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A PORTMANTEAU THESEUS IN EURIPIDES' *SUPPLICES*?

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'The play that poses the greatest challenge to interpretation ... is *Supplikes*'
(Mastronarde 2010, 80)

Abstract. The title of the conference to which this paper formed a contribution was Topical Issues of Ancient Culture and Its Heritage. The issues raised here have, however, been side-lined by most modern scholars, and thus might be said to be no longer as topical as they once were. It is with a view to reviving the once widely held view that writers for the Athenian stage might choose plots that shed light on current events, rather than engaging in escapist drama, that this paper has been written. The dramatic stage was very much part of Athenian political life, and once we recall with Simon Goldhill (Goldhill 1987) that a dramatic festival was the occasion for the pouring of libations by the generals, for the display of the annual tribute, for the praise of civic benefactors, and the parade in armour of war orphans, then we can understand how plays might have a political resonance, and how the stage — whether tragic or comic — might be the place where things could be said that were impossible to say in other contexts.

In many instances, I have found that Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes employed individuals belonging to the extended family of Pericles — Alcibiades, Aspasia, Hipparete (Alcibiades' wife) and of course Pericles

himself — in order to make their points about the contemporary scene.¹ This, of course goes against the grain of criticism over the past century or more. It was Wilamowitz who placed a major obstacle in the way of this kind of research in 1899 with his dogmatic statement that “no Sophoclean tragedy has any immediate connection with a contemporary event.”² Scorn and ridicule greeted anyone bold enough to challenge such an approach to ancient drama.³

This still standard approach is best exemplified by another dictum, that of E. R. Dodds. In an article perhaps appropriately entitled “On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*,” Dodds wrote that “it is an essential critical principle that *what is not mentioned in the play does not exist*” (italics original).⁴ The centrality of this view is attested by the fact that the article in which it appeared has been reprinted twice (in 1973 and 1983). Such voluntary blindfolds, such indifference to the historical context of Greek drama, are still adopted by most scholars today, and this has meant that an issue central to our understanding of Ancient Culture is not nearly as “topical” as perhaps it should be.

This paper builds on recent research within this taboo area. I have argued elsewhere that five of Sophocles’ extant plays can be seen to shadow Alcibiades’ mercurial career from his early teens to his second exile.⁵ One piece of evidence in particular has proved to be very fruitful in the case of Euripides. This is the realization that Plato’s implication that writers for the stage might be venal⁶ has a recognisable rationale in Euripides’ career in the years following 416 BC, when he composed an epinician ode to commemorate Alcibiades’ victory in the chariot race at the Olympic games of that year.⁷ Epinician poets were extremely well paid — witness Pindar’s 10,000 drachma fee for a poem in praise of Athens⁸ — and it could safely be said that Euripides was in Alcibiades’ pocket thereafter. From his obsequious (and inaccurate) attribution of first, 2nd and 3rd places to his pa-

¹ Vickers 1997; 2008; 2014; 2015.

² Wilamowitz 1899, 59; cf. Wilamowitz 1917, 316-17.

³ E.g. Johansen 1962, 163; Dover 1958, 235; 2004.

⁴ Dodds 1966, 40.

⁵ Vickers 2008.

⁶ Pl. *Resp.* 595b4, 597e6, 598e8, 602b9, 605c11, 607a3; cf. 595c1.

⁷ Vickers 2015, 45.

⁸ *Isoc.* 15.166; *Pind. Fr.* 75 Snell.

tron, to his eventual employment as poet-in-residence at the Macedonian court of the man for whom Alcibiades proposed a vote of *euergasia* during his brief return to Athens from exile in 407 BC (ML 91), Euripides appears to have been hand-in-glove with Alcibiades. Small wonder that in plays written after 416 BC Euripides often gives a pro-Alcibiadean spin. Thus, for example, the innocent heroine of *Helen* is a born-again Alcibiades,⁹ and what has been called the “inconsistency” of the hero of *Ion*,¹⁰ who is sometimes a naïve lad, sometimes a cynical politician, is an accurate and largely sympathetic rendering of an Alcibiades who was, as Plutarch tells us, full of “many strange inconsistencies and contradictions.”¹¹

