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Epicharmus' *Odysseus automolos* and the Invention of a Comic Anti-Hero

Despite the new edition of the fragments in *PCG I* and the recent reassessment of the relationship between Doric and Attic Comedy by R. Kerkhof, the artistic character of Epicharmus' works remains largely unknown. Epicharmus' *Odysseus automolos* is one of the few plays of which we at least have one substantial papyrus fragment (Epich. fr. 97, partly commented upon in fr. 98). A reconstruction of its plot has been attempted repeatedly, but so far there has been no convincing integration of the turbulent stage action of fr. 97 with the information provided by the other fragments. The philological discussion presented here will lead to a solution and shed new light on the relationship between Epicharmus and his Homeric subtexts. Whereas previous scholars (since Gomperz and Kaibel) assumed that Epicharmus closely followed Homer (without explaining in what sense the *Odysseus automolos* would then be a 'comedy'), it is shown that Epicharmus developed an un-heroic Odysseus who prefigures the mythological burlesque of Attic Comedy.

In Epich. fr. 97 a speaker identifiable as Odysseus converses with an unnamed interlocutor who has been thought to be Diomedes: according to this interpretation, the two characters are the ones sent on a spying mission to Troy in *Iliad* 10, and the title of the play refers to Odysseus' being disguised as a deserter. However, the text makes it clear that the second speaker is not Odysseus' companion but his opponent. Also, Odysseus is worried because the Achaeans are approaching, and he wishes that he might have performed some dangerous task involving a report to the Greeks instead of preferring a cowardly action. In order to make sense of this, scholars have suggested that Odysseus has *not* gone to Troy and is now preparing a cover-up speech.

This reconstruction fails to explain why Odysseus should be afraid of the Achaeans, why he laments about being beaten, why he is on bad terms with 'Diomedes', why he refers to the Achaeans in the third person in his 'cover-up speech', and why the play is entitled *Odysseus automolos*.

Instead, a story can be reconstructed where Odysseus, facing the prospect of a dangerous spying mission, chooses to desert to Troy; he becomes a real *automolos*. In the present scene, he is being beaten by a Trojan, but at the same time fears to fall into the hands of the Achaeans. His 'speech' is in reality the (monologic) wish not to have deserted. The reason for the beating is given in fr. 99, which must have followed shortly after fr. 97. Here the speaker declares that he was employed as a swineherd, but after he lost one of the animals his employer accused him of bartering with the Achaeans – the Greek hero is being punished because the Trojans suspect him of duplicity.

Epich. fr. 97 contains various epic echoes. These are strategically placed in Odysseus' mouth as he is referring to the Achaeans with bitter irony: the un-heroic 'hero' distances himself from the discourse of epic poetry. This procedure foreshadows the technique of para-epic passages in Aristophanes. It implies an iconoclastic attitude which is typical of popular drama and helps to grasp the generic character of Epicharmus' art. In addition,

the undermining of epic authority in Sicilian Comedy can be read as an expression of a new colonial identity which has begun to compete with the social models provided by the traditional literary canon.