

SINCE ORPHEUS WAS IN SHORT PANTS: REASSESSING OEAGRUS AT ARISTOPHANES, *WASPS* 579–80*

ABSTRACT

In Aristophanes' Wasps, Philocleon says that he and his fellow jurors do not acquit Oeagrus until he has recited a speech from the Niobe. Scholars have almost universally assumed that this was the name of a contemporary tragic actor, despite its extreme rarity. This article argues that the reference is rather to the father of Orpheus. As a figure from the generation before the archetypal bard, 'an Oeagrus' represents the old-fashioned poetry to which Philocleon and his fellow jurors are devoted.

Keywords: Aristophanes; *Wasps*; Greek comedy; actors; Orpheus

Among the many perks of jury-duty which Philocleon enumerates in Aristophanes' *Wasps* is the jurors' power to extort various forms of entertainment from the defendants. This entertainment includes the titillation of ogling boys' genitals at their deme-registration *dokimasia* (578), having a piper pipe them out of the court (581–2) and making a defendant recite a tragic *rhēsis* (579–80):

κᾶν Οἶαγρος εἰκέλθῃ φεύγων, οὐκ ἀποφεύγει πρὶν ἂν ἡμῖν
ἐκ τῆς Νιόβης εἴπῃ ῥῆσιν τὴν καλλίστην ἀπολέξαι.

And if Oeagrus comes into court as a defendant, he doesn't get off until he chooses and recites for us the prettiest speech from the *Niobe*.

Commentators and critics universally follow—or, on the basis of context, tacitly agree with—the assertion of the scholia that Oeagrus was a 'tragic actor' (τραγικὸς ὑποκριτής).¹ These lines and the scholium likewise earn him a place in catalogues of actors from antiquity.² His inclusion in lists of known individuals from fifth-century

* The idea for this article came to me while teaching *Wasps* to a Greek Comedy class at the University of Sydney in 2019. I am grateful to the students for such a stimulating class, and to Peter Wilson, Matthew Wright and *CQ*'s anonymous reader for their helpful comments.

¹ Σ RVΓ Ar. *Vesp.* 579 Koster. Commentators (all cited ad loc.): D.M. MacDowell (ed.), *Aristophanes Wasps* (Oxford, 1971): 'evidently a tragic actor'; A.H. Sommerstein (ed.), *Aristophanes Wasps* (Warminster, 1983): 'evidently a tragic actor'; L. Lenz (ed.), *Aristophanes Wasps* (Berlin, 2014): 'ein sonst unbekannter Tragödienschauspieler'; K.S. Rothwell, Jr. (ed.), *Aristophanes' Wasps* (Oxford, 2019): 'evidently an actor who had a part in a *Niobe*'. Critics: J. Vaio, 'Aristophanes' *Wasps*. The relevance of the final scenes', *GRBS* 12 (1971), 335–51, at 346: 'Oeagrus the actor'; M. Wright, 'Comedy versus tragedy in *Wasps*', in E. Bakola, L. Prauscello and M. Telò (edd.), *Greek Comedy and the Discourse of Genres* (Cambridge, 2013), 205–25, at 218 n. 64: 'Oeagrus is an actor'; M.C. Farmer, *Tragedy on the Comic Stage* (Oxford, 2017), 128: 'when [Philocleon] gets a tragic actor in his courtroom, his obsession leads him to demand a private tragic performance'.

² J.B. O'Connor, *Chapters in the History of Actors and Acting in Ancient Greece* (Chicago, 1908), 124, §383; P. Ghiron-Bistagne, *Recherches sur les acteurs dans la Grèce antique* (Paris, 1976), 349; I.E. Stephanis, *Διονυσιακοὶ Τεχνίται* (Heraclion, 1988), 342, §1928; A.H. Sommerstein, 'How to avoid being a *komodoumenos*', *CQ* 46 (1996), 327–56, at 349–50.

