

The Influence of Old Comedy on Aeschylus' Later Trilogies

C. J. HERINGTON

TORONTO UNIVERSITY

I. INTRODUCTION: THE DEVELOPMENT OF AESCHYLUS

One of the few well-attested facts about the earlier history of Attic tragedy is that it was raised to the level of a major art form by Aeschylus.¹ *A priori* we would not suppose that this was achieved at a single stroke. Rather, if we possessed the whole of Aeschylus' forty-year output in its chronological sequence, we should expect to trace in it an evolution comparable in scale and pace to that which we can still observe with our own eyes in the visual arts of the same period. We should expect a difference between his earliest and latest dramas no smaller than the difference between the late archaic *korai* or the Aegina pediments, carved in the first two decades of his career, and the Olympia pediments, whose completion almost exactly coincides with his death. Now it is hardly to be hoped that so much Aeschylean material will ever be restored to us that this supposition will become verifiable in its entirety. And yet even the material as it stands, especially since the publication of the *Supplices*-didascalia,² does in fact point to a clear pattern of development in the course of Aeschylus' later years. By this I do not refer primarily to mere technical changes, but to a development in the poet's view of the human and divine condition: a swing from fear, or at least resignation, to hope.

To review the available evidence: in 472 Aeschylus produced a group of three tragedies, probably unconnected in theme,³ of which the middle (*Persae*) and the last (*Glaucus of Potniae*) each displayed an irrevocable disaster. In 467 he presented a connected

¹ Two of the witnesses are as early as the fifth century: Aristoph. *Frogs* 1004 f., Pherecrates, *Krapataloi* Fr.94 Kock.

² *POxy.* 2256 Fr.3; H. J. Mette, *Die Fragmente der Tragödien des Aischylos* (Berlin 1959) Fr.122 (where further references to the literature on the fragment will be found).

³ Possible connections between the three plays are discussed by F. Stoessl, *Die Trilogie des Aischylos* (Baden bei Wien 1937) 157 ff.

trilogy on the Theban story, of which we have the final play, the *Septem*; here we watch a family curse fulfill itself in the obliteration of the male line. It must be stressed that Aeschylus was not, at this date, absolutely bound by tradition to give his trilogy so hideous an ending. Pindar, in an ode referring to a victory of 476 B.C., mentions Polynices' glorious son Thersander, ancestor of Theron; and Herodotus can still record traditions that Eteocles was succeeded by his son Laodamas as king of Thebes, and that a long line of princes also descended from Polynices.⁴ All the more striking, then, is the contrast between the Theban trilogy and those three trilogies that are now more or less certainly datable later than 467. The *Supplices*-trilogy: unless the statement of the Oxyrhyncus didascalia that Sophocles competed against this trilogy is to be dismissed entirely, we must accept that it was produced later than the *Septem*, while many scholars, on rather more slender evidence, favor the date 463. The *Oresteia* is securely dated at 458. The third actor in the prologue of the *Prometheus Bound* should alone be enough to date the *Prometheia* after the *Septem*, but a variety of metrical and stylistic criteria further indicates that it is later even than the *Oresteia*.⁵ All three of these trilogies, therefore, will date from the last ten years of Aeschylus' life, perhaps even only the last seven; and in all three it is either certain or universally conjectured that an apparently desperate feud was resolved in the final play on the cosmic level.

Unfortunately the lost tragedies, other than those belonging to the trilogies that have already been mentioned, provide little evidence, but that little tends to favor the pattern of development

⁴ Pind. *Ol.* 2. 43-46; Her. 5.61 and 4.147, respectively. See Jebb on Soph. *Antigone* 173.

⁵ It is probably superfluous at this date to refute in detail the view (which became something like a dogma between the time of Welcker, its originator, and H. J. Rose's commentary on Aeschylus) that Prometheus was represented by a giant puppet, rendering a third actor unnecessary. A lucid discussion of the point, to which the present writer has nothing to add, will be found in P. Arnott, *Greek Scenic Conventions of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford 1962) 96 ff. The metrical and stylistic criteria point with complete unanimity towards a very late dating of the *PV*. Briefly they are: decrease in overall frequency of resolution but increase in use of first-foot anapaests (E. C. Yorke in *CQ* 30 [1936] 116 ff., and E. B. Ceadel in *CQ* 35 [1941] 66 ff.); increase in "enjambement" (E. C. Yorke in *CQ* 30 [1936] 153 f.); development in use of certain particles (J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles*² [1954], lxix); increasing tendency to restrict the chorus' iambic utterances, outside stichomythia, to quatrains (C. J. Herington in *CR* 13, N.S., [1963] 5 ff.).

