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ARISTOPHANES, THE ACCUSER OF SOCRATES: SOME SOCIOLINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF COMEDY

SUMMARY: This paper examines the impact of verbal abuse typical of the old Attic comedy on the reputations of real-life citizens of Athens. It can be argued that the way in which comic poets insulted well-known people of their age shared many characteristics with the communicative strategies applied in everyday familiar speech. This may indicate that the only proper reaction to it consisted in accepting the ridicule as if it were not offensive.

KEYWORDS: old comedy, aischrology, shame, obscenity, personal abuse

According to a widespread interpretation of the *Apology of Socrates* (18a-b), Aristophanes was responsible for the bad reputation of the philosopher, and at least partially for his notorious trial and condemnation.[1] If we are to believe Plato (*Epist*. 7.325), this traumatic experience made him resign from his career as a statesman and made him turn for the rest of his days towards *theoretical life*.[2] If this chain of causation is true, we should be grateful to Aristophanes for the creation of works which show us that apart from the shadows on the wall of our

[1] In the passage, Socrates says that his *earlier accusers* (i.e., comic poets) were much more serious and dangerous than those later ones (cf. *Apology of Socrates* 19c). Assuming that the reader of the dialogue did not take comic playwrights seriously, the philosopher's words may be understood as an insult, since they imply that Anytos and his colleagues were even less serious than Aristophanes. Such a reading has recently been criticized by Sommerstein (2004: 155) and firmly retained by Halliwell (2008: 254-255 with note 94 which contains the bibliography to the controversy).

[2] See e.g., Snell 2009: 371-372.

cave there is some other reality. On the other hand, one cannot be sure that the playwright contributed to it in any substantial way. Although we know that the old Attic comedy harassed the citizens of Athens in a way which perplexes even the most liberal representatives of the modern audience, it seems likely that it did not affect the reputation of the Athenians ridiculed on the stage. If it had, we would probably know something about it. Instead, the ancient sources do not contain anything to that effect. The only exceptions are the passage in the *Apology* and some obscure mentions of a legal action, supposedly taken by Cleon against Aristophanes.[3] It is noteworthy that in the latter case, the demagogue, even though he had been ridiculed by the poet in his comedy *Babylonians*, did not sue the poet for personal slander, but for the abuse of the people of Athens.

This is bewildering for at least two reasons. First of all, we know that the law forbade under penalty the verbal abuse of citizens in public and sacred places (the theater belonged to both categories; see Halliwell 1991: 49). Secondly, in ancient Athens a person's reputation counted perhaps even more than in contemporary public life.[4] Moreover, seeing that the Athenians used to sue each other even for petty offenses and that the trials were often treated as a source of entertainment for the general public (Cohen 1995: *passim*), it seems natural to expect them to prosecute the comic poets on a regular basis. This, however, was clearly not the case. It has even been suggested by scholars that there had been some sort of law which protected the playwrights.[5] This does not seem plausible, however, because the ancient authorities do not inform us about the existence of such a law. More importantly, the aforementioned story about the conflict between Cleon and Aristophanes shows that a citizen abused by a poet, even if he was not allowed to sue him for personal slander, was free to take action against him for any other real or invented crime. Since this almost never happened, it is clear that something protected the playwrights. What could it be if it

[3] In Aristophanic comedies, scholia and the *vita* of the poet. A full account is given by Sommerstein (2004: 167-172, 145-154).

[4] See e.g. Cohen 1991: *passim*; Fisher 1998: *passim*.

[5] See e.g. Halliwell 1984: 86-87; Halliwell 1991a; Halliwell 2004: 15-16; Halliwell 2008: 244 (bibliography); Sommerstein 2004; MacDowell 1995: 25-26; Henderson 1990: 288-289; Carrière 1979: 44-46.

was not the law?[6] In my opinion, paradoxically, what made the comic poets immune was the personal invective itself. The less sublime they were and the more precisely they hit below the belt by being obscene, the safer they may have felt behind the walls of laughter.

Laughter is a physiological reaction to some (usually) psychological stimuli, and is a means of emotional discharge. This is one of the reasons why it can be described in terms analogical to those applicable to physical aggression. Within the field of research on the ancient comedy, most scholars draw a distinction between its exclusive and inclusive social functions.[7] The former is perfectly parallel to collective violence, the model of which was developed by René Girard; it (laughter/violence) focuses on a human object, stigmatizes it, excludes it from a group or community (the exile of Oedipus can be cited as a *locus classicus*), and at the same time allows the group to express its unity and consolidate its internal ties. Inclusive laughter, the effects of which are much more beneficial for its object, can be compared with the act of including a structurally marginal human being into a society (as in the reception of Oedipus by the Athenians), which, in turn, can also be a means of the self-articulation of the group and can help strengthen its cohesion (Seaford 1994: 123-139).