Athens also depends entirely on these two testimonia.³ Biles and Olson do strike a note of salutary caution by observing that ‘this is most likely only a deduction from this passage’, but their scepticism seems to be about the scholiast’s extratextual knowledge rather than about Oeagrus’ existence or profession.⁴

Greater scepticism is surely justified by the scholia’s similar and clearly mistaken assertion that the Aesopus mentioned a little earlier at lines 566–7 was also a tragic actor. Philocleon describes how defendants try to put the jury in a good mood by, among other strategies, saying ‘something funny’ of, by or about Aesopus.⁵ The scholiast clearly noticed the contradiction in a tragic actor’s being associated with τι γέλοιον, so he contorted himself to make Aesopus either a ‘ludicrous’ or a paradoxically ‘comical’ one (Αἰσώπου τραγωδία ἐγένετο ὑποκριτῆς γελοιώδης).⁶ Such contortions are of course unnecessary, since the reference is clearly to the fabulist Aesop, whose fables play so large a part throughout the play, especially in the second half.⁷ A similar guess is made in *Clouds*, this time assuming that a mythological figure is a contemporary actor. When Strepsiades taunts the second of his lamenting creditors by asking ‘What evil has Tlempolemus ever done you?’ (τί δαί σε Τληπόλεμος ποτ’ εἴργασται κακόν; *Nub.* 1266), the scholiast notes that ‘some [say] that Tlempolemus [*sic*] was a tragic actor who repeatedly acted for Sophocles’ (ἄλλοι δὲ τραγικὸν ὑποκριτὴν εἶναι τὸν Τληπόλεμον, συνεχῶς ὑποκρινόμενον Σοφοκλεῖ, Σ ENp Ar. *Nub.* 1266 Holwerda).⁸ Other scholia recognize that it is a quotation of a line from a tragedy by Xenocles, either *Tlempolemus* or *Lycymnius*. The scholia are thus quite capable of simply guessing that a figure whom they do not recognize is a contemporary tragic actor. With Aesopus and Tlempolemus, they are manifestly wrong, but just because Oeagrus’ identity is a more plausible guess does not mean that it is correct.

Biles and Olson also note of Oeagrus that ‘the name is extremely rare (also once in the late Hellenistic period on Tenos).’⁹ Such rarity is in itself a reason to pause before assuming that the name corresponds straightforwardly to a contemporary individual

³ PAA 740540: ‘[A]ctor tragic performing in *Niobe*, komoidoumenos in *Wasps* of Aristophanes’. The question mark next to Athens in his entry at *LGPN* II.348 seems to express doubt about his being Athenian rather than about his existence.

⁴ Z.P. Biles and S.D. Olson (edd.), *Aristophanes Wasps* (Oxford, 2015), ad loc. For acceptance of the *communis opinio*, see Z.P. Biles, ‘Thucydides’ Cleon and the poetics of politics in Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, *CPh* 111 (2016), 117–38, at 122: ‘The tragic actor Odiagros escapes conviction only if he recites a tragic monologue.’

⁵ οἱ δὲ λέγουσιν μύθους ἡμῖν, οἱ δ’ Αἰσώπου τι γέλοιον | οἱ δὲ κώπτουσι, ἴν’ ἐγὼ γελῶω καὶ τὸν θυμὸν καταθῶμαι, 566–7. The genitive is (perhaps deliberately) ambiguous and the ‘something funny’ could be a fable by Aesop or an anecdote about him.

⁶ Σ VLhAld Ar. *Vesp.* 566 Koster. Σ VLh ad loc. adds that he was an actor ‘of Aeschylus’ (Αἰσχύλου δὲ ἦν ὑποκριτῆς).

⁷ On Aesop in *Wasps*, see K.S. Rothwell, ‘Aristophanes’ *Wasps* and the sociopolitics of Aesop’s *Fables*, *CJ* 90 (1995), 233–54; S. Pertsinidis, ‘The fabulist Aristophanes’, *Fabula* 50 (2009), 208–26; S. Schirru, *La favola in Aristofane* (Berlin, 2009), 56–70; E. Hall, ‘The Aesopic in Aristophanes’, in E. Bakola, L. Prauscello and M. Telò (edd.), *Greek Comedy and the Discourse of Genres* (Cambridge, 2013), 277–97, at 289–94; S. Miles, ‘Cultured animals and wild humans? Talking with the animals in Aristophanes’ *Wasps*’, in T. Fögen and E. Thomas (edd.), *Interactions between Animals and Humans in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (Berlin, 2017), 205–32, at 213–24.

