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## Aristotelian Comedy

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the evidence for Aristotle's theory of comedy in the *Poetics* and other works. Since he defines comedy in terms of its 'inferior' characters, he cannot have objected in principle to ethical impropriety, obscenity and personal abuse in comedy; comedy cannot be judged by the ethical standards appropriate in everyday life. His account of the historical development of comedy is discussed, together with the application of the concept of poetic universality to comedy. It is argued that Aristotelian theory is consistent with Aristophanic practice.

My aim in this paper is to reconsider a number of aspects of Aristotle's thinking on comedy in the light of the acknowledged Aristotelian corpus. I shall have nothing to say about the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, an obscure and contentious little document which must (despite Janko's energetic attempt to restore its credit)<sup>1</sup> remain an inappropriate starting-point for discussion. There is still, I believe, something to be learnt from the extant works.

### 1. Ethical propriety

The sections of Aristotle's ethical writings (*EN* 1108a23-6, 1128a4-b3, *EE* 1234a4-23) which define wit (εὐτραπελία) as a mean between buffoonery (βωμολοχία) and boorishness (ἀγροικία) have exercised a powerful influence on discussions of his views on comedy. Most scholars have concluded that 'a strong degree of decorum and restraint was central to Aristotle's comic ideal',<sup>2</sup> and have inferred from this that he could not have approved of the licence and indecency of Aristophanes' plays; a few have attempted to show that Aristophanes did indeed conform to the ethical ideal. Both lines of approach assume that the ethical standards applicable in ordinary social intercourse are equally applicable to comedy; but this assumption is questionable.

At first sight Aristotle may seem to give comfort to the assumption when he refers to comedy to illustrate his discussion of wit (*EN* 1128a22-5); this is generally taken to express a preference for the innuendo (ὕπονοια) of 'recent' comedies over the indecent language (αἰσχρολογία) of 'old' comedies: 'these', he says, 'differ in no small degree with respect to decency (εὐσχημοσύνη)'.<sup>3</sup> There is

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<sup>1</sup> R. Janko, *Aristotle on Comedy* (London 1984), a book widely admired and disbelieved: see especially W.G. Arnott, *CR* 35 (1985), 304-6; D.M. Schenkeveld, *Gnomon* 58 (1986), 212-17; W.W. Fortenbaugh, *CP* 82 (1987), 156-64. I am willing to believe that the *Tractatus* descends from an epitome of *Poetics* II, but fear that it has suffered more distortion—and is less useful—in detail than Janko contends; cf. J. Barnes, *Phronesis* 20(1985), 103-6.

<sup>2</sup> S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London 1986), 274.

<sup>3</sup> S. Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle* (London 1987), 87 n.2: 'he mentions the contrast between older and newer styles of Athenian comedy, indicating his clear preference for the latter's more

no doubt, of course, that in ordinary social intercourse Aristotle prefers the more decent mode of behaviour. But this only entails a preference for the more decent comedies *as comedy* if it is presupposed that the virtues of everyday life are necessarily virtues in comedy also; and whether Aristotle did believe that is precisely the point at issue. There are two considerations which suggest that he did not.

The first is the discussion of indecent language in *Pol.* 1336b3-23. Aristotle begins by proposing its complete exclusion from the state by law (ὅλως μὲν οὖν αἰσχρολογία ἐκ τῆς πόλεως... δεῖ τὸν νομοθέτην ἐξορίζειν).<sup>4</sup> But he goes on to except certain religious cults (εἰ μὴ παρά τισι θεοῖς τοιούτοις οἷς καὶ τὸν τωθασμὸν ἀποδίδωσιν ὁ νόμος), and iambus and comedy.<sup>5</sup> He takes it for granted that there will be indecent language in comedy (and see *Rhet.* 1384b9-11 for comic poets as κακολόγοι, slanderers), but does not propose to ban comedy or to censor its content; he simply limits the audience to mature males, whose moral education will have rendered them immune to its potentially harmful effects (τῆς ἀπὸ τῶν τοιούτων γιγνομένης βλαβῆς ἀπαθείς ἢ παιδεία ποιήσει πάντως).<sup>6</sup> The point—I suggest—is that those who have not already learned how to behave in ordinary social contexts may transfer indecent language (and consequently indecent behaviour, 1336b5-6) from comedy, where it is in order, to everyday life, where it is not.

