

This paper proposes a particular interpretation of the “*agôn* proper” between Euripides and Aeschylus in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, namely that Euripides' epirrheme constitutes a rhetorical display (*epideixis*), whereas Aeschylus' involves a question-and-answer approach with elements that resemble the Socratic *elenkhos*. In general, apart from the classic structural study of Gelzer (1960), the epirrhematic *agôn* remains an understudied component of Aristophanic comedy. This paper attempts to show how in this case a rhetorical analysis can reveal new strata of meaning and enhance our knowledge of the play's take on the cultural-political history of the late fifth century, which, as many scholars have shown, is a primary concern in the *Frogs* (*inter alios*, Konstan 1986; Hubbard 1991; Willi 2002).

I propose that two main stylistic features characterize Euripides' epirrheme: First, it is neatly structured in a very consistent way. There is an introduction by Euripides (907-10) which explicitly describes the structure of what is to follow—no other preserved epirrhematic speech in Aristophanes begins with an introduction of this sort. In what ensues, Euripides adheres to the structure he committed himself to while offering a symmetrical speech of the form ABB'A'C, where every point is marked by an indicator of sequence (A: πρώτιστα 911, B: κάπειτα 923, B': εὐθύς 939 and εἶτα 944, A'εἶτα 945 and ἔπειτα 948, C: ἔπειτα 954). Secondly, Euripides, once he has engaged himself with his argumentation, largely refrains from responding to provocations and interruptions by Aeschylus and Dionysus (914, 926, 948, 952, 954-5, 959), an almost unique instance in extant Aristophanic comedies (save the *Birds*, where, however, Peisetairos and Euelpides are allies).

At this point, I suggest taking into account the fact that Euripides has already off-stage held an *epideixis* (ἐπεδείκνυτο 771, see Woodbury 1986) on his superiority to Aeschylus in order to gain the support of the masses in Hades. An *epideixis* in that cultural setting was the process through which Sophists advertised their skills, delivering speeches which they had to some extent prepared—and, importantly, a Sophist would often give *many* performances of the same speech (R. Thomas 2003). I therefore suggest that Euripides is presented as delivering a speech he has already prepared.

A sharp contrast emerges when Aeschylus' interactive epirrheme unfolds. I point out that Aeschylus starts out by *eliciting* the *definition* of the “good poet” from his opponent (1008-10) and then *tests* his opponent's claims against this definition, in order to refute them (1010-17). These verbal actions, of course, correspond to key elements of the Socratic *elenkhos*. The overall outcome is a marked discursive variation: the only epirrhematic *agôn* consisting of an essentially monological epirrheme and a dialogical antepirrheme in extant Aristophanes.

While I do not assert that the audience would have been able to identify Aeschylus' tactic as Socratic, I do argue that Aristophanes in the *Frogs*, as often Plato (mainly in the *Protagoras*, the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*), presents us with the theme of the prepared rhetorician versus the *sophos* or philosopher who uses an oral technique to substantiate his claims. Aristophanes and Plato both experienced the era of the flourishing of the Sophists, the emergence of “new learning,” and the birth of rhetoric (on which e.g. Wallace 1998; Yunis 1998). Of course, it would be impossible to claim that Aristophanes sees himself as an intellectual ally with Socrates (in *Frogs* 1490 he in fact aligns him with Euripides) and Plato certainly did not see himself as an intellectual ally with poets. However, Aristophanes as well as Plato and Socrates indicated alarm at the cultural developments just mentioned, and, in this case, they did so by putting forward the same antithesis.