which we are suggesting. Scholars are reasonably well agreed in recognizing the traces of some ten other trilogies among them.⁶ Of these none is certainly datable,⁷ but it is statistically probable that the majority were produced during the still (for us) unfilled space of nearly three decades in Aeschylus' career before the *Persae* of 472. Among their fragments there is nothing whatever to suggest that any of them ended with a resolution of the type seen in the *Oresteia*; and while this fact in itself could well be due to the accidents of preservation, it must further be noted that such a resolution—involving not merely an individual's fate but wide moral issues human and divine—is very difficult even to imagine for three of them, the trilogies that dealt with Achilles, Ajax, and Odysseus respectively.

Thus, while it is admitted that our present evidence is very far from complete, the most reasonable inference from what we actually have will be that Aeschylus' thinking veered towards hope in the last decade of his life. In that case (encouragingly for those who attach value to the life experience of great poets) his later development will fall into something like the same pattern as that of Sophocles, who at a comparable stage composed the *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus Coloneus*; or even that of the author of *Hamlet*, who, again at the end of his working life, gave us *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Now, although no one would venture to explain that change in mood towards the end of any of the three lives, it may prove, at least, possible to account for the particular formal mold into which the hope of Aeschylus was poured. To attempt this is the purpose of the present article. Our chief material must of course be the *Oresteia*, though we shall also have occasion to call on the other two "hopeful trilogies" (as we may now name them for short), the *Supplices*-trilogy and the *Prometheia*.

⁶ The following may be cited, in approximately descending order of certainty: *Lykourgeia*; trilogy on Achilles; on Ajax; on the Argonauts; on Odysseus; on Perseus; Dionysiac trilogy; trilogy on Memnon; on Telephus; on Adrastus. For details and references to the literature on each, see Mette's edition of the fragments [above, note 2].

⁷ A possible exception is the *Psychostasia*, which must be later than the introduction of a third actor if we suppose (as seems most likely in itself) that all three participants in the famous tableau of Eos, Thetis, and Zeus (Fr.205 Mette) had speaking parts. Interestingly enough the *Memnon*, which there is reason to think may have belonged to the same trilogy as the *Psychostasia*, appears to be credited with no less than four actors in a somewhat corrupt passage of Pollux (Fr.203 Mette).

II. THE UNIQUE FEATURES OF THE *EUMENIDES*

Stoessl's generalization⁸ that an Aeschylean trilogy conforms, on a grander scale, to the structure of a lyric triad certainly applies to the contents of the *Oresteia*. Strophe, the murder of the king; antistrophe, responding to the strophe, the murder of his murderers; epode, responding to nothing, the *Eumenides*. The first two members of this triad are also linked together in that the course of their grim plots, and even the majority of their characters, were already firmly fixed in earlier versions of the saga; and, correspondingly, they show few formal features that cannot be paralleled elsewhere in Aeschylean or later tragedy. If, however, we can think ourselves into the situation of Aeschylus as he entered on the composition of the *Eumenides*, we shall see that he now faced a task of a very different nature. Here, so far as we can tell, the only data that he inherited from any predecessor whatever were that Orestes had been persecuted by the Furies and purified by Apollo.⁹ Everything else in the plot, every other character, and above all the final triumphant resolution, were going to be his own; and, being a Greek artist, he must now arrive at a form to match this unheard-of content. This, surely, is the reason why the *Eumenides* presents so many features that are either absolutely unparalleled in extant Greek tragedy, or at most are extremely rare in it. These features we shall next survey, beginning with those that affect the play as a whole.

The most astonishing of them is certainly the chorus, unique among extant tragic choruses in its spiritual nature, its physical appearance, and its functions. We may go even further: in so far as it is possible to infer the nature of a tragedy's chorus from the title, the *Eumenides* appears to be unique among the vast number of lost tragedies—more than five hundred—whose titles are preserved. The only two apparent exceptions to this rule, the *Moirai* of Achaëus of Eretria and the *Kêres* of Aristias, are probably no more than apparent, since both those writers were famed above all for their satyr plays, and the scanty fragments of both the plays concerned show a satyric element.¹⁰ The one

⁸ F. Stoessl (above, note 3) 46, 226.