There is no reason to doubt that Aristotle could have accepted such a distinction between the norms of social intercourse and those of comedy.<sup>7</sup> In *Poet.* 1460b13-15 he distinguishes sharply between poetical and ‘political’ (which includes ethical) correctness (οὐχ ἡ αὐτὴ ὀρθότης ἐστὶν τῆς πολιτικῆς καὶ τῆς ποιητικῆς οὐδὲ ἄλλης τέχνης καὶ ποιητικῆς). The point is pertinently elaborated in 1461a4-9; to determine whether something said or done in a poem is said or done well (by poetic criteria) one must consider not only its moral character (εἰ σπουδαῖον ἢ φαυλόν), but also the agent or speaker and the circumstances in which he acts or speaks. For Aristotle, comedy is by definition a representation of morally inferior people (μίμησις φαυλοτέρων, 1449a32-3, cf. 1448a2-5, 16-18, b24-6); and if one is to represent morally inferior people, one

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restrained style of humour’; cf. (e.g.) D.W. Lucas, *Aristotle’s Poetics* (Oxford 1968), 68; R.G. Ussher, *G&R* 24(1977), 71; E. Segal, *HSCP* 77 (1973), 129 (a very misleading article).

<sup>4</sup> There is a partial ban in existing states, which Aristotle tentatively proposes to extend in *EN* 1128a30-1: τὸ γὰρ σκῶμμα λοιδορήμα τι ἐστίν, οἱ δὲ νομοθέται ἐνία λοιδορεῖν κωλοῦσιν. ἔδει δ’ ἴσως καὶ σκώπτειν. Janko (n.1) 244 (‘he recognises some need for mockery’) overlooks the tense of ἔδει; one must understand κωλύειν from the previous sentence.

<sup>5</sup> Comedy, at least, is covered by the religious exemption; cf. M. Heath, *Political Comedy in Aristophanes* (*Hypomnemata* 87, Göttingen 1987), 26-7.

<sup>6</sup> A passage not always accurately reported. G. Else, *Aristotle’s Poetics* (Cambridge, Mass. 1963), 188, cites it without noticing that comedy is exempted from the ban on αἰσχρολογία—a point which demolishes his argument; Halliwell (n.2) 274 n.31, says that Aristotle ‘is ready to envisage restrictive legislation on stage-comedy’, citing *EN* 1128a30-1 (which does not mention stage-comedy) as well as this passage, which imposes restrictions on the potential audience—a very different thing

<sup>7</sup> Contrast the scepticism of Halliwell’s retort (*ibid.*) to Lane Cooper, *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy* (Oxford 1924), 121-3 (cf. 19-20, 116-7).

must (logically) represent them doing and saying morally inferior things.<sup>8</sup> By Aristotle's own poetical criteria, therefore, the contents of comedy must deviate from the ethical norms of polite social intercourse.

If Aristotle's criteria for comedy diverge, as this evidence suggests, from the criteria he would apply to behaviour in everyday life, then we cannot infer Aristotle's views on comedy from his ethical writings—unless it should be *e contrario*. Certainly, there is no valid reason to suppose that Aristotle disapproved of (for example) Aristophanic comedy because of its deviations from the mean of wit prescribed in the ethical writings. He would have disapproved of anyone who spoke in daily life as Aristophanes composed comedies; so, I am sure, would Aristophanes.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Personal abuse

In a complex passage on the history of poetry in *Poet.* 1448b20-49a6, Aristotle says that Homer was the first to exhibit the σχῆμα of comedy in his burlesque *Margites*, οὐ ψόγον ἀλλὰ τὸ γελοῖον δραματοποιῆσαι. This phrase is usually, but I believe mistakenly, taken to imply that personal abuse is alien to comedy.

First, it is worth stressing that the practice of criticism or abuse (ψέγειν) is one to which Aristotle had no objection in general. The term is prominent in his ethical writings (e.g. *EN* 1108a15-16, *EE* 1223a9-13), and denotes an entirely respectable form of oratory (*Rhet.* 1358b12-13 etc.): Isocrates, as well as Archilochus, ψέγει (*Rhet.* 1418b27-8). In oratory, of course, care has to be taken not to compromise the character one is trying to project by seeming to be a slanderer, and Aristotle suggests one way to guard against this danger:<sup>10</sup> compare the use of innuendo to maintain decency in *EN* 1128a22-5, cited in (1) above. Public speaking is subject to the norms of ordinary social intercourse in a way in which (I have argued) comedy may not be; it is not self-evident, therefore, that a comic poet need be as guarded in abuse as an orator.