Found among Euripides' papers after his death was the *Bacchae*, the two main characters of which “Dionysus is the dispenser of natural joys, Pentheus the joy-hating Puritan,” as E. R. Dodds well put it.¹² I suggested in my *Sophocles on Stage*¹³ that they are based on Alcibiades and Critias, the one prone to pleasure¹⁴ and the other who was possessed of “a strong puritanical streak.”¹⁵ *Bacchae* was written by Euripides during his stay in Macedon, where he will doubtless have received accounts from Athens of Alcibiades' return: his triumphant arrival by sea, and his restoration and magnificent celebration of the Eleusinian Mysteries; he will have heard how the Athenians granted Alcibiades gold and bronze crowns,¹⁶ and “not only all human, but divine honours.”¹⁷ On this view, the exaggeratedly enthusiastic image of the Asia from which Dionysus has just come¹⁸ represents an imperial shopping list that Alcibiades was in the event unable to fulfil (these lines did, however, inspire the young Alexander, whose favourite tragic poet was Euripides,¹⁹ and who was probably very much aware of his Alcibiadean precursor).²⁰

⁹ Vickers 2015, 89-108.

¹⁰ Lee 1997, 29.

¹¹ Plut. *Alc.* 2.1; Vickers 2014; 2015, 42-57.

¹² Dodds 1960, 128.

¹³ Vickers 2008, 104-14.

¹⁴ Plut. *Alc.* 6.1-2.

¹⁵ Ostwald 1986, 465.

¹⁶ Nep. *Alc.* 6.

¹⁷ Just. *Epit.* 5.4.

¹⁸ Eur. *Bacch.* 13-9.

¹⁹ Brown 1967.

²⁰ Vickers 2011a.

Before his services had been bought, Euripides was less inclined to flatter Alcibiades and members of the household in which he lived. Aspasia probably lies behind the figure of Phaedra in the various versions of *Hippolytus* (of ca. 430 BC) and not to her credit;²¹ nor to that of her paramour's ward Alcibiades (who underlies the eponymous hero, on whom more below). *Supplices*, the Euripidean play that is the principal subject of this paper, is in another category again, and marks a transitional stage on the playwright's way to a pro-Alcibiadean position.

The likely financial nexus between Euripides and Alcibiades has been consistently neglected by students of Attic drama, as has the clear statement of the Antiochene scholar Libanius to the effect that Alcibiades underpinned Old Comedy: "What play did not include Alcibiades among the cast of characters?"²² It is for those who believe that to take such evidence seriously "reduces a piece of dramatic poetry to mere packaging of a political message" (to quote a recent critic) to demonstrate that writers for the Athenian stage were oblivious to the contemporary scene (in the case of Sophocles, there are few in recorded history who had a longer career in politics). Until then, some of us will continue to explore the rich, neglected, field of political allegory in the hope that new life might be breathed into the tedious and self-referential scholarship that currently stands in the way of a proper appreciation of ancient drama.

There is a problem at the heart of the interpretation of *Supplices* that cannot be said to have been solved by recent scholarship. Indeed, it is fair to say that much recent scholarship has tended to ignore the problem altogether. It was well expressed by P. Decharme at the beginning of the last century as follows: "The tragedy of the *Suppliants* no doubt contains allusions to Alcibiades that nobody calls into question: the alliance recently entered into by Athens and Argos was, in fact, his work. But these allusions appear to be contradictory. On the one hand Adrastus says to Theseus that Athens is fortunate in having in him a young and valiant leader."²³ On the other hand, the poet places on Theseus' lips a very lively criti-

²¹ Strauss 1993, 166-75; Vickers 2000; 2015, 185-95.

²² Lib. *Fr.* 50.2.21.

²³ Eur. *Supp.* 190ff.

cism of the behaviour of the youths who take part in public affairs (*Supp.* 231-37)."²⁴

There were constant discussions in the 19th century over the issues involved²⁵ and while few acknowledge any more the "allusions to Alcibiades," a strong case has nevertheless been made by A. Michelini for seeing elements of Alcibiades in the person of Theseus: "What *Suppliants* does for Alcibiades is to overlay his public persona with one that resembles him at key points but differs signally elsewhere. Like Theseus, Alcibiades is an orphaned youth with great inherited prestige. Like Theseus, he is intellectual and argumentative. Like Theseus, he has a unique position in a democracy — or would like to lay claim to such a position. Like Theseus, he enters the political arena in a time of extreme youth. Like Theseus, he supports aggressive foreign policies."²⁶