⁹ On the extent of Aeschylus' inventiveness in the *Eumenides*, see F. Jacoby, *FGrH*, commentary on 323a Hellenikos Fr.1, and his note 26 on the same commentary.

¹⁰ For the *Moirai* and *Kêres*, see Nauck, *TGF* pages 753 and 727 respectively; and, for the fame of Achaëus' satyr plays, A. W. Pickard-Cambridge in *OCD*, s.v. "Achaëus

certainly tragic chorus even approaching the Erinyes in power and venerability occurs, as it happens, in another of the "hopeful trilogies": the Titans of the *Prometheus Unbound*. But the distance is still considerable. The Erinyes are among the oldest and most influential female deities in the cosmos. Their masks and costumes are grotesque and hideous, as we can tell from the way in which the priestess and Apollo have to grope for foul associations with which to describe them; contrast the Titans, who, to judge by the renderings of them in the fifth century visual arts, will have appeared simply in human form. One characteristic of the Aeschylean Furies which may not have been expressed in their costume, but which certainly appears often in the language of the play's earlier scenes, is their animal nature. To Apollo they seem like a flock of goats (196-97), or simply "beasts," *knôdala* (644). Even by their own account they are hounds, snuffing for blood (230, 245-68 *passim*). Yet more surprising, perhaps, than any of these features is the function of this chorus in the plot of the *Eumenides* as a whole. No other extant tragedy is built, as this one is, around the raging opposition of the chorus to all the actors, followed by its abrupt conversion to an equally intense benevolence.¹¹

Another element which distinguishes the *Eumenides* as a whole

of Eretria." Nauck, page 726, thinks that all the surviving titles and fragments of Aristias are from satyr plays.

For the sake of comparison, we should note here the other recorded titles which imply, or might be thought to imply, choruses of supernatural beings:

1. Aeschylus, *Nereides*; there is no reason to doubt that the chorus here consisted of the Nereids; cf. Fr. 237 Mette. Fr. 285 Mette suggests, though it does not prove, that the Nereids formed the chorus of the *Hoplôn krisis* also; and we may compare the Oceanids of the *Prometheus Bound*.

2. Aeschylus, *Kabeiroi*, believed by many to have been a satyr play in view of the tone of the fragments.

3. Aeschylus, *Phorkides*, also often taken for a satyr play. In any case, it is doubtful whether the Phorkides (*i.e.* the Graeae) could possibly have constituted a chorus; the sight of fifteen, or fifty, of these hags (in hot pursuit, no doubt, of their single eye) would hardly fit the tragic stage.

4. A *Mousai* will be found in the collections of Sophoclean fragments by Nauck (p. 220) and Pearson (2, pages 69-70). The present writer doubts the existence of this. It depends solely on the letters *Ἰουσαι*, apparently part of a list of Sophoclean plays in *CIA* II. 999.1, line 25; but these letters could equally well be interpreted as the ending of a feminine participle (cf. such titles as *Nauplios katapleôn* or *Hippolytos kalyptomenos*).

¹¹ Perhaps the least distant parallel is the behavior of the chorus in the earlier part of Sophocles' last play, the *Oedipus Coloneus*.

from any other tragedy is its open reference to a pressing matter of contemporary internal politics, the Areopagus reforms and the threatening *stasis* that surrounded them. Whatever view one takes of Aeschylus' personal attitude to these events,¹² it will at least be agreed that this is not just an affair of such passing political allusions as scholars have recognized, with varying degrees of certainty, in other tragedies. For here the bond between play and political situation is so close that, had the Areopagus problem not existed at the time, the *Eumenides* could no more have found its present shape than, for example, the *Knights* of Aristophanes could have been what it is without the existence of Cleon. A related feature, which similarly emphasizes the relationship between the events on the stage and contemporary reality, is the "audience participation" at the end of the *Eumenides*, to which we shall return later.

So much for the unique general characteristics of the play: in brief, the appearance, nature, and function of its chorus, and the dependence of its design on contemporary internal politics. We may now consider certain of its parts which also present features either unique in tragedy, or extremely rare. These can for the most part be catalogued with little comment.

