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Aristophanes' 'Oresteia': An Unnoticed Silence in the *Frogs*

The brief silence of Aeschylus upon his appearance (830-40), which is emblematic, as Euripides is quick to point out (833f; cf. 907ff), of Aeschylean dramatic technique, has rightly attracted the critics' attention, but it also seems to have overshadowed another silence of equal importance. Pluto, a seemingly secondary character, comes on stage simultaneously with Aeschylus but remains speechless much longer. I shall argue that, on account of both its duration (830-1414) and its dramatic effect, Pluto's silent presence on stage for one third of the comedy deserves a closer look as the focus of sophisticated paratragic play. In particular, it is intended to recall the role of Pylades in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*. Both Pluto and Pylades must be assumed by the audience to be mute extras, until they suddenly break their silence to resolve the impasse and urge the still undecided protagonist, Orestes and Dionysus respectively, to complete the task at hand. By patterning his Pluto on Pylades, whose name can be construed as meaning "Gate of Hades," Aristophanes offers an interpretation of the Aeschylean character and his dramatic function.

This, however, does not exhaust the significance of the paratragic allusion to the *Choephoroi*. Not accidentally, the model that emboldens Dionysus to overcome his hesitation, like Orestes, with the help of a previously silent character is provided by the very tragedy with which Euripides begins his criticism of Aeschylus' prologues (1119ff). The use of a device from the repertoire of Aeschylean art signals the rejection of Euripides' earlier criticism and foreshadows Aeschylus' victory, to be celebrated at Pluto's behest with a torch-lit procession, which, although not unique in Aristophanes (cf. *Lysistrata* 1295ff), is reminiscent of the procession that concludes *Eumenides*. At the same time, Pluto's paratragic silence invites a comparison between Aeschylean and Aristophanic poetics, both of which are based on the suppression of what is vulgar, manifested as *to ponêron* in tragedy (1053ff) and as *to phortikon* in comedy. Twice in *Frogs*, in fact, the chorus sketches this comic poetics of silence by renouncing glib rhetoric, excessive chattering, and misplaced ribaldry (1491ff; cf. 354ff). Thus Aeschylus' victory, which is precipitated by the paratragic reference to the silence of his tragic characters, is transformed into a victory also for the comic poet, who purifies the voice of his own genre and asserts his authority in the polis.