⁸ Tlempolemus is listed as a tragic actor by Ghiron-Bistagne (n. 2), 359, but Stephanis (n. 2), 429, §2430 designates him a ‘fictional person or of doubtful historicity’ (‘πλαστὰ ἢ ἀμφίβολης ἱστορικότητας πρόσωπα’) and O’Connor (n. 2), 135, §467 assigns him a sceptical question mark.

⁹ Biles and Olson (n. 4), ad loc. *LGPN* I.347, citing *IG* XII(5) 978 and tentatively dating him and it to the second or first century B.C.E.

rather than being chosen for some other reason.¹⁰ Sometimes, it is even considered grounds for emendation. Euphemius (Εὐφημίου) is the manuscript reading at *Vesp.* 599, but because it is otherwise unattested in Classical Athens and the -ioc ending is typical of late antique onomastics, it is generally emended to the more common Euphemus (Εὐφήμου) or Euphemides (Εὐφημίδου).¹¹ Even names that are attested in Classical Athens, but not associated with prominent, known individuals, may have been chosen for reasons other than that they were borne by someone familiar to the audience at the Lenaea. Ergasion (1201), while far from common, does occur a handful of times in fifth- and fourth-century Attica, but Biles and Olson still reasonably assert that ‘the name has been selected ... for the etymological hint that the man in question is a common “worker” rather than an aristocrat’, while Kanavou more cautiously allows that it ‘is likely ... that it was not an accidental choice, but was used for its appropriateness to a small farmer’.¹² Likewise, Philoctemon (1250) is a fairly common name and was held by the prominent fourth-century subject of Isaeus 6, so that Sommerstein has even suggested that the man mentioned in *Wasps* may have been his grandfather.¹³ However, as the host of a lavish symposium, ‘Possessions-lover’ does not merely ‘sound ... appropriate for a rich man’, but ‘the real point is so obviously etymological ... that there is no reason to assume a reference to an otherwise unattested contemporary’.¹⁴ The name Oeagrus is not attested in Classical (or any other period) Athens, but it does have a very obvious and common other significance, as that of the father of Orpheus. The subtle etymological implications of the name Philoctemon are the principal significance that the audience would assign to it, even though they probably knew of several contemporaries of that name. So, a fortiori, the obvious mythological implications of the name Oeagrus would surely make them think of Orpheus’ father, since a name attested nowhere in the fifth century and never in Athens is unlikely to make them think of a real individual.

This is not to say that the figure whom Philocleon describes reciting a *rhēsis* in a fifth-century Athenian court is to be imagined as literally Oeagrus, the father of Orpheus. Rather the name should be taken metonymically, ‘an Oeagrus’. A clear-cut and unambiguous example of such metonymy occurs in *Ecclesiazusae*, when the girl expresses concern that the sexual revolution will ‘fill the whole world with Oedipuses’ (τὴν γῆν ἅπασαν Οἰδιπόδων ἐμπλήσετε, 1042).¹⁵ The plural makes it clear that she means not a specific individual or individuals but rather the type of men who sleep with older women. The indefinite τιν(ά) produces a similar effect at lines 180–1 of *Wasps* itself, when Bdelycleon, in jest but more truly than he realizes, asks the donkey: ‘Why are you groaning, unless you are carrying an Odysseus?’ (τί στένεις, | εἰ μὴ φέρεις Ὀδυσσεά τιν’;).¹⁶ With a little more complexity,

¹⁰ Cf. N. Kanavou, *Aristophanes’ Comedy of Names: A Study of Speaking Names in Aristophanes* (Berlin, 2011), 98 on Trygaeus in *Peace*: ‘It is not historically attested and must be the poet’s own creation, possibly inspired by similar names attested in neighbouring regions; these were rare, which would have made the etymological significance more noticeable.’