In the passage of *Poetics* in question, however, ψόγος is not being used in this quite general sense, as 'abuse', but in a semi-technical sense to denote a particular kind of poetry—the invectives which were the elementary form of poetry imitating morally inferior actions, analogous to hymns and encomia (1448b27). These are non-dramatic forms. It is likely, therefore, that ψόγον in 1448b37 is governed by an implicit ποιήσας, not by the explicit compound

<sup>8</sup> Ussher (n.3) 71, suggests that Aristotle 'could not have raised a smile' at a Dicaeopolis or a Trygaeus, because of their βωμολοχία, forgetting that precisely this kind of person is embraced by Aristotle's own definition of comedy. The illuminating comparison in that article between Aristophanic characters and Theophrastus' caricatures does not, therefore, mark a difference between Aristophanic or Theophrastean and Aristotelian comedy.

<sup>9</sup> In this respect, as (I believe) in others, Plato's presentation in *Symposium* is verisimilar; cf. Heath (n.5) 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Archilochus, as well as Isocrates, is cited for this technique (to which I shall return in (4) below); strangely, Else (n.6) 149 n.85, insinuates that the reference to Archilochus here is implicitly disapproving, apparently on the sole evidence of ψέγει.

δραματοποιήσας.<sup>11</sup> The sense, then, is: in *Margites* Homer did not compose a ψόγος, but a dramatic (or quasi-dramatic) poem of laughable content.

Further, ‘laughable content’ (τὸ γελοῖον) is not antithetical to ψόγος (or, more precisely, to the abusive content of a ψόγος), as is usually supposed, but to the ‘serious’ or ‘elevated’ content of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (τὰ σπουδαῖα 1448b34). This is clear from the following explanatory sentence (ὁ γὰρ Μαργίτης...), which is concerned with the analogous relations of *Margites* to comedy and of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to tragedy, not with the relation of *Margites* and comedy to invective. It should not be objected that the antithesis to σπουδαῖον in Aristotle is not γελοῖον but φαυλόν;<sup>12</sup> Aristotle makes it clear in 1449a32-7 that φαυλόν is too broad a term for the distinctive content of comedy, and that γελοῖον, which is a species of τὸ φαυλόν, is the more precise term (see (5) below).

In fact, ψόγος would make poor sense as an antithesis to τὸ γελοῖον; abuse is often laughable, as Aristotle was well aware. In *EN* 1128a30 he refers to the ‘jest’ as a form of insult (τὸ γὰρ σκῶμμα λοιδορημὰ τι ἐστίν), and in *EE* 1234a15-17 to the jest as a form of the laughable (τῷ γελοίῳ... ὧν ἐν καὶ τὸ σκῶμμά ἐστιν),<sup>13</sup> of course not all jests are insulting (e.g. *Rhet.* 1405b30), but it is the insulting kind that is chiefly in question in the *Ethics* (Aristotle refers here to the reactions of its victims). Indeed, it is primarily because abuse is laughable, and because people enjoy laughing, that the question of ‘jesting properly’ becomes an ethical problem (cf. *EN* 1128a12-15).

I conclude, therefore, that in *Poet.* 1448b36-9 Aristotle’s point is this: although imitations of morally inferior acts had previously taken the form of the ψόγος, in *Margites* Homer composed a quasi-dramatic poem of laughable content, which can be set alongside his quasi-dramatic poems of serious content; and he continues, consequently enough, by observing that *Margites* stands to comedy as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* stand to tragedy. There is no implication here that comedy does or should exclude abuse of a kind that is found in non-dramatic invectives; at most it is implied that, if there is abuse in comedy, it must be laughable.

There is more to be said about personal abuse in comedy, but the question has become entangled with that of Aristotle’s concept of universality in comic plots; I shall try to disentangle this confusion in (4) below. It may be helpful if we first look more closely at his history of poetry.

<sup>11</sup> See J. Vahlen, *Aristotelis de arte poetica liber*<sup>3</sup> (Leipzig, 1885), 104, 106.

<sup>12</sup> So K.K. Smith, *CW* 21 (1928), 147; cf. L. Golden, *AJP* 107 (1986), 441, reviewing Janko (n.1), who discusses the point on p.154. There are serious problems with the definition of comedy in the *Tractatus*, but this is not one.

