SICK HUMOUR: ARISTOPHANIC PARODY OF A EURIPIDEAN MOTIF?

BY

F. D. HARVEY

Dedicated to the memory of Jim Fitton,
a good scholar and a good friend.

Aristophanes’ Wasps (422 B.C.) opens with a dialogue between two slaves who have been given the task of keeping watch over Philokleon. After a while, Xanthias, one of the slaves, turns to the audience, and, addressing them directly (φέρε νῦν, κατείπω τοῖς θεαταίς τῶν λόγων, 54), explains the situation. Philokleon has to be locked up because he has a strange illness - νόσον γὰρ ὁ πατήρ ἄλλοκτον αὐτοῦ νοσεῖ, 71. Xanthias challenges the audience to guess the nature of the illness, but eventually he tells them: Philokleon is crazy about the law-courts (87-8, φιληλιαστῆς). In a long speech (85-135) Xanthias elaborates on the situation, giving examples of Philokleon’s folly. The words νόσος and νοσεῖν are frequently used—lines 71, 76, 80, 87, 114; ἐπιμικρέσθαι at 744.

The Peace (421 B.C.) opens in a similar way, with a dialogue between two slaves who have been given the task of feeding an enormous dung-beetle. After a while, one of them turns to the audience, and, addressing them directly (ἐγὼ δὲ τῶν λόγων τε τοῦτο παθίως [etc.] . . . φράσω, 50-3), explains the situation. They have to feed the beetle because their master Trygaios is crazy—ὄ δεσπότης μου μαίνεται καὶνὸν πρότον, 54. He tells the audience the nature of the madness: Trygaios wants to go up to heaven to persuade Zeus to end the Peloponnesian war. In a longish speech (50-61, 64-81) the slave elaborates on the situation, giving examples of Trygaios’ folly. The words νόσος and νοσεῖν are not used; this time it is always μαίνεται, μαίνεσθαι (54, 65; synonyms at 66, 90, 95).

The Birds (414 B.C.) begins rather differently; but there are similarities. It opens with a dialogue between Euelpides and
Pisthetairos. After a while, Euelpides turns to the audience, and, addressing them directly (διότι οἱ παρῆντες ἐν λόγῳ, 30), explains the situation. This time it is Euelpides and Pisthetairos themselves who are crazy—ἡμεῖς γὰρ . . . νόσον νοσοῦμεν (30-1). Euelpides tells the audience the nature of their illness: they are anxious to get away from Athens. The speech is comparatively brief (27-48), and the image of sickness is not stressed or pursued.

There is nothing surprising in these similarities. A direct address to the audience is a convenient and amusing method of explaining the state of affairs at the beginning of a play. One method of constructing a comedy is to give one of the central figures a marked peculiarity of character, for which νόσος and μανία are obvious words. Aristophanes had indeed already used this device in the Clouds, where Pheidippides' love of horse-racing is described as νόσος ἵππει (243, cf. 74). But the repeated association of these two motifs, the direct address to the audience, and the illness or madness of a main character, is remarkable.

One possible explanation is that in each case Aristophanes is mockingly imitating Euripides. There are two plays of his which he may have had in mind, the Medea (431 B.C.) and the Hippolytus (428 B.C.), and perhaps there were others. The Medea opens with a monologue by the Nurse, who describes the situation allegedly to Heaven and Earth (57) but in effect to the audience (1-48): Medea is like a sick woman—she keeps to her bed, she refuses food, her gaze is perpetually downcast, she weeps and rages, she may do something desperate. Euripides does not use the obvious words νόσος or μανία or the cognate verbs, but there is no need for him to do so; they would be redundant. Later Medea says that she reproached herself with the words τι μαίνομαι; (873), and the messenger questions her sanity—οἷς μαίνετε; (1129).

A more striking parallel to the passages in Aristophanes is the opening of the Hippolytus. The address to the audience, in this case delivered by Aphrodite, is quite direct (1-57). Phaedra is sick, sick with love; Aphrodite describes it as a νόσος (40). The words νόσος, νοσερὸς and νοσεῖν are used again and again of Phaedra’s state—lines 131, 176, 179, 186, 205, 269, 279, 283, 293, 294, 394, 405, 463, 477, 479, 512, 597, 698, 730, 766, 1306; μαίνεσθαι at