¹¹ Biles and Olson (n. 4), ad loc.; Kanavou (n. 10), 95.

¹² Biles and Olson (n. 4), ad loc.; Kanavou (n. 10), 95.

¹³ Sommerstein (n. 1), ad loc.

¹⁴ Kanavou (n. 10), 95 and Biles and Olson (n. 4), ad loc. respectively.

¹⁵ Kanavou (n. 10), 181–2.

¹⁶ Cf. Biles and Olson (n. 4), ad loc.: ‘lit. “some Odysseus”, i.e. “someone like Odysseus”’. I am indebted to *CQ*’s anonymous reader for this example, though it does fall into a slightly different category, since it refers not to a more generally applicable type, ‘an Odysseus’ (e.g. a trickster), but to the very specific, perhaps unique ‘type’ of men who escape imprisonment by hiding under

Aristophanes twice uses the name Orestes in a similar way, at *Ach.* 1167–8 and *Av.* 712.¹⁷ On both occasions, the name seems intended to evoke a type figure who in a particular way resembles the Orestes of myth, a madman in *Acharnians* and a thug in *Birds*. On both occasions, critics have been tempted to identify a contemporary figure either named or nicknamed Orestes, but with little success. The figure is not Orestes, nor even ‘Orestes’, but ‘an Orestes’, though that type might still correspond to a particular unidentified individual. The same interplay of generalization and particularization can be seen in action as with Oeagrus, the evocation of a type emblemized by a figure from myth but with the invitation to imagine that type as a contemporary individual. What then is ‘an Oeagrus’ and to what type does his mythological characterization correspond?

Oeagrus’ mythology is strictly limited.¹⁸ He is not simply Orpheus’ father. He is *only* Orpheus’ father. Indeed, until Late Antiquity, apart from a couple of instances where he is mentioned in a chain of genealogy or in the act of begetting Orpheus, his name occurs only in the genitive (for example υἰὸν Οἰάγρου <δὲ> | Ὀρφέα, Pind. *Thren.* 3 fr. 128c.11–12 Maehler) or in patronymic form (for example εὐαί]νετον Οἰαγρίδα[ν, Bacchyl. fr. 28.8 Irigoin) to describe or designate his son.¹⁹ We might compare Laertes, who is similarly defined only as the father of Odysseus and has no mythology of his own, but even he appears, acts and speaks as a character in the *Odyssey*, if only in a supporting role *as* father to his protagonist son.²⁰ In contrast, Oeagrus does not even appear in his own right in a narrated present but is always thought of in the past, or perhaps rather in the plupast, the time before whatever past exploit of Orpheus is being recounted. It is not until Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca* at the turn of the fifth century C.E. that Oeagrus has a role of his own, singing in a contest with Erechtheus and performing an *aristeia* in Dionysus’ battle against the Indians.²¹ Even here he is self-consciously a figure of the plupast, competing with the primaeval Athenian Erechtheus and defined as Orpheus’ father, even paradoxically deriving his musical powers from his son.²² He also leaves the baby Orpheus on Calliope’s lap, a scene reminiscent of Apollonius’ Chiron showing baby Achilles to Peleus with a similarly self-conscious effect of prolepsis.²³ In general, then, Oeagrus’ mythological

animals, a type which the joking Bdelycleon does not in fact believe exists. As a further complication, Bdelycleon is unwittingly flagging Aristophanes’ witting parody of *Odyssey* 9.

¹⁷ Kanavou (n. 10), 48, 114–15; S.D. Olson (ed.), *Aristophanes Acharnians* (Oxford, 2002), ad loc.; N.V. Dunbar (ed.), *Aristophanes Birds* (Oxford, 1995), ad loc.

¹⁸ He has no iconographic presence, either in his own right or even in his capacity as Orpheus’ (mortal) father. See M.-X. Garezou, ‘Orpheus’, *LIMC* VII.1.81–105, at 81: ‘Les témoignages disparates sur la parenté d’Or[pheus] ne sont pas d’un intérêt particulier pour l’analyse iconographique.’