1. *The episodic and complicated character of the prologue.* This consists substantially of three separate scenes: the speech by the priestess, the dialogue between Apollo and Orestes, the dialogue between Clytaemnestra's ghost and the sleeping Furies. There is no tragic parallel.

2. *The nature of the parodos*, with the Furies suddenly revealed (by what means is a matter of conjecture) within the temple. Of the four categories of *parodos* that have been distinguished in other tragedies, the *parodos* of the *Eumenides* falls into none.¹³

3. *The change of scene from Delphi to Athens at line 235.* For such a violent change of location there is only one tragic parallel, and that uncertain: the *Aetnaeae* of Aeschylus himself.¹⁴ Sophocles

¹² For a recent discussion of this problem, I refer to E. R. Dodds, "Morals and Politics in the *Oresteia*," in *Proc. Camb. Philol. Soc.* No. 186 (1960) 19-31.

¹³ The question has been studied by V. de Falco, *Studi sul Teatro Greco*² (Naples 1958) 24-25, who also summarizes earlier investigations.

¹⁴ The hypothesis in *POxy.* 2257 Fr. 1 (Mette, Fr. 26) seems now to be tacitly accepted as giving the contents of Aeschylus' *Aetnaeae*. But the five formal shifts of

offers us a gentle change, from Ajax's tent to the neighboring shore, *Ajax* 815; the scene is never changed in Euripides' extant plays.¹⁵

4. *The trial in a court of law, lines 566–777.* Speeches and vote-casting occurred also in Aeschylus' *Hoplôn krisis*, to judge by the fragments and by the vase-paintings of the same event. But the only other tragedy in which a formal trial is conjectured, with considerable probability, to have occurred is his *Danaides*¹⁶—the last play of another of the "hopeful trilogies."

5. *The torchlight procession in the finale.* Again, there is no tragic parallel—except that scholars have long postulated a torch race or torch procession at the end of yet another hopeful trilogy, the *Prometheia*.¹⁷

6. "Audience participation" in the finale. Every reader of the *Oresteia* will have felt for himself how, from the moment when Orestes finally leaves the stage, the living Athenians seated in the auditorium are pulled more and more into the action. It is their fate that now swings in the balance in place of Orestes', and it is they, the *astikos leôs*, whom the chorus repeatedly bids rejoice when the reconciliation is complete (996 ff., 1014 ff.). Wilamowitz went so far as to suppose that "the people in the theatre will have joined in the *ololygê* for which the chorus of escorts calls."¹⁸ If that was so, as it may well have been, a parallel to the repeated

scene recorded here are really so extraordinary in the context of fifth century Greek drama that the present writer still ventures to doubt whether it does not refer to the "spurious *Aetnaeae*"—presumably Hellenistic—whose existence is acknowledged in the Medicean Catalogue of Aeschylus' plays. Even if the authenticity is accepted, however, it must be doubted whether such a production could be classified as true tragedy; as E. Fraenkel suggests in a most stimulating article ("Vermutungen zum Aetnafestspiel des Aeschylus," *Eranos* 52 [1954] 61–75), it will have been something more like a pageant or masque.

¹⁵ de Falco [above, note 13] 37.

¹⁶ The conjecture, based on indications in the mythographers and on the apparently forensic nature of Aphrodite's surviving speech (Fr.125 Mette), dates back to Welcker and Hermann. It is discussed, with references, in F. Stoessl, *Die Trilogie des Aischylos* 94 ff.

¹⁷ Since R. Westphal it has been assumed by almost all, in view of the title (*Prometheus pyrrhoros*), that the final play had some connection with the institution of the Athenian torch races in honor of Prometheus (Paus. 1.30.2). See, for example, Wilamowitz, *Aischylos Interpretationen* (Berlin 1914) 129; and F. Solmsen, *Hesiod and Aeschylus* (Ithaca 1949) 155 and note 139.

¹⁸ *Aischylos Interpretationen* 185.

crash of thirteen thousand voices at the end of the *Oresteia* must be sought in the modern football stadium. None, assuredly, occurs in ancient tragedy.