Classical examples of these two functions of laughter can be sought in the *Iliad* in the episode (1.595-600) in which the lame Hephaestus acts as a steward serving *nectar* to the gods and makes the others

[6] Most scholars claim that the time of Dionysian festivals was somehow excluded from ordinary life, which made the audience treat the comic insults less seriously and forget them easily. Why? Reckford (1987: 479) claims that the ritual context explains everything; Rosen (1988: especially 63-64 and 78-79; criticism in Bowie 2002) argues that people mentioned or depicted in comedy are purely fictional (the comic Socrates has nothing to do with the real one). Such an explanation is theoretically perfectly correct, although it requires the ancient simpletons to be as deeply aware of the orthodoxy of literary theory as only few modern scholars are. Halliwell (2008: 254-255) claims that the accumulation of obscenity caused some sort of anesthetics; Sommerstein (2004) states that the words of comic poets could really spoil a citizen's reputation, although a trial would only have made the situation worse. The latter opinion seems to me to be closest to the truth.

[7] See e.g., Robson 2006: 78; O'Higgins 2003: 4. Halliwell, quite exceptionally, applies a pair of analogical terms *consequential*/*non-consequential = playful laughter*, which he defines in Halliwell 1991b.

laugh by imitating Ganymede and Hebe in a naturally clumsy way, he brings an end to a quarrel between Zeus and Hera, which otherwise could have brought other, certainly not laughable, results. In another passage, (2.211-277) *the worst of Achaeans*, Thersites speaks boldly against Achilles and Agamemnon. Subsequently, Ulysses insults him and threatens him, which makes the witnesses of the stage laugh at Thersites and puts an end to a potentially dangerous conflict between the leaders and their troops. The contrast between the two situations described in the *Iliad* consists in different consequences that the laughter of the group had for its object and in his willingness (or unwillingness) to play this role and to accept the rules of the game.

According to Aristophanes' declarations, the invective in his comedies was supposed to cause strongly exclusive laughter.[8] In similar terms of verbal aggression, we may describe all other instances of the use of obscene language typical of the old Attic comedy. According to Jeffrey Henderson, the author of the classical monograph on obscenity in Aristophanes, this category embraces all references to the taboo phenomena connected with sex and physiology (scatology) which avoid euphemisms or technical language.[9] Seeing that there is no metalinguistic term such as the Latin *obscaenum* in the classical Greek, the ancient speakers of this language would use some other words, all of which connote the concept of shame.[10] One of them, namely αἰσχρολογία (and its cognates), has become quite common in the scholarly works of recent decades.[11]

Taking these differences in terminology as a starting point, Henderson (1991: 1-13) draws a sharp borderline between *our* ideas and the Greek image of the phenomena which may be described in an obscene manner. He reaches the conclusion that unlike the Romans and the Victorian-Christian western culture, which associated sexuality with guilt and obscenity with impurity, the Greeks treated eroticism mainly

[8] See especially *Nubes* 549-550, where the comic attacks on Cleon are described in the categories of fist-fighting: ὃς μέγιστον ὄντα Κλέων' ἔπαισ' εἰς τὴν γαστέρα κοὐκ ἐτόλμησ' αὖθις ἐπεμπηδῆσ' αὐτῷ κειμένῳ.

[9] Henderson 1991: 2 (first edition: 1975).

[10] Henderson (1991: 2) enumerates: αἰδέομαι, αἰδώς, αἰδοῖος, αἰσχρός, αἰσχύνομαι.

[11] E.g., Halliwell uses its English version which he himself minted: *aischrology*. Degani (1987) uses the Italianized term *escrologia*.

as a source of pleasure, as long as it remained confined to the private sphere. Therefore, talking about it publicly would not break the rules of morality or purity, but it could violate the *decorum* (analogically, stripping off in a private space is morally neutral, whereas in public it may be seriously disruptive). If, however, obscene language was applied to a description of a third party, especially some well-known person, the audience would enjoy it in a similar way to that which is connected with the violent exposure of someone and the penetration of his or her intimate sphere.

The parallels, unfortunately, do not have to be sought very far. Whoever has had the opportunity to read a tabloid newspaper might have noticed that these virtual forms of collective violence are still a common source of pleasure. In order to remain within the Greek universe, we may return to Thersites' episode, in which Ulysses threatens the unfortunate scoundrel (*Il.* 2.258-264):

> εἴ κ' ἔτι σ' ἀφραίνοντα κιχήσομαι ὥς νύ περ ὧδε,
> μηκέτ' ἔπειτ' Ὀδυσῆϊ κάρη ὤμοισιν ἐπείη,
> μηδ' ἔτι Τηλεμάχοιο πατὴρ κεκλημένος εἴην,
> εἰ μὴ ἐγώ σε λαβὼν ἀπὸ μὲν φίλα εἵματα δύσω,
> χλαῖνάν τ' ἠδὲ χιτῶνα, τά τ' αἰδῶ ἀμφικαλύπτει,
> αὐτόν δὲ κλαίοντα θοὰς ἐπὶ νῆας ἀφήσω
> πεπλήγων ἀγορῆθεν ἀεικέσσι πληγῇσιν.