¹⁹ Genealogy: *Certamen* 48. Begetting: Heraclid. Pont. fr. 159 Wehrli; Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 1.25. Genitive: Pl. *Symp.* 179d2; Alcidi. fr. 2.126 Avezzù; Hermesian. fr. 7.1 Powell; Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 1.570, 2.703, 4.905, 4.1193; Phanocl. fr. 1.1 Powell; Diod. Sic. 3.65.6, 4.25.2; Lucian, *Astr.* 10. Patronymic: Nic. *Ther.* 462.

²⁰ Ion of Chios’ mysterious tragedy *Laertes* may have been the exception that proves the rule.

²¹ Contest: Nonnus, *Dion.* 19.61–117; *aristeia*: 22.168–217, 320–53.

²² δεῦτερος ἀόλον ἕμνον ἀναξὶ Οἰάγρου ὑφαίνων, | ὅς γενέτης Ὀρφῆος (‘Second, Lord Oeagrus, weaving a varied song, because he was the father of Orpheus’), Nonnus, *Dion.* 19.100–1. A. Bernabé and R. García-Gasco, ‘Nonnus and Dionysiac-Orphic religion’, in D. Accorinti (ed.), *Brill’s Companion to Nonnus of Panopolis* (Leiden, 2016), 91–110, at 98: ‘This kind of “inverse genetic heritage” works ... as a poetic anticipation of the capability that would make Orpheus well known later on.’

²³ Nonnus, *Dion.* 13.428–31. Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 1.553–8. On the Apollonian scene’s metapoetic implications, see C.J. Ransom, ‘Back to the future: Apollonius’ *Argonautica* 1.553–58, chronological play and epic succession’, *Mnemosyne* 67 (2014), 639–45.

characterization is as ‘earlier than Orpheus’.²⁴ Since Orpheus himself, along with Musaeus, was considered one of the earliest singers, if not *the* earliest, Oeagrus constitutes a hyperbolically pre-originary, plupast, hyperarchaic *ne plus ultra* of poetic prehistory.²⁵ ‘An Oeagrus’, as a type, transplanted into 420s Athens and made to recite a *rhēsis* from the *Niobe*, would suggest, with appropriate comic hyperbole, a representative of old-fashioned modes of tragic composition and performance.

Such an old-fashioned mode of tragic composition and performance is, of course, exactly what most appeals to Philocleon and his fellow-jurors in the chorus. As David Konstan puts it, ‘Their old-fashioned cast of mind is indicated by a preference for Phrynichus, and for traditional art forms in general.’²⁶ This preference—and its socio-political implications—are repeatedly signalled throughout the play, from Bdelycleon’s anticipation that the chorus will warble ‘old-fashioned-honey-sweet-Sidon-style-Phrynichan-lovely lyrics’ (μέλη | ἀρχαιομελιιδωνοφρυνηχίρατα, 219–20) through the wasps’ own puzzled observation that Philocleon is usually the first to lead the way ‘singing [a song] of Phrynichus’ (πρῶτος ἡμῶν | ἡγεῖτ’ ἄν ἄδων Φρυνίχου, 268–9) to Philocleon’s climactic dance-fight with the modernist sons of Carcinus, including special Phrynichan moves (καὶ τὸ Φρυνίχειον | ἐκλακτικῶτα τις, 1523–5) and prefaced by Xanthus’ description of the old man, who ‘hasn’t for a moment all night stopped dancing those old-fashioned dances with which Thespis used to compete’ (ὀρχούμενος τῆς νυκτὸς οὐδὲν παύεται | τάρχαϊ’ ἐκεῖν’ οἷς Θέσπις ἠγωνίζετο, 1478–9).²⁷ Whether we see Philocleon as primarily a paratragic figure, with Farmer, or para-epic (in antithesis to the paratragic Bdelycleon), with Papatathanasopoulou, or as transcending genre, with Nelson, he is unquestionably a man who loves song (φιλωδός, 270) and more specifically one who loves old-fashioned song.²⁸ When such a man and his like-minded cronies are sitting as jurors, the ideal person

²⁴ Aelian may mention an otherwise unattested Oeagrus (or perhaps a different chronology for the same Oeagrus) as post-dating Orpheus and Musaeus and being the first to compose a poem about the Trojan War (Ael. *VH* 21). However, Οἰαγρος is König’s conjecture for the manuscripts’ Σύαγρος and in any case such a minor and probably late variant in the mythological tradition would not outweigh the overwhelming testimony for Oeagrus as Orpheus’ father.