III. THE *EUMENIDES* AND OLD COMEDY

Such are the principal features of the *Eumenides* that, so far as can be seen, are unique or rare on the tragic stage. But we must now confront the extraordinary fact that most of them are paralleled, not once or twice but repeatedly, in Old Comedy. In that art form, free composition of the plot, and a triumphant resolution to it, are rules. In that art form, choruses of beings grotesque in shape and nature are not much less common than human choruses. For choruses consisting of supernatural females we compare the *Gorgons* of Heniochus, the *Sirens* of Theopompus (a title re-used by Nicophron), the *Victories* of Plato, the *Hours* of Cratinus (and of Aristophanes, and the Middle Comic poet Anaxilas), the *Muses* of Phrynichus (and of the later comedians Ophelion and Euphron), the *Fates* (*Moirai*) of Hermippus. And do not the competent authorities in the field restore the actual title *Eumenides* in an inscription, as a victorious play by the Old Comic poet Teleclides?¹⁹ Further, it is well known that the Old Comedy showed a strong liking for choruses of an animal or quasi-animal nature. We need only recall the extant *Wasps*, *Birds* (also the title of a comedy by Aeschylus' contemporary, Magnes), and *Frogs* (also used by Magnes and by Callias); or the *Goats* of Eupolis, the *Griffins* of Plato, the *Centaurs* of Apollonphanes.

But the resemblance between Aeschylus' *Eumenides* chorus and the choruses of Old Comedy goes deeper than names and appearances; it even applies to their function in the plot. An initial violent antagonism of the chorus towards one or more actors, followed by an argument, followed by an enthusiastic conversion to the actor's point of view, is a common feature of the earlier extant plays of Aristophanes; we find it in the *Acharnians*, *Wasps*, and *Birds*, from which the *Thesmophoriazusae* only differs in that the final conversion is somewhat half-hearted.²⁰

¹⁹ J. M. Edmonds, *The Fragments of Attic Comedy* 1 (1957) 182; cf. 186. The stone, it must be observed, has only the letters Εὐμε[.]

²⁰ *Acharnians*: chorus at first antagonistic to Dicaeopolis, but completely converted by the time of the second *parabasis*, 929–51. *Wasps*: chorus *versus* Bdelycleon, but

Another striking resemblance lies in the fact that almost all Old Comedy refers continually to current problems of internal politics, and that many of the plays are designed round such problems. This hardly requires much illustration; we have already cited the most obvious instance, the *Knights*, earlier in our discussion.

A number of the peculiarities in detail which were observed in the *Eumenides* are also paralleled in Old Comedy. The episodic prologue appears in the extant Aristophanic plays without exception. For example, that of the earliest, the *Acharnians*, consists of three scenes: the monologue by Dicaeopolis, the meeting of the ecclesia (itself a string of brief episodes), and the dialogue between Dicaeopolis and Amphytheus. The fashion of the *Eumenides'* *parodos*, it is true, is not exactly paralleled in comedy, but there are analogies in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, where the scene is suddenly changed to the Thesmophorion and the chorus apparently crowd into it before their *parodos* song; and in the *Clouds*, where the pupils of Socrates (who do not, admittedly, constitute the chorus of the play) are abruptly discovered in striking philosophical attitudes within the *phrontistêrion*.²¹ More or less violent changes of the location of the action are a regular Old Comic feature, occurring fairly certainly in six out of the eleven surviving comedies, and also in the *Dêmoi* of Eupolis. The change involved may be as far as from earth to heaven, or from hell to the agora of Athens.²²

The happy finale, where all concerned march off in harmony and triumph, is too familiar a feature of Old Comedy to need discussion. Only, for the purposes of the present inquiry, one detail is worth noting: no less than three of these comic triumphs are attended by torchlight, those of the *Peace*, the *Frogs*, and the

conversion by 1450-73. *Birds*: chorus *versus* Peisthetaerus and Euelpides, but conversion by 539-47. *Thesm.*: chorus *versus* Mnesilochus; a bargain struck at 1160-71. See also A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb, Tragedy, and Comedy*², revised by T. B. L. Webster (1962) 149 and 160-62, where two probable instances are adduced from the lost comedies: Cratinus, *Odyssês* (of 439-37 B.C.?) and *Dionysalexandros*.

²¹ *Thesm.* 277 ff., with scholiasts on 277; *Clouds* 181-84.

²² As in the *Peace* and the *Dêmoi* (cf. D. L. Page, *Greek Literary Papyri* 1 [1942] 203-4) respectively. The other comedies referred to in the text are *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Birds*, *Thesm.*, and *Frogs*. It is in fact only in his two fourth century plays, *Eccl.* and *Plut.*, that Aristophanes seems to take pains deliberately to avoid a change of scene.