<sup>13</sup> For the connection between abuse, comedy and τὸ γελοῖον see also Plato *Laws* 934e-936b, where too the opposite is τὸ σπουδαῖον (935b3); unlike Aristotle, Plato does impose restrictions on the content of comedy.

### 3. Historical development

Aristotle suggests that poetry emerged from impromptu activities (αὐτοσχεδιάσματα) which expressed the natural human pleasure in imitation (1448b20-4). From its earliest stages, poetry was divided into two broad streams, distinguished by the ethical quality of the objects of imitation (κατὰ τὰ οἰκεῖα ἦθη 1448b24, cf. 1448a1-18).<sup>14</sup> The elementary forms of these two kinds of poetry were hymns and encomia, imitating morally superior actions, and invectives (ψόγοι), imitating the actions of the morally inferior (1448b24-7). The earliest extant example of a poem of the latter kind is the Homeric *Margites*;<sup>15</sup> but in *Margites* one already finds a formal development analogous to that which took place in the other class of poems as it progressed from encomia to heroic epic (although the juxtaposition of ἥρωικά and ἴαμβοι in 1448b30-34 seems to imply that this developed form did not become usual in the imitation of morally inferior actions, as epic did in the other tradition). Aristotle goes on to claim that *Margites* shares with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* the qualities which made them exceptional even among heroic poems: both anticipate the much later emergence of drama in their narrative technique (1448a35-6, cf. 1460a5-11); hence in *Margites* Homer adumbrated (ἀπέδειξεν 1448b37) the σχῆμα of comedy. It is in this sense that *Margites* stands to comedy as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* do to tragedy (1448b38-49a2).

Comedy and tragedy proper developed later;<sup>16</sup> Aristotle subsequently makes it clear that the origin of the dramatic genres in impromptu activities and elementary poetic forms was separate from the history of epic (1449a9-13). This does not exclude the possibility that Homer's adumbration exercised an influence on the pioneers of drama; but on this point Aristotle is in fact silent.<sup>17</sup> Once drama had emerged, poets of the two traditions judged these σχήματα (1449a6, recalling 48b36) superior to the older non-dramatic forms, and adopted them by preference (1448a2-6). It is worth noting that Aristotle could hardly have ascribed the transition from iambus to comedy to a recognition of the superiority of the comic

<sup>14</sup> Not the character of the poets: cf. Else (n.6) 136-7, although I cannot accept all his arguments, nor the interpretation of the broader context which he proposes.

<sup>15</sup> In 48b28-9 τοιοῦτον ποίημα must refer to the broader class of poems imitating morally inferior actions, not specifically to ψόγοι, since the *Margites* was not a ψόγος (48b37). Since this poem is cited here *simply* as an instance of the broad class (its exceptional qualities only come into question at 48b34ff.), τὰ τοιαῦτα and ἐν οἷς (48b30) will likewise refer to the class as a whole, not to poems like *Margites* in particular; hence ἴαμβιζον ἀλλήλοισ (48b32), which is hardly applicable to *Margites*.

<sup>16</sup> παραφανείσης (49a2) surely does not mean (as it is taken by Else [n.6] 146-7) 'glimpsed in passing' (sc., in the Homeric adumbrations: the implication of transience, stressed by Else, is by no means always present) but 'come into view' (sc., in the earliest stages of the development of the dramatic genres themselves, before their full potential was realised). That is to say, the absolute clause takes up the preceding references to comedy and tragedy in order to introduce a new topic.

<sup>17</sup> If one assumes that Aristotle placed tragedy in a continuous line of evolution with Homer (e.g. Halliwell [n.3] 81, cf. [n.2] 254-6), then the separate emergence of drama from improvisatory beginnings (1449a9-10) is bound to seem obscure and even contradictory; but Aristotle does not say this, only that Homer anticipated the later form. On the further question of the dithyrambic/satyric origins of tragedy, and the difficulty of squaring this with Aristotle's σπουδαῖον/φαιλόν distinction, see R. Seaford, *Euripides Cyclops* (Oxford 1984), 10-11.

σχήματα in 1449a5-6, if in 1448b36-7 he had wanted to imply that personal abuse was alien to the σχήμα of comedy; for early comic poets did not have a clear preference for non-abusive jesting, and comedy in Aristotle's own day was still abusive (cf. (1) above).

