

Carcinus and the Temple: a Lesson in the Staging of Tragedy

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Δεῖ δὲ τοὺς μύθους συνιστάναι καὶ τῇ λέξει συναπεργάζεσθαι ὅτι μάλιστα πρὸ ὀμμάτων τιθέμενον· οὕτω γὰρ ἂν ἐναργέστατα [ὁ] ὄρων ὥσπερ παρ' αὐτοῖς γιγνόμενος τοῖς πραττομένοις εὐρίσκοι τὸ πρέπον καὶ ἥκιστα ἂν λανθάνοι [τὸ] τὰ ὑπεναντία. σημεῖον δὲ τούτου ὁ ἐπετιμᾶτο Καρκίνῳ. ὁ γὰρ Ἀμφιάραιος ἐξ ἱεροῦ ἀνήει, ὃ μὴ ὄρωντ' ἂν τὸν θεατὴν ἐλάνθανεν, ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς σκηνῆς ἐξέπεσεν δυσχερανάντων τοῦτο τῶν θεατῶν.¹

Aristotle, *Poetics* 1455a22–29

This passage has been noticed a number of times, but its implications for staging have not had much thorough discussion and I am not sure that scholars have visualized the situation properly and drawn the appropriate conclusions.² Carcinus' dates are not entirely clear, but he was certainly writing in the 370s: the *Suda* puts his *floruit* at 380/376 and credits him with some 160 plays, in itself no mean record and surely implying a fairly long career. He was grandson of the Carcinus made fun of by Aristophanes; his father Xenocles (apparently one of three or perhaps four precocious children) must already have been writing tragedies to win the distinction of having a line parodied

¹ "One should compose the story and work it out with the language, so far as possible with it visualized in the mind's eye; in this way, seeing it quite clearly, with the action as it were happening in front of him, the poet will discover what is fitting and most readily avoid the contrary. Evidence of this is the charge laid against Carcinus: his Amphiarus came up out of a temple. If the episode had not been staged, it would have escaped notice, but when it was put on the stage, it shocked the audience and he was thrown out."

² See e.g. D. S. Margoliouth, *The Poetics of Aristotle* (London 1911) 191f; T. B. L. Webster, *Hermes* 82 (1954) 300; D. J. Allen, *CQ* NS. 21 (1971) 84; B. Snell, *TrGF* I 210ff; W. Romani, *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta* (Rome 1978) 481f; G. Xanthakis-Karamanos, *Studies in Fourth-Century Tragedy* (Athens 1980) 19 n.6 (on Carcinus see also 20 nn.2f, 87, 98). The passage does not seem to be discussed by S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London 1986). I am most grateful to E. W. Handley for alerting me to the possibilities of interpretation of this anecdote.

in the *Clouds*.³ According to Aelian, the poet's *Aerope* moved Alexander of Pherae to tears, and that tyrant was in power from 369 to 358.⁴ Carcinus' name is restored in *IG II² 2319 + Agora I 7151*, commemorating a victory at the Lenaea, perhaps in 376.⁵ It is also restored in *IG II² 2325*, reporting eleven victories at the Dionysia.⁶ By this period theatre, at least in Athens, had reached a quasi-professional status; contemporary actors such as Theodorus were commanding huge fees; and performances attracted a large public, presumably a discerning one, even if—by Aristotle's rather conservative standards—they were too much taken with spectacle and with actors who pandered to a taste for the over-dramatised.⁷ Everyone makes mistakes, but it is not easy to see how in such an environment a third-generation playwright with quite a good and extensive record could come to commit a blunder of proportions awful enough to have him eliminated from the competition⁸ and remembered as a bungler for centuries to come. At least the tragic actor Hegelochus had confused weasels and calm seas by a slip of the tongue (Σ Eur. *Or.* 279).

Of the difficulties in the interpretation of this passage, not the

³ *Clouds* 1261ff (see Dover *ad loc.*); *Wasps* 1501ff (with the dance of the sons of Carcinus I ending the play; see MacDowell *ad loc.*); *Peace* 782, 864; *Thesm.* 169, 440. On the family see recently D. F. Sutton, *AJP* 108 (1987) 17f.

⁴ Ael. *VH* 14, 40. As Snell points out, however, such stories were a commonplace, and there is no particular reason to believe this one (*TrGF* I 211); but whoever invented the story believed it could be taken as possible.

