CHAPTER SIX
BADNESS AND INTENTIONALITY
IN ARISTOPHANES’ FROGS

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‘In vain one explains that advocacy and representation are not the same thing.’
(Wendy Steiner, The Scandal of Pleasure)

1. Introduction: Representing badness

Aristophanes’ Frogs famously opens with Dionysus preparing to travel to the underworld in order to bring back the recently deceased Euripides, whom he regards as a ‘clever’ (δεξιός, 71) and ‘creative’ (γόνυς, 96) poet. Although Dionysus’ initial entrance on the stage as a fan of Euripidean poetry might lead the audience to expect that the rest of the play will address the nature of ‘good’ poetry, things soon take a turn in the opposite direction. It is remarkable, in fact, how much of the play, especially the agon between Euripides and Aeschylus, is suffused with the discourse of ‘badness’, and how often attempts to articulate what constitutes ‘good’ poetry rely on a contrast with poetry conceptualized as ‘bad’. Euripides and Aeschylus channel most of their energy in Frogs into ridiculing and repudiating each other’s poetry, each one exalting the merits of his own by highlighting the badness of the other’s.1 The

1 Dionysus prepares the audiences for this focus on poetic ‘badness’ by quoting at 72 from Euripides’ lost Oineus (fr. 565). Explaining his desire for a ‘clever poet’, he says that ‘some are no longer with us, and those still alive are bad’ (κακοί). Heracles takes issue with Dionysus’ judgment of Euripides in the ensuing dialogue, incredulous that anyone would think Euripides a good poet. Heracles sums up Euripidean poetry at 106 as ‘completely and totally bad’ (ἀτετχνής γε παμποίηρα). On the semantic range of ποιητὸς and ποιησία in Aristophanes, and the contexts in which ‘bad’ and ‘badness’,
two tragedians carry out their debate in terms that oscillate between absurd extremes of materialism (e.g., poetic badness can be weighed on an actual scale) and abstraction (e.g., the badness of a work’s ideas), hoping that in the end their reciprocal accusations of badness will leave the audience with a clear sense of their differences and the aesthetic criteria for deciding which is the better poet. In the end, however, as Dionysus himself recognizes, clarity about literary value is not so easy to come by, especially when each type of poetry has been presented in such negative terms. The end of the agôn leaves a stronger, largely comic and parodic, impression of what is bad about each antagonist’s poetry than of what is good, so no matter which of the two poets one ends up preferring, it is still a choice vividly circumscribed by its badness. Euripides may have to remain in Hades because his poetry was felt to be too edgy or avant-garde (his badness in Aeschylus’ view), but Aeschylus will return to Athens with the various comic charges of badness against him still fresh in the audience’s mind.

The question I would like to discuss in this chapter concerns the very nature of the badnesses imputed to each poet, and more specifically, the badness of Euripidean poetry in Aeschylus’ eyes. At first glance, the extensive parodies of Aeschylean and Euripidean tragedy seem to dramatize a reasonably transparent aesthetic polarity—if the former is loud and bombastic, the latter is airy and thin, and so on—and each can histrionically accuse the other of writing tragedy in bad style. Yet things are much less clear when we consider what each poet also has to say about good and bad content in tragedy. Aeschylus’ overriding complaint against Euripides is that he writes plays that feature bad people doing bad things, often in morally ambiguous situations. In his critique of Euripides Aeschylus fixates on famous examples of scandalous women, such as the incestuous Sthenoboea or Phaedra, and, in a striking anticipation of Plato’s discussion of artistic censorship in Republic 2–3, he takes Euripides to task for the dramatic representation of ponêria in his plays.

The contrast that Aeschylus is trying to draw with his own tragedy seems apparent enough, but scholars have often noted that Aeschylus

respectively, are appropriate translations of these terms, see Storey, in the preceding chapter (§) of this volume.

² The stylistic polarities of Frogs have been well treated in O’Sullivan 1992 (with further bibliography), who analyzes the agôn between Aeschylus and Euripides in terms of the familiar post-classical debate between a genus grande and genus tenue.