This is in a tradition that saw *Supplikes* as "practically a party pamphlet"²⁷ or "an electioneering manifesto"²⁸ in the interest of Alcibiades. Nevertheless, more recent studies, Michelini apart, have poured cold water on the very notion that characters in the play should resemble contemporary individuals in any way. The search for such parallels is dismissed as "crude reductiveness," and we are warned that we should "beware of the dangers of trawling contemporary politics to find a key to the play."²⁹ The thrust of another recent comment is much the same, but it does contain the seeds of a solution to the problem outlined above. "To identify characters ... with real figures of contemporary politics" is said to be "a dangerous undertaking."³⁰ On this view, tragedy is "dramatic entertainment first and political allegory a distant second, and we should not ransack these dramas to find one-to-one equations between tragic characters and contemporary politicians" (*ibid.*, 22).

The key expression here is "one-to-one," for this is the way, erroneous as we shall see, in which the problem has usually been tackled. Scholars in the past have argued not just for an association between Theseus and Al-

²⁴ Decharme 1906, 125.

²⁵ E.g. Lugge 1887.

²⁶ Michelini 1997, 183; cf. 1994, 248.

²⁷ Wilamowitz 1875, 179; cf. Giles 1890, 95-97.

²⁸ Delebecque 1951, 212-13; cf. Morwood 2007, 171.

²⁹ Morwood 2007, 170.

³⁰ Storey 2008, 42.

cibiades, but for Theseus and Nicias³¹ and for Theseus and Pericles.³² The difficulties in incontrovertibly associating Theseus with any one of these individuals to the exclusion of the others has led to the current condition of scholarly defeatism, to the view that even to look at *Supplices* in terms of the historical personalities who may have been involved is said to smack of “impropriety.”³³

The key to the problem is perhaps to recognise that there is not a “one-to-one” relationship between Theseus and any of these characters, but that the Theseus of Euripides’ “encomium of the Athenians” (as the fragmentary plot-summary of *Supplices* calls it) may include elements of them all. Euripides is employing here what we might call “portmanteau characterization,” of a kind matched in another play performed at about the same time (assuming a date for *Supplices* of soon after 424 BC, the events of which it probably evokes: “The disaster at Delium in 424 BC and the refusal of the Thebans contrary to Greek religious custom to give up the bodies of the dead manifestly suggested the theme of the play.”)³⁴ The play in question is a comedy, but since the genius of comedy was, according to the Socrates of Plato’s *Symposium*, the same as that of tragedy (223a), this need not detain us.

Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (of 423 BC) includes two characters who are amalgams of others. “Socrates” is a portmanteau figure combining aspects of Socrates himself, and of the philosophers who were members of Pericles’ circle. I have suggested elsewhere that “rather than being a faithful image of Socrates, Aristophanes’ clever conceit may instead be a witty cento of allusions to several representatives of the new learning which was, rather in the manner of Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s learned exercises with fruit, flowers and vegetables, formed into a portrait of the son of Sophroniscus.”³⁵ There were so many traits that did not fit Socrates himself that he could stand up in the theatre to imply “Do I look like the sort of man who’s playing the fool onstage?”³⁶

³¹ Goossens 1962, 440-46; Strauss 1993, 141-42.

³² E.g. Goossens 1932; Podlecki 1975-76.

³³ Cf. Collard 1975, 13, n. 49.

³⁴ Giles 1896, 95; cf. Bowie 1997, 45-47.

³⁵ Vickers 1997, 31.

³⁶ Ael. *VH.* 2.13.