²⁵ E.g. Ar. *Ran.* 1030–2 κέψαι γὰρ ἄπ’ ἀρχῆς | ὡς ἀφέλιμοι τῶν ποιητῶν οἱ γενναῖοι γεγέννηται. | Ὀρφεὺς μὲν ... (‘For think how helpful the noble ones among the poets have been since earliest times. Orpheus ...’).

²⁶ D. Konstan, ‘The politics of Aristophanes’ *Wasps*’, *TAPhA* 115 (1985), 27–46, at 32. Cf. M. Payne, ‘Teknomajikality and the humanimal in Aristophanes’ *Wasps*’, in P. Walsh (ed.), *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Aristophanes* (Leiden, 2016), 129–47, at 141: ‘Their aesthetic preferences are old-fashioned, like Better Argument’s untimely preference for old school poetry and old school sex in *Clouds*.’

²⁷ Cf. the similar artistic and socio-political preferences of Dicaeopolis (especially *Ach.* 9–11, with Z.P. Biles, ‘Aeschylus’ afterlife: reperformance by decree in 5th c. Athens?’, *ICS* 31–2 [2006–7], 206–42, at 221–7) and Strepsiades (especially *Nub.* 1353–79, with M. Wright, *The Comedian as Critic* [London, 2012], 84).

²⁸ Farmer (n. 1), 117–53; N. Papatathanasopoulou, ‘Tragic and epic visions of the *oikos* in Aristophanes’ *Wasps*’, *CW* 112 (2019), 253–78; S. Nelson, *Aristophanes and his Tragic Muse: Comedy, Tragedy and the Polis in 5th Century Athens* (Leiden, 2016), 165–71; Wright (n. 1), 216: ‘The aged Philocleon and the decrepit jurors, predictably, prefer the archaic tragedy of Phrynichus to that of the more up-to-date younger tragedians.’

to entertain them is ‘an Oeagrus’, a poet-cum-performer so old-fashioned he could have been composing and singing literally since Orpheus was in short pants.²⁹

The University of Sydney

ROBERT COWAN
bob.cowan@sydney.edu.au

²⁹ It is tempting to look for a reason why it is a speech specifically from *Niobe* that Oeagrus must deliver. However, in marked contrast to Oeagrus, Niobe has multiple associations, with fertility, boasting, impiety, mourning and petrification, which makes it harder to assert the primacy of any single one. Plato has Critias, himself ‘quoting’ Solon, say that she and Phoroneus were the first human beings, pre-dating even Deucalion (Pl. *Ti.* 22a). This tradition of Niobe’s antiquity is also reflected in reports that she was the first mortal woman with whom Zeus had sex (Diod. Sic. 4.14.4, Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.17.3) and perhaps in Martial’s use of her as a mythological *exemplum* of a sexually repulsive *uetula* (Mart. 3.32.3, 10.67.2). The audience at the Lenaea in 422 might thus have associated Niobe as well as Oeagrus with extreme antiquity and by analogy with old-fashioned poetry. However, Aristophanes may simply be evoking a famous tragedy by that other archetypally ‘old-fashioned’ poet, Aeschylus (though Sophocles’ play cannot be ruled out), perhaps with a comic paradox that Oeagrus must recite the loveliest *rhēsis* from a play best known for its protagonist’s silence. *CQ*’s anonymous reader makes the further attractive suggestion that such a paradox could characterize Philocleon as a *mis*-reader of tragedy, like Dionysus in *Frogs*. On Niobe’s silence, including the possible allusion to it in *Frogs*, see O. Taplin, ‘Aeschylean silences and silences in Aeschylus’, *HSPH* 76 (1972), 57–97, at 57–76; M. Wright, *The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy. Volume 2: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides* (London, 2019), 262–6.