.

¹⁴ Unless Nicolaus Com. fr. 1.35 is earlier; but it need not be.

Battle of Salamis¹⁵ and that Xerxes was present at it; and he considers Thessaly worth singling out from all the places mentioned at *Pers.* 480–514. I have charitably assumed that the words *μετὰ δυνάμεως... ἢ καὶ δεκατέσσαρας*, which M omits, are interpolated, though it is hard to feel confident that they are really any worse than the rest.

Sept. Extremely telegraphic (12 words)¹⁶ and in part unintelligible. *στρατιά*¹⁷ 'Ἀργείων πολιορκούσα Θηβαίους, τοὺς καὶ νικήσαντας, καὶ θάνατος Ἐτεοκλέους καὶ Πολυνείκους' appears to mean 'army of Argives besieging Thebans, who had also been victorious [?], and death of Eteocles and Polynices'. If the writer wrote *τοὺς καὶ νικήσαντας* when he meant something like *οὗτοι δὲ νικῶντες*, one could think of better names for him than Aristophanes *γραμματικός*.¹⁸

Eum. Discussed at *CQ* 34 (1984), 270–1.¹⁹

P.V. Not bad, but very leisurely (46 words), and in the present tense. A surprising emphasis is placed on the birth of Epaphus, which is treated as if it were the only event prophesied to Io. We may certainly hope that Aristophanes would not have been guilty of *ἐπαφήσεως*,²⁰ but it is possible that the true reading here is *ἐπαφῆς* (the *-εως* being a scribe's attempt to expand a non-existent abbreviation).

Ant. Again leisurely (43 words), and with several suspicious linguistic features. Jebb²¹ notes that the perfect tense *ἀνήρηται* (in place of an aorist) could be sound if the synopsis were of late date, and that *παρὰ τοῦ Κρέοντος*, where *παρά* means no more than *ὑπό*, points in the same direction. He might have added that the use of *μνημεῖον* to mean 'tomb', not 'monument', is frequent in the Septuagint and the New Testament but seems not to occur earlier. Both *δυσπαθήσας* and *διεχειρίσατο*²² also look like Koine usages, though more respectable ones (being found in Polybius); and in the last sentence (*ἐπὶ δὲ τῷ τούτου θανάτῳ...*) causal *ἐπὶ* is stretched beyond normal limits.

Phil. Fairly absurd. After a very cursory (13-word) summary of the play a further 21 words are devoted to the capture of Helenus, about which we are given some details unfortunately omitted by Sophocles (compare *Phil.* 604–9). The use of *συντελοῦντας* is odd – 'oracles contributing to the capture of Troy'?

O.C. For this play we have only a fragment preserved in Latin translation by Lactantius Placidus on Statius, *Theb.* 12.510: 'Oedipus expulsus Creontis imperio confugit ἐπὶ Κολωνόν, in quo locus erat Furiis consecratus. sed misericordia Atheniensium illa sede est erutus hospitaliterque tractatus.' Lactantius would have us believe that 'hanc tragoediam Aristophanes scripsit', but he or his source was obviously misled by 'Ἀριστοφάνης ἔγραψε' or the like (perhaps even 'Ἀριστοφ(άνους) γρ(αμματικού)') referring to the hypothesis.²³ This synopsis is

¹⁵ *ἐν Σαλαμῖνι* might look odd for a sea-battle, but is in fact correct Greek (e.g. Isoc. 5.147).

¹⁶ Achelis 1914 (n. 2), 140, considers that this is not a true synopsis (*ὑπόθεσις*) but a relic of a *κεφάλαιον*.

¹⁷ Wecklein's conjecture, now found in I¹ according to O. L. Smith, *Scholia Graeca in Aeschylum* ii(2) (Leipzig, 1982), 1. It is of no consequence that M reads *στρατεία*.

¹⁸ The papyrus hypothesis of *Laius* or *Oedipus* (*TrGF* i DID C 4[a]), which duplicates part of hyp. *Sept.*, contains no synopsis.

¹⁹ I might, however, have noted that the worst fault in this synopsis could be alleviated by simply changing *περιεχόμενος* to *περισχόμενος*, since the passive use of the aorist middle of *ἔχω* extends to Attic prose (cf. Barrett on Eur. *Hipp.* 27).

²⁰ Apart from this hypothesis, *TGL* s.v. cites Clement of Alexandria, Nicostratus, and Julius Africanus.

²¹ *The Antigone*³ 3–4.

²² The v.l. *διεχρήσατο* would be Attic.