More to the point in the present context is the way in which Aristophanes has constructed the character of Pheidippides in *Clouds*. Pheidippides used to be universally identified with Alcibiades, but this is no longer the case. It was the sheer impossibility of identifying Strepsiades, the father-figure in *Clouds*, with Alcibiades' physical father Cleinias who had died in battle in 447 BC, that caused Hatzfeld (reluctantly) to dismiss an equation between Alcibiades and Pheidippides.³⁷ There are, however, several reasons why Strepsiades could correspond to Pericles, in whose house Alcibiades grew up, and who played the *de facto* role of a father. It is indeed Pericles who is parodied as Strepsiades in *Clouds*, sometimes cruelly, with allusions for example to symptoms of the Plague, in which Pericles suffered. The bed-bug scene can thus be seen as the model for Thucydides' more sober description.³⁸ It is Pericles' own cruelty that is often parodied, for the name Strepsiades means "son of Torturer," and thus recalls the punishment Pericles is supposed to have meted out to Samian prisoners in the Agora at Miletus in 439 BC.³⁹ The primary allusion, however, may be to the savage conduct of Pericles' father Xanthippus at Sestos in 478 BC.⁴⁰

Pheidippides does not, however, "come forward" as Alcibiades alone. Certain elements are certainly Alcibiadean, and were pointed out in some detail by J. W. Süvern in 1826. He noted *inter alia* that both Pheidippides and Alcibiades belonged to the Alcmaeonid clan; he associated the *hipp*-element in Pheidippides' name with Alcibiades' keenness for horses. He associated baby-talk at *Clouds* (1381) with Alcibiades' well-known speech impediment whereby he pronounced *rho* as *lambda*. He also regarded the report that "Socrates' admirers ... especially those in the circle around Alcibiades" prevented the poet from winning first prize⁴¹ as grounds for believing that Alcibiades was lampooned in the person of Pheidippides. He notes too that Alcibiades and Socrates had recently been in the news when the younger had saved the older man's life at the battle of Delium in 424 BC.⁴² Süvern saw a distinctly Socratic conversation between

³⁷ Hatzfeld 21951, 34.

³⁸ Vickers 1997, 38-40; 2015, 196-98; Rubel 2014, 204-05, n. 44.

³⁹ Plut. *Per.* 28.2-3.

⁴⁰ Hdt. 9.120.4; cf. Azoulay 2014, 59-60.

⁴¹ *Nub.* 5.

⁴² Plut. *Alc.* 7.6.

Alcibiades and Pericles recorded by Xenophon⁴³ making Alcibiades' education directly relevant to *Clouds*. He likewise regarded the story of Alcibiades' injunction to Pericles to find ways of not rendering his accounts as an indication of the way in which Alcibiades' mind was widely thought to work. Some of these points are stronger than others, but together they constitute a case that still deserves serious consideration.

But Alcibiades is not the only individual hiding behind the name of Pheidippides. There are allusions to Xanthippus, Pericles' eldest son, as well: Xanthippus could not bear his father's stinginess, and sneered at his discussions with philosophers.⁴⁴ Pericles' inheritance, moreover, was in the news during the last months of his life, when he persuaded the Athenians to grant citizenship to his son by Aspasia. Aristophanes seems to have taken the notion of 'filial relationship to Pericles' and created another arcimbollesque portrait, this time in the image of Alcibiades.

In doing so, he had a Euripidean model; the way in which the figure of Hippolytus in the eponymous extant play is based on a fusion of features of Alcibiades and Xanthippus has been well brought out by B. S. Strauss.⁴⁵ In the case of the *Hippolytus*, Strauss points out that the troubles of both households are ascribed to an inherited curse: "That of Theseus and Hippolytos is nameless (820, 1379-80), that of Pericles and his son [was] the infamous curse of the Alkmeonids ... Theseus accuses his son of sleeping with his stepmother; Xanthippos accused his father of sleeping with his daughter-in-law, [and] both sons, Hippolytos and Xanthippos, quarrelled bitterly with their fathers." Then, "both Theseus and Pericles had a well-loved illegitimate son (in Pericles' case it was his son Pericles)." But, as in *Clouds*, the characterization mainly depends upon Alcibiades. Strauss lists many of the parallels between Alcibiades and Hippolytus: a lack of respect towards older males, a love of horses, and a childhood in the household of a great political leader. Like Alcibiades, Hippolytus "appears in the company of young men and is sometimes seen as representative of them (*Hipp.* 967-70, 987)," he is a good orator (986-89), he is ambitious, and aspires to a famous name (1028, 1299) and to the "first place in the contests of the Greeks (1016)." Like Alcibiades, Hippolytus' "gender is ambivalent," he

⁴³ *Mem.* 1.2.40-6.

⁴⁴ *Plut. Per.* 36.4.