⁵ J. McK. Camp, *Hesperia* 40 (1971) 302–07 and pl. 62; H. J. Mette, *Urkunden dramatischer Aufführungen in Griechenland* (Berlin 1977) 146, IV D1 col. 5.16.

⁶ Mette (*supra* n.5) 162, V A1 col. 3.9; see also A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*², rev. J. Gould and D. M. Lewis (Oxford 1968) 112; P. Ghiron-Bistagne, *Recherches sur les acteurs dans la Grèce antique* (Paris 1976) 53ff.

⁷ See more recently O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford 1977) 477ff; Halliwell (*supra* n.2) 337–43, esp. 342f.

⁸ ἔξέπεσεν probably means that he (or his production) was hissed off the stage, which would also mean that he was eliminated from the competition. Cf. (as E. W. Handley points out to me) Dem. 19.337, ἐξεβάλλει' αὐτὸν καὶ ἐξεσυρίττει' ἐκ τῶν θεάτρων; 18.265, τριταγωνίσαις, ἐγὼ δ' ἐθεώρου. ἐξέπιπτες, ἐγὼ δ' ἐσύριπτον; Antiphanes, *Poesis* fr.142 K. (in the context of a dramatist's error). One might compare the ἀπεώσθη of *P.Oxy.* XXXV 2737, where the sense seems to be that Plato Comicus was demoted from competition in the Dionysia to the Lenaea: see D. F. Sutton, *BASP* 13 (1976) 125ff and *ZPE* 38 (1980) 59–63; G. Mastromarco, *RhM* 121 (1978) 19–34; W. Luppe, *ZPE* 46 (1982) 147–59 and 54 (1984) 15f.

least is concerned with what actually occurred. (I leave aside the question of the text and interpretation of ὃ μὴ ὀρῶντ' ... ἐλάνθανεν: the purport of the passage seems sufficiently clear from the context for the present purpose.) In attempting to reconstruct the events, the force of ἀνῆει is the critical question and it seems best to follow Margoliouth and Romani in giving the word its full and literal sense of 'rising up'. The term for coming down onto the stage (*i.e.*, in the direction of the audience) seems to have been καταβαίνειν, and ἀναβαίνειν meant moving upstage (in the direction of the *skene*).⁹ What Carcinus did, then, was to have Amphiarus coming up, resurrected from a temple rather than a tomb, an action not only illogical but possibly somewhat blasphemous. The resurrection of heroes of the recent past to give good advice to the living was of course a theme with a long history in Athenian drama. We have evidence in vase-paintings for three, perhaps four such tragedies in the earlier part of the fifth century; we also have the *Persae* of Aeschylus, perhaps his *Psychagogoi*, and we know about Sophocles' *Polyxena*.¹⁰ A theme with a long history arouses certain expectations in the audience and one could expect the spectators to be alert to the way it was handled. The logical way to stage the appearance of a figure from a tomb in the time of Carcinus was through the central door of the stage, a feature that could also serve as the doorway or gates to a palace or the entrance to a temple (as, for example, it must have done in the recognition scene of *Iphigenia in Tauris*). That is, the actor playing Amphiarus would have emerged from the same place onto the stage whether he was coming from tomb or from temple. What Carcinus had failed to do was make it clear to the audience that the central door at this point in the play was to be imagined as a tomb, not a temple.

On this basis one can hypothesize two further points. First, that no scenery was involved. This is not the place to become involved in this notorious discussion, but in general I remain sceptical of its use beyond perhaps, at some point in the history

⁹ Margoliouth and Romani (*supra* n.2); C. P. Gardiner, *TAPA* 108 (1978) 75-79.

¹⁰ On the archaeological evidence see J. R. Green in *JHS* (forthcoming); on the literary evidence see the excellent study by F. Jouan, "L'évocation des morts dans la tragédie grecque," *RHR* 98 (1981) 403-21. In the *Frogs*, faced with the crisis for tragedy, one is by contrast taken down to meet the heroes instead of having them come up. This must have been a conscious twist of the tradition on Aristophanes' part.

