

Sophocles Did This To Me: Tragic Characters on the Comic Stage

When the Hoopoe in Aristophanes' *Birds* announces that he is not just any man-turned-fowl but *the* eponymous Tereus of Sophocles' tragedy, this is not merely a one-off joke about Sophoclean costuming, but the first manifestation a new and distinct type of fictional character: one who claims to be neither an original creation nor a version of a mythological figure but the actual character from a specific prior text. The notion that a character could escape the confines of one text and migrate into the plot of another has no prior example in extant classical literature: in this paper I examine several instances of this previously unnoticed phenomenon and demonstrate the new interpretive possibilities presented when we understand certain Old Comic characters in this way.

Like Tereus in *Birds*, Echo in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* claims to have originated in a specific prior text, in this case Euripides' *Andromeda*; both she and Tereus explicitly cite the texts in which they originated. Critics of Old Comedy have noted for some time that Aristophanes' Hoopoe claims to be Sophocles' Tereus (Griffith, Dobrov) or that his Echo makes a similar claim to be the Echo from Euripides' *Andromeda* (Heath, Sommerstein, Slater, Hartwig), but the two Aristophanic characters have yet to be connected as instances of a distinct phenomenon. After establishing these two firm examples of such characters, I suggest other possible instances in Old Comedy, such as Dionysus in Strattis' fragmentary *Phoinissai*; I also discuss possible depictions of such characters in vase painting, particularly the figure in tragic dress labeled "Aegisthus" who appears to have stumbled into a comic performance on the so-called "Choregoi Vase."

This new type of character deserves attention not simply as a previously unnoticed dramatic resource but also as a focus of interpretation: I argue in this paper that understanding

Tereus as Sophocles' Tereus and Echo as Euripides' Echo enriches our reading of *Birds* and *Thesmophoriazusae*. In the case of Echo, for example, instead of being constrained to see her as yet another tragic role reperformed by Mnesilochus or Euripides, we are enabled to read her as an escapee from Euripidean tragedy who has arrived to wreak havoc on Euripides' efforts to free his relative. Echo presents herself in Aristophanes' play as a "mocking repeater," and her disruption of Mnesilochus' reperformance of Euripides' *Andromeda* both raises the issue of Euripides' own repetition and recycling of older tragic material, and draws out the inherent ridiculousness of Echo's scene in Euripides' play, a scene that Euripides had attempted to use to give his tragedy a moving and pathetic opening sequence. Echo's scene in *Thesmophoriazusae* thus becomes a commentary on the problems of Euripides' poetics and his inability to control the genre of his plays rather than the silly but ultimately pointless interlude it would be if we failed to understand Aristophanes' Echo as literally *the* Echo of Euripides' play the year before.

Athenian audiences were perfectly familiar with characters drawn from what we now call myth; or with characters, whether original or mythological, who appeared in specific works of poetry; but the notion that a character could travel directly from one text into another requires a rather different conception of the extent to which characters in a text "exist." In order to investigate this new conception of character, I borrow from discussions among philosophers of metaphysics who have begun in recent decades to debate the ontology of fictional characters (Parsons, Thomasson, Martinich / Stroll, Braun, Salmon). Aristophanes takes care to distinguish Tereus and Echo from the characters around them; isolating the phenomenon of characters traveling from one specific text into another enables us to do likewise, and unlocks the interpretive potential of this innovatory dramatic technique.

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