Plutus; ²³ and persons carrying torches for one reason or another also appear in the penultimate or final scenes of four other extant comedies. ²⁴ Indeed, the torch was so well established a property in comedy that already in the *Clouds* (543) Aristophanes can hypocritically—or precipitately—congratulate himself for *not* bringing torches on the stage like other, more vulgar, comedians.

As for the “audience participation” observed in the finale of the *Eumenides*, it is true that Old Comedy presents no certain parallels in its *exodoi*. Elsewhere in the comedies, however, it is the rule that the choruses should address the city directly in the *parabases*, while at any other moment also an actor may swing round and talk to the audience, ²⁵ as if every citizen present belonged to the play—as indeed, in a sense, he did.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

It appears, then, that the majority of the features in the *Eumenides* which struck us as exotic in the context of Athenian tragedy happen to be either regular or common in Old Comedy. True, we have failed to parallel one of them, the formal trial scene, ²⁶ in the extant comedies, and have found only remote analogies there for the fashion of the first *parodos*. Yet there remain enough resemblances to make it almost certain that there is some relationship between the form which Aeschylus gave to the *Eumenides* and the forms characteristic of Old Comedy.

Naturally, it is a difficult task to demonstrate precisely what that relationship is, for we have to recognize at once that we know only too little even about the tragedy of the Aeschylean period, while the material for the history of comedy before 425 B.C. (the date of the *Acharnians*) is fragmentary in the extreme. And yet if the three theoretically possible relationships are considered, it will appear that only one of them has much to be said in its favor. These possibilities are:

²³ *Peace* 1317, *Frogs* 1524 ff., *Plut.* 1194 f. (It is possible, however, that the *Frogs* example does not signify, if W. B. Stanford is right in suggesting, in his commentary on the passage, that Aristophanes is actually parodying the finale of the *Eumenides* at that point.)

²⁴ *Clouds* 1490, 1494; *Wasps* 1329–31; *Lysistr.* 1217; *Eccl.* 1150.

²⁵ E.g. *Clouds* 1201–3.

²⁶ Though the writer has not overlooked the very formal trial of the dog Labes in *Wasps* 891 ff.!

1. Old Comedy borrowed the features which we have discussed from the *Eumenides*, or, at most, from the *Eumenides* and the two other "hopeful trilogies."

2. The Old Comic poets and Aeschylus independently derived the features discussed from a lost common source.

3. Aeschylus, experimenting with a new type of tragedy that culminated in joy and hope, borrowed the features discussed from Old Comedy.

The first theory would present grave difficulties. There is not only the historical objection (on which more will be said below), that the origins of Old Comedy as we know it, and of such elements in it as the animal chorus,²⁷ can hardly be placed so late as 458. There is also the extreme general unlikelihood that certain *exceptional* features occurring in a very restricted group of a single tragedian's works should have been adopted, at a single blow, as *standard* features by a different art form. For it must be stressed that most, if not all, of the comic phenomena which we have been discussing are indeed standard features. They cannot be explained as due to any individual poet's caprice, or to *ad hoc* parody of tragedy, since they occur repeatedly in comedies of very different contents and even of different authorship.

Our second theoretical possibility was that there is a lost common source: in other words, that the *Eumenides* and Old Comedy have inherited their forms independently from some sort of archaic "protodrama," which did not yet clearly distinguish between tragedy and comedy. But this, it seems, can be ruled out at once, because it would be very difficult to explain why there was no indication of this assumed heredity in any tragedies earlier or later than the "hopeful trilogies."²⁸

With our third explanation, however, all becomes straightforward. It is, in short, that Aeschylus has borrowed from Old Comedy to suit his special purposes. Certainly in the *Oresteia*, and possibly in the *Supplikes*-trilogy and *Prometheia*, he has dreamed of a grand design which involves following the outlines of the

²⁷ Pickard-Cambridge and Webster [above, note 20] 151-56 give ample evidence for the antiquity of this feature.