²³ Moore (n. 2), 292–3; Achelis 1913 (n. 2), 434.

accurate enough but looks distinctly wordy, considering how little of the play it covers. **Med.** Promising. The length (26 words) and the style look right, and the only serious anomalies are contained in the word *Γλαύκην*. If the text of Murray and others is correct, ἀπέκτεινε μὲν *Γλαύκην* comes very oddly after τὴν *Κρέοντος θυγατέρα*, and anyway the name does not occur in Euripides' text. We need only read ταύτην (Schwartz, Wecklein), as Diggle now does,²⁴ to remove both anomalies. Less important oddities are the bare dative τῷ... γεγαμηκέναι, which can perhaps be excused by the desire for brevity, and ἐχωρίσθη in the sense 'departed', which appears to be Koine (Polybius and later writers).²⁵

I.T. Far too wordy. Since the 52 words that we have cover only about 400 or 500 lines (without mentioning *Iphigenia*, incidentally), the full synopsis must have been of typically Byzantine length.²⁶

Phoen. Thoroughly feeble in style, consisting merely of three noun-phrases strung together by καί, without a single participle.

Rhes. Extremely leisurely, at 63 words (note the unnecessary explanation μέγαν γὰρ... ἐκ τούτου), and incompetent. Tenses are mixed indiscriminately. The name *Terpsichore* does not occur in the play, and there was no justification for supplying it.²⁷ In the last sentence we must presumably understand 'Euripides' or 'the play' as subject of διαλαμβάνει, which anyway seems to be used in a sense unknown to LSJ.

In this discussion I have been able, at the cost of a likely emendation and some linguistic credulity, to vindicate one more synopsis (*Med.*) to add to the three 'good' synopses (*Alc.*, *Or.*, *Bacch.*) with which I began. The line between 'good' and 'bad' synopses has been drawn quite subjectively, and I have no wish to insist on it. Some of the 'bad' synopses, such as those of *P.V.* and *O.C.*, are not positively offensive, and might perhaps have been written by *Aristophanes* in a relaxed mood, or by an assistant. Conversely, if I had dealt as severely with every lapse from accuracy or Atticism as *Aristophanes*' high reputation might seem to justify, the number of 'good' synopses could easily have been reduced to nil.

A true sceptic, indeed, might start to wonder whether *any* part of our hypotheses is really *Aristophanes*' work. Admittedly the didascalic information which they contain is usually believed to be accurate, and this belief is not purely a product of circular argument or wishful thinking; but the copying out of information from the work of *Aristotle* or *Callimachus*²⁸ would not require any great scholarly ability. Attribution to *Aristophanes* in the manuscripts cannot be held to prove anything in itself if we accept that the verse hypotheses are not by him; and it has also been

²⁴ In fact Diggle, besides changing *Γλαύκην* to ταύτην, inserts the name after *θυγατέρα*, perhaps feeling that it should have come from somewhere in this context, or on the analogy of hyp. I. But it would do the writer more credit to suppose that he did not supply the name *Glauce* at all (cf. n. 27); and the variety of MS readings here could well point to an intrusive gloss (cf. Murray's apparatus).

²⁵ Dr Diggle points out that this use of χωρίζομαι is affected by the author of the 'Dicaearchan' hypotheses, being found at I *Rhes.* 13 and (in a variant which Dr Diggle favours) at I *Phoen.* 10 (Murray's line-numbers). τοὺς ἰδίους υἱούς recalls τοῦ ἰδίου ἀνδρός in hyp. II *Alc.*, though there may be more emphasis in this case: 'her own children'.

²⁶ I am prepared to believe, with Diggle and other editors, that the tautologies ἐλθὼν... παραγενθεῖς and προσελθὼν... καὶ φανείς are due to textual corruption.

²⁷ Numquam *Aristophanes* nomen proprium, quod in fabula deest, addidit de suo', declares *Achelis* (1914 [n. 2], 148 n. 338), to the approval of Zuntz (n. 2), 140 n. 1. These scholars consider that hyp. *Rhes.* has suffered interpolation or rewriting, but they do not explain how they dispose of *Thebans* in hyp. *Sept.*, *Eumenides* in hyp. *Eum.*, *Calchas* in hyp. *Phil.*, or *Glauce* in hyp. *Med.*

²⁸ Cf. Pfeiffer (n. 2), 193.

plausibly claimed that the 'Dicaearchan' hypotheses were consistently misattributed in antiquity.²⁹

In any case, I think I have established that the synopses are, for whatever reason, hopelessly unreliable (much more so, indeed, than the 'Dicaearchan' hypotheses). Brief as they are, many of them contain something which no reputable Alexandrian scholar *could* have written. It may seem difficult to believe in late scribes or scholars with nothing better to do than to take workmanlike synopses and rewrite them wholesale, for the worse; but the only alternative is to suppose that, for many plays, workmanlike synopses never existed.

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²⁹ J. Rusten, *GRBS* 23 (1982), 357–67.