⁴⁵ Strauss 1993, 166-75.

"disdains the common people (986), [and] does not hesitate to sing his own praises, announcing that no one will ever find a more *sōphrōn* (prudent, modest, virtuous) man than himself." Euripides opposes Hippolytus' absolute chastity to Alcibiades' notorious promiscuity; there may well have been a good practical reason for representing on stage the opposite of the true state of affairs: namely, it would be difficult to challenge the imputation of Aspasian infidelity without drawing even more attention to it.

All this is by way of clearing the ground for a discussion of the polyvalent figure of Theseus in *Supplikes*. The play is of course concerned with far more complex issues than those that arise from the identification of characters, but I would maintain that such identification would have been a necessary precursor to the audience's understanding of the play. To reverse Professor Storey's judgement, and to replace the horse in its proper place before the cart: contemporary politics came before dramatic entertainment. In principle, the tragedian would take an ostensibly appropriate traditional tale and rework it in order to fit a pressing political issue. Not least, this would account for the many discrepancies between one treatment of an ancient myth and another: the disparate versions we have will have been composed to meet different historical situations.

Perhaps the most sensitive treatment of Alcibiades in *Supplikes* is that of A. Michelini. She first deals scrupulously with the objection that is sometimes raised that Alcibiades was not prominent enough in the middle or later 420s to justify the kind of dramatic attention that some would maintain Euripides grants him. Rather, the apparent date of the play "coincides with a period when Alcibiades was increasingly active in Athenian politics and during which he displayed political ambitions considerably out of proportion to his age. The production of a highly political play ... featuring an extremely youthful and highly intellectual leader, orphaned by his father, who creates a formal alliance between Argos and Athens, does indeed seem to point directly at Alcibiades."⁴⁶ So far so good. Where I find it difficult to follow her argument is where she tries to force the indubitably Periclean indications in the character of Theseus, noted by Goossens⁴⁷ and

⁴⁶ Michelini 1997.

⁴⁷ Goossens 1932.

Podlecki⁴⁸ into an Alcibiadean mould, or at least to view them from a purely Alcibiadean angle.

Another critic, B. S. Strauss, not only recognises something of Alcibiades in the 'nimble' Theseus, but also devotes a long passage to recognising features common to Theseus and Nicias, who was one of Alcibiades' strongest critics. He states: "Theseus sounds much like Nicias does in 415 when he warns the assembly not to undertake an expedition to Sicily led by young Alcibiades and his young supporters (Thuc. 6.12.2-13.1). The two men make many of the same points: for example, Theseus says the youths rejoice at wars (233) and want generalships (234), Nicias notes Alcibiades' joy in his command ... 6.12.2); Theseus says that some youths seek gain (... 236) in war, Nicias says that Alcibiades is out to profit from office (6.12.2, cf. 6.15.2); Theseus says that young generals fail to look at (236) the good of the majority, Nicias says that Alcibiades only looks at his own interests (6.12.2); Theseus says that young men promote wars without justice (233), Nicias says that Alcibiades will 'do injustice to', that is, harm the public interest (6.12.2); Theseus contrasts courage with good counsel (161), Nicias contrasts youthful passion with mature forethought (6.13.1); Theseus says that the youth corrupt the citizens (234), Nicias says that the young intimidate the old (6.13.1)."⁴⁹

It would appear that Euripides is imbuing the figure of Theseus with Nician features that are every bit as firmly delineated as those of Alcibiades. The positive note that is struck throughout the play is, as has been noted, encomiastic⁵⁰ and this may well have influenced Alcibiades' choice of poet to celebrate his Olympic victories a few years later. The debate between the different facets of Theseus' character might also be seen, as Andrelini has tentatively proposed,⁵¹ as a model for the debate in Book 6 of Thucydides: "The paired speeches of Nicias and Alcibiades ... echo *Suppliants* in associating age and youth with conservative and aggressive politics respectively." Given the extent to which Thucydides elsewhere apparently used information culled from dramatic sources (e.g. characteristics of his Pericles are shared by the Creon of *Antigone*, down to

⁴⁸ Podlecki 1975-1976.

⁴⁹ Strauss 1993, 141-42; cf. Goossens 1962, 440-46.

⁵⁰ Andrelini 1997, 182.