This passage describes a paradigmatic case of the violation of someone's intimacy, evidently with hostile intentions and in a clearly aggressive manner. Or, to be more clear, it would have described it had Ulysses put into practice what he said he would do. Instead, the violence remained almost completely virtual. Having uttered the threats, Ulysses hit Thersites with a scepter, Thersites fell into tears, and the others laughed (since the performance had an audience).[12]

In this particular case, real, physical violence is almost absent. Henderson is clearly right by saying that it can be entirely eliminated and

[12] In spite of some evident parallels between this episode and a comic performance, Redfield's (1990: 327) claim that Thersites may be a prototype of a comic poet seems unjustified, seeing that this character becomes an object of laughter and aggression. If anybody plays a role in this passage similar to that of Aristophanes, it is certainly Ulysses.

substituted with the use of obscene language. What begs some sort of correction is his statement that obscenity actually makes the sender and the receiver of the message imagine the object to which the word refers. Within this oversimplified model, the difference between more (primary obscenities) and less (secondary obscenities) vulgar expressions consists in the mental picture they evoke.[13] It would be much safer, then, to apply the term and definition proposed by Steven Halliwell.

Unlike Henderson, this scholar, instead of using the modern word *obscenity,* uses the word *aischrology*. According to his definition (Halliwell 2004: 117):

> The concept covers the use of language that causes (or could reasonably be expected to cause) individual or social offense by obtrusively breaching norms of acceptable speech. Especially in one or more of the following ways: (1) by explicit, non-technical reference to sexually sensitive topics (a form of offensiveness that at any rate overlaps with later classifications of obscenity); (2) by personal ad hominem vilification; or (3) by direct mention of religiously protected and normally 'unspeakable' objects (ἄρρητα, ἀπόρρητα), though these terms can also embrace the two preceding categories in my list.

As Halliwell explains (further on Halliwell 2004: 117-130), whether the Greeks considered a given sort of verbal behavior to be aischrological or not often depended not on the subject matter, but on the way in which it was presented. This clearly results from the Aristotelian criticism of Bryson (*Rhet*. 1405b), who claimed that language had no other level than a purely referential one. As the Stagirite says, what really counts in this case is word choice. Therefore, aischrology, or at least

[13] Henderson 1991: 10, 35-54. As *primary obscenities,* the scholar describes those (mostly four-letter) words which in the most immediate way refer to some specific actions or parts of the body. This is certainly not the place to criticize at length his idea (based on Freud and Ferenczi) of how they function and are acquired by speakers of natural languages. It is sufficient to say that it seems highly speculative that the use of these lexemes causes hallucinatory-regressive states since their acquisition precedes the understanding of their taboo. As a matter of fact, common experience shows that most children start using forbidden words exactly because they know that they are forbidden and in spite of the fact that they do not know their exact meaning.

the kind 1 which to a large degree overlaps with our *obscenity*, should be described in sociolinguistic terms rather than in any other terms. It would, however, be an oversimplification to claim that it depends entirely on lexical choices.[14] There are, for instance, many ways of talking about sexuality, ranging from very obscene ones to those perfectly neutral, elevated, or technical. On the other hand, it is really difficult to talk about someone's mother's sexual life without offending that person's feelings. This sort of behavior is very likely to be considered abusive and therefore aischrological in the sense 2. In this case, the choice of subject matter plays a much more important role than lexical choices.

Two points need to be emphasized: first, the possibility of the violation of rules presupposes their existence. Second, clearly very much depended on the context of verbal behavior. Henderson has already observed that obscene language would be categorized as such when used in a public space mainly because it belonged primarily to the private sphere of conversations at home, or a symposium between friends and with courtesans. Analyzing the phenomenon in sociolinguistic rather than semantic terms, James Robson (2006: 81-83) made a valuable suggestion that obscenity can be compared to some linguistic subsystems such as slang, the use of which is a means of identifying a given social unit's members. This *degradation* of the language, as the scholar calls it in Bachtinian terms, is tolerated only in a specific sphere, to the definition of which it contributes. Outside of this conceptual space, it can be (and usually is) considered outrageous and often causes a violent reaction. Michail Bachtin (1975: 75-77) himself noted that the linguistic and extralinguistic communicative strategies which indicate intimacy or familiarity are not limited to the lowering of register. They comprise, for instance, the replacement of official forms of address with first names (often shortened) or nicknames, jokes, mutual ridicule, and the choice of less serious subjects of conversation, including some private or even intimate matters. Within this model, a paradigmatic dialogue, which consists of the interchange of roles between the sender and the

[14] Halliwell is clearly aware of this (see Halliwell 2004: 121: *Aischrologic speech is correlated with but not reducible to the status of its subject matter*), although his rhetoric strategy of polemics makes him mention it only in passing.

receiver, permits them to examine and negotiate the degree of mutual familiarity by means of the use of *figures of intimate speech*.