of the ancient theatre, the use of panels.¹¹ Certainly there is no evidence of the sort of scenery we are used to, scenery that would disguise or alter the appearance of the central door in an explicit way. And the so-called Lycurgan *skene* with columns across the central part of the stage building, while later, would imply that the earlier version as used by Carcinus was not designed for full-scale naturalistic scenery either.¹² To the same end one could argue that if there had been scenery to distinguish between temple and tomb, the problem would have been glaringly obvious to those involved in the production before things reached this critical point. The function of the central door was indicated by the script of the play and the audience was used to this convention. It was this same convention (that the physical setting for the action was defined by the words) that lay at the source of Aristophanes' parody in the *Thesmophoriazusae* (411 B.C.) of Euripides' *Helen*, which had been staged in the previous year, recently enough for the audience to remember the staging quite readily. In lines 885ff ("you have the effrontery to call the altar a tomb," etc.), he mocks the use of the structure which usually served as an altar and as a tomb, as Euripides had made so crystal clear in his script at 466, 528, 544, 547, 551, and 556. He was not one to go in for Aeschylean obscurity.¹³ But he would not have needed to place such emphasis on these things if the stage setting had made it self-evident.

This brings us to the second hypothesis. It seems reasonable to assume that the central door had served as a temple in the

¹¹ Among more recent works, A. L. Brown, "Three and Scene-Painting in Sophocles," *PCPS* 210 (1984) 1-17, has strengthened the case for τρεῖς δὲ καὶ σκηνογραφίαν Σοφοκλήης being an interpolation at *Poetics* 1449a18-19. See also my survey in *Lustrum* 31 (1989) 7-95, esp.27f. Important too is H. Eristov, "Peinture romaine et texts antiques: informations et ambiguïtés," *RA* (1987) 118-21.

¹² The validity of Dörpfeld's reconstruction has now been demonstrated by R. F. Townsend, "The Fourth-Century Skene of the Theatre of Dionysos at Athens," *Hesperia* 55 (1986) 421-38; see also L. Polacco, "Ancora sulle porticus eumenicae di Vitruvio," *AttiVenezia* 137 (1978-79) 719-24; F. E. Winter, "The Stage of New Comedy," *Phoenix* 37 (1983) 38-47. For arguments that the fifth-century stage building had columns, perhaps under the inspiration of the captured *skene* or tent of Xerxes, see more recently H. Kenner, "Zur Archäologie des Dionysostheaters in Athen," *ÖJh* 57 (1986-87) 55-91; L. Polacco, "La fronte di retroscena del teatro di Epidauro," *NumAntCl* 7 (1978) 83-93, and in *AttiVenezia* (*supra*).

¹³ Note especially *Frogs* 1122: Aeschylus was ἀσαφής ἐν τῷ φράσει τῶν πραγμάτων.

earlier part of the play and that it changed its function for Amphiarus' appearance: that is, one would have expected Carcinus to incorporate into the script some dialogue or description that would prompt the audience to think of the door as a tomb. To judge by his record, he cannot normally have been an incompetent and he must normally have been able to create the staged effect in his mind's eye when he was writing. We do not know if Carcinus produced the play himself (it seems to have been a little less common for the playwright to do so in the fourth century than it had been in the fifth), but for present purposes it does not matter. In *TrGF* Snell commented laconically that he did not know how the producer (whether Carcinus or another) could fail to notice, and this is the crux of the problem. One could add that it seems strange that even if it escaped the producer in rehearsal, the deficiency escaped the actors as well: actors were if anything more anxious than poets to win prizes at this period, and their livelihood as professionals depended on the quality of their performances. It seems probable that Theodorus acted in Carcinus' *Aerope* (Ael. *VH* 14.40). Men of such stature would be unlikely to risk their reputations even if the fault was not directly attributable to them. We can only assume that this was another case of things running to the last minute and perhaps of an over-hasty cut in the script.¹⁴

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¹⁴ Cratinus (fr.237 K.=255 K.-A.) seems to make too much of having spent a whole two years on his play (contrast Aristophanes' rate of production in the 420s). More especially see A. C. Cassio, "I tempi di composizione delle commedie attiche e una parafrasi di Aristofane in Galeno (Ar. Fr.346 K-A)," *RivFil* 115 (1987) 5-11, where he examines Aristophanes' bid for sympathy in the second *Thesmophoriazusae* by claiming that he was ill for the four months immediately prior to the performance (*i.e.*, after the award of the chorus). For tragedy see recently C. W. Müller, *Zur Datierung des sophokleischen Ödipus* (=AbhMainz 1984.5) 60-77, who argues for a normal two-year gap between tragedians' productions, but he is concerned with tetralogies in the fifth century. To write 160 plays, Carcinus must have worked at some speed.