⁵¹ Andrelini 1997, 177-78.

the obtrusive references to himself and his personal opinions,⁵² this suggestion has much in its favour. A Thucydides writing, as seems likely, in ca 396-395 BC⁵³ would have had a need for an *aide-mémoire* of a kind represented by *Supplices*.

That the relevant characteristics are subsumed in an essentially Alcibiadean figure is suggested by the clever exploitation on Euripides' part of Alcibiades' speech defect in lines spoken by Theseus. First, however, a little background. I have argued elsewhere that Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, performed in 425 BC, was composed as a warning against allowing Alcibiades get away with his increasingly lawless and potentially tyrannical behaviour.⁵⁴ The matrophiliac plot was appropriate to Alcibiades, accused as he was by a contemporary of having been so debauched that "he lay with his mother, his sister and his daughter"⁵⁵ and Oedipus' belligerence when he was blocked "in the narrow way" (1399) bears more than a superficial resemblance to the occasion when the infant Alcibiades was involved in an altercation with a waggoner "in the narrow street."⁵⁶ The rough personality of Creon in this play, described as a *prostates* at *OT* (303, 411) has been persuasively associated with the historical Cleon, a *prostates* ('demagogue') in real life (Ahl 1991, 93-97), and it is not surprising that in the mouth of one who employed Alcibiades' habitual speech defect the "r" of Creon will have been pronounced "l", resulting in "Cleon" at *OT*, 69-70 (and the statement "I have not come to laugh" [1422], otherwise unmotivated, makes good sense in terms of the ridicule heaped on Cleon by Alcibiades and others in 425). The phenomenon known as λαμβδακισμός, which, "along with iotacism, a soft voice, and broad pronunciation happen through sounds, and ... cannot be shown in writing because they are errors in speech and of the tongue,"⁵⁷ was one that was often exploited by ancient writers who had Alcibiades in their sights.⁵⁸

By the same token, the statement of the Alcibiadianizing Theseus at *Supplices* (518-20) to the effect that "I am not aware that Creon is my mas-

⁵² Vickers 2008, 217; 2011b.

⁵³ Munn 2000, 317, 320; Vickers 2008, 150-52.

⁵⁴ Vickers 2008, 34-46; following Musgrave 1800, 1.289.

⁵⁵ Antisth. 29a Caizzi ap. Ath. 5.220a.

⁵⁶ Plut. *Alc.* 2.3.

⁵⁷ Quint. 1.5.32.

⁵⁸ E.g. Tzetz. *XIAi* 89 Koster; Ar. *Vesp.* 44-45; cf. Archipp. *PCG* 48 ap. *Alc.* 1.8.

ter or has the greater power so that he can compel Athens to do these things" would have a strong topical reference if Creon were pronounced "Cleon." It would inevitably bring to mind the intense rivalry that existed between Cleon and Alcibiades that had reached a peak after Cleon's victorious return from Pylos in the summer of 425 BC when Cleon prosecuted Alcibiades for laughing at his exploits.⁵⁹ There are indeed those who have detected an anti-Cleonian message in *Supplices*.⁶⁰ There is room for them too.

There should thus no longer be a fear of "impropriety" of a kind that has corrupted the study of *Supplices*. It is, for example, difficult to appreciate a recent study of "Athenian self-image and ideology" and "political theory" arising from *Supplices* if the writer is confessedly "not interested in the contemporary political allusions in the play."⁶¹ It is surely important to know whence the various views are supposed to have emanated: whether they are expressed by a Periclean, Alcibiadean or Nician figure, or by a portmanteau character articulating at different times the positions of any one of them. Scholarly impropriety lies in ignoring such possibilities.

In conclusion, Theseus in Euripides' "encomium of the Athenians" is a composite, portmanteau, character intended to evoke the best traits of Alcibiades, but restrained by elements of Nicias' conservatism, not to mention aspects of Pericles' commanding role to which Alcibiades hoped to succeed.

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⁵⁹ Aps. *Rh.* 348; Syrianus, Sopatrus and Marcellinus, *Schol. Hermog.* 1.587; Anon. in *Hermog. Comm. in Stat.* 7.487.

⁶⁰ E.g. Di Benedetto 1971, 160-62; Rehm 1994, 118.

⁶¹ Daneš 2011, 18.

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