²⁸ In any case, the ancient authorities that imply the existence of such a "protodrama" are few, late, and suspect on various grounds. They are cited and discussed by Pickard-Cambridge and Webster [above, note 20] 74-76.

crude ancient saga in the first two plays, but freely composing a triumphant and harmonious ending for the last of them. Yet no Greek artist, in our experience, creates *in vacuo* where form is concerned, even at the height of the fifth-century experiment. He may drastically adapt the form in which he has previously been working in order to suit the new thing that he has to say, or, if that is still not enough, he may call on a related form for the purpose. The latter resource is rare, but not unparalleled in the middle decades of the century. In drama we can cite Euripides' experiment with a blend of tragedy and satyr play, the *Alcestis* of 438 B.C. From the visual arts, we have the extraordinary example of the Parthenon. Its planners (who must have been holding their preliminary conferences within six years of Aeschylus' death) had something to say that could no longer be expressed in pure Doric: hence a phenomenon unprecedented in mainland architecture, a Doric temple with soaring Ionic columns in its western room, and with that Ionic type of frieze which plays so great a part in the total effect of the building. Very much in this way, on our third and last supposition, Aeschylus, having planned a statement for which the tragic art offered no precedent, will have turned—perhaps not entirely consciously—to the forms of an existing art where both free composition of the subject-matter and triumphal end were standardized: to comedy.

Although this theory seems to account for the data far more satisfactorily than the other two, there is one objection which may possibly be raised. We have very little direct information about the nature of Old Comedy before the earliest extant play of Aristophanes, that is, until thirty-one years after Aeschylus' death. It may therefore be asked whether we can properly infer from our material that the distinctive features discussed above already existed in Old Comedy in time for Aeschylus to borrow them. But on two substantial grounds the answer seems to be that we can.

First, it appears certain that the peculiar forms of comedy as seen in Aristophanes, especially in his first plays, cannot be the poet's own invention, but are an inheritance from earlier comedians; in part an unwanted inheritance, which he gradually eliminated throughout his career, but with increasing ruthlessness after the *Birds*. Even so austere a critical investigator as Pickard-Cambridge, it will be found, bases his discussion of the early

history of comedy largely on this assumption,²⁹ and indeed few readers of Aristophanes' plays in their entirety will question it.

Secondly, such external evidence as we have for the history of early drama shows that an art form, which the ancient writers do not differentiate by name from the "Old Comedy" under which they classify Aristophanes' plays, was fully in being by the last two decades of Aeschylus' life. The first two of its practitioners who made a respectable name for themselves, Chionides (called by the *Suda* "the protagonist of the Old Comedy") and Magnes (acknowledged as a fellow craftsman in his own trade by Aristophanes, *Knights* 518–25) are recorded as performing in ca. 487 and 472 B.C. respectively; while Crates and Cratinus were both active by ca. 450 B.C., the former being actually described in one source as a contemporary of Aeschylus.³⁰ It is to be noted that the recorded titles of plays by these authors do not differ in kind from those used by later poets of Old Comedy and, indeed, are duplicated by them in several instances.³¹

On this evidence it is reasonable to conclude that an art resembling the Old Comedy known to us from Aristophanes was already alive in Aeschylus' later years, the years that saw the *Supplices*-trilogy, the *Oresteia*, and the *Prometheia*. No doubt much remained to be improved in the succeeding three decades, especially in respect of coherence and polish;³² but the essential forms were there. If that was so, the main possible objection to our explaining the unusual features in the late trilogies as due to the influence of that art is overcome. There will result both a glimpse into the workshop of the poet in his old age and, perhaps, a new understanding of that position into which Socrates was once overheard cornering Agathon and Aristophanes (Plato, *Symposium* 223D): "that the same individual has it in him to compose both comedy and tragedy, and that he who is a tragedian by trade is a comedian also."

²⁹ *Op. cit.* [above, note 20], Chapter 3. The ancient sources for this and the next paragraph will be found in that chapter, and in the collection of *testimonia* on the earliest Athenian comic poets in J. M. Edmonds, *Fragments of Attic Comedy* 1.4 ff.

³⁰ Demetrius of Byzantium, *Peri Poiëmatôn* (= Aeschylus Fr. 70 Mette).

³¹ For example, the *Heroes* by Chionides, Crates, and Aristophanes; the *Frogs* by Magnes, Callias, and Aristophanes; the *Satyr*s by Ecphantides, Cratinus, Callias, and Phrynichus.

³² So Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b, of Crates: πρῶτος ἤρξεν ἀφέμενος τῆς λαμβλικῆς ιδέας καθόλου ποιεῖν λόγους καὶ μύθους; cf. the discussion of this passage by G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: the Argument* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1957) 201–3.