Seeing that the highest degree of absolute familiarity between friends exists only in mythology, the behavior of each person in any close relationship is to a large degree determined by this person's position in the hierarchy. There are, for instance, some explicit rules which tell us who may start calling the other by his or her first name. Less explicit, although very rigid, rules regulate who may first use a vulgarism or the interlocutor's nickname, make a joke about the way he or she dresses, say something about delicate matters such as erotic life, etc. When a person of lower social status shows this sort of initiative, his or her invitation to closer familiarity can be easily dismissed by the other with such simple (and yet cruel) methods as perplexed facial expressions or lack of a smile. On the other hand, some behaviors apply these rules (which can be compared to grammar) in a paradoxical way by violating them, which sends a clear message. When, for example, a student refuses to shake a professor's hand or to greet him or her, or does not allow himself or herself to be called by his or her first name, his or her action can be described as an act of symbolic aggression, an attempt to break down the existing hierarchy and establish a new one. This sort of behavior is typical especially for communities in a state of political, religious, racial, or other conflicts.

The dialectic of the temporal interchange between the states in which the hierarchy is well articulated and those in which it becomes suppressed can be easily described in Turnerean terms of *structure* and *communitas*. The old comedy, by means of using obscene language, the invective exchange between the characters and the verbal abuse of the audience (sometimes entire or large part of it, as in the case of *Nubes* 1099), radically breaks with what was permitted in public space in everyday life. The mythological burlesque, which did not leave even the gods immune to slander, and the fact that the poets focused on the banal pleasures of food, drink, and eroticism,[15] contributed to that special mood of celebration. For an average citizen, it must have been difficult to decline an invitation to share such intimacy with others because the comedy was produced and received collectively. It needs to be empha-

[15] See e.g., Ruffell 2000: *passim*; Fisher 2000: 359-360.

sized that it was not Aristophanes himself who insulted the Athenians. It was the chorus and actors appointed by the archont as being representative of the whole city-state.

The temporary suppression of the structure and hierarchy contested by means of insulting the most prominent citizens can be understood as an articulation of democratic egalitarianism. This concept, quite naturally, existed in its pure form only within the symbolic space of official ideology, whereas the real life practice consisted in a constant struggle for status and rank in the hierarchy. This dichotomy, however, explains the freedom of speech and insult in comedy. The rhetoric of the slightly later period shows that the more elevated the position of a speaker was, the more he was determined to convince the audience that he entirely depended on people's favor and that all he wanted to do was to serve demos, not manipulate it.[16] Therefore, it seems reasonable enough that a demagogue whose intention was to dominate society could not help but apply the strategies which made him appear to be an average member of it. The more a comedy could spoil his image, the less he was supposed to show that he cared for his dignity and elevated status.

It is not a surprise that the only (fictional) judicial speech in which a playwright is accused of spoiling someone's reputation is the *Apology of Socrates*. The fictional speaker created (or at least colored) by Plato refuses to persuade the judges to declare him innocent. Thus the speech, although formally being an apology, instead of aiming to show that the defendant is a helpless victim, is designed to create an image of a real philosopher, an intellectual aristocrat, who does not even bother to pretend to be an average citizen. Socrates does all he can to the opposite effect by emphasizing the differences between himself and other people, slaves of illusions.

It is noteworthy that in another dialogue, the *Symposium*, Plato shows Socrates peacefully spending time in the company of Aristophanes. Assuming that Plato was a genius and that nothing in his oeuvre is really casual, it is tempting to think that the two texts are complementary. The fictional Socrates (and very likely also the real one) was the exact opposite of a demagogue. He did not take comic slander as a personal offense since he was not a presumptuous megalomaniac. He

[16] See e.g., Cohen 1995: 75-81; Ober, Strauss 1990; Goldhill 1987: 62-63.

was not afraid of saying publicly that he did not deserve to be laughed at simply because he cared little for his image. It seems to be a great strategy: not to speak well of ourselves, waiting for others to do it in our stead. Socrates, however, had to wait for it until he was dead. Why? If we permit ourselves to take the *Apology* at face value as a real judicial speech, it will become clear that it was not the accusation (which was otherwise really clumsy) that made the jury condemn Socrates, but his own arrogant attitude towards the possibility of defending himself. It is not Aristophanes, one of the *earlier accusers*, who is responsible in this case, but Socrates himself, who did not even pretend that he deserved to be ridiculed.

If he had laughed, he would have been safe.

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