Within the history of comedy in the strict sense, Aristotle is aware of several distinct local traditions: Megarian (1448a31-2) and Sicilian (1448a33-5, 1449b6-7), as well as Athenian (1449b7-8). He leaves the question of the πρώτοι εὐρεταίοι of drama, raised in 1448b29-31, unadjudicated. Chronological priority would not entail influence on the other local traditions, of course; but in 1449b6-7, where Aristotle concedes priority to Sicilian comedy in one crucial respect, he does imply that it exercised an influence on the development of the Athenian tradition (note ἐκ Σικελίας ἦλθε). The nature of this development must now be examined more closely.

#### 4. Comic universality

Crates, Aristotle claims, was the first comic poet in Athens to 'abandon the iambic ιδέα' and to 'compose plots universally' (1449b7-9 τῶν δὲ Ἀθήνησιν Κράτης πρῶτος ἦρχεν ἀφέμενος τῆς ἰαμβικῆς ιδέας καθόλου ποιεῖν λόγους καὶ μύθους). Aristotle knows of comic poets in Athens before Crates (1448a34, Chionides and Magnes), and evidently regards these people as unequivocally writers of comedy, not of ψόγοι or iambs (cf. 1449b2-4, where it is observed that comedy already had some of its σχήματα by the time of the first recorded poets).<sup>18</sup> What, then, preceded Crates' innovation? And what, more precisely, was that innovation? The first of these questions can only be answered speculatively; but a definite answer is possible to the second, and will give us a fair basis on which to speculate.

The term 'universal' (καθόλου) is used in a carefully defined sense in the *Poetics*: universality is achieved when it is in accordance with necessity or probability that a person of such a kind does or says things of such a kind (1451b8-9, τῷ ποίῳ τὰ ποῖα ἅττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ἢ πράττειν κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον, cf. 1454a33-6). This means that to compose a plot 'universally' is to compose it in conformity with the criteria set out in 1450b26-34, as a whole, with beginning, middle and end standing in a necessary or probable relation to each other. In other words, a 'universal' plot is an appropriately delimited series of causally consequent events. It is this form of composition which, in Aristotle's view, Crates introduced into Attic comedy.

To illustrate this point, consider two different approaches to the imitation of morally inferior actions. First of all, I may stand on a soapbox and proclaim scurrilities about the editors of *CQ*; that would be a ψόγος.<sup>19</sup> My ψόγος will be more sophisticated if I make use of the technique which Aristotle commends to

<sup>18</sup> These σχήματα include a plurality of actors (1449b5): for the reason, cf. M. Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London 1987), 138 n.32.

<sup>19</sup> In the technical sense, it would not: my performance would lack artistic form and—crucially—the setting of an established social practice which would legitimise the αἰσχρολογία (cf. (1) above). But this does not affect the point with which I am concerned here.

the orator to protect his character when indulging in abuse: that he should distance himself from the abuse by attributing it to some other speaker, whose words are merely quoted (*Rhet.* 1418b24-32, cf. (2) above). Aristotle illustrates this technique from Archilochus (fr. 122 and 19 West). On the other hand, I can create a rudimentary form of comedy if I and a friend dress up as, say, Bill and Ben, and perform a dialogue ('I've just seen the editors of *CQ*, Bill, and you'll never guess what they were up to...'). By stringing a series of these dialogues together, I will give my comedy a kind of plot—the kind which Aristotle terms 'episodic' (1451b34, λέγς δ' ἐπεισοδιώδη μῦθον ἐν ᾧ τὰ ἐπεισόδια μετ' ἄλληλα οὔτ' εἰκὸς οὔτ' ἀνάγκη εἶναι); as such, it will fail to fulfil the criteria for universality. But if I integrate one or more of these dialogues into a causally consequent series of events in which Bill and Ben consistently sustain the character of people likely to talk insultingly about distinguished classicists, then I will have constructed a comedy with a plot made 'universally' by Aristotle's criteria.

It will be noted that the more sophisticated form of invective differs from my rudimentary comedy chiefly in being performed but not acted, and in being for one voice only; rudimentary comedy can therefore be viewed as a version of this sophisticated iambus written for performance by actors (cf. 49b26 δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας). Both kinds of poem are characterised by the lack of a causally consequent plot-structure, and it is for this reason that the innovation ascribed to Crates, the causal integration of the comic plot, can properly be described as 'abandoning the iambic ἰδέα'.<sup>20</sup>

The reference to 'the iambic ἰδέα' is concerned, then, with plot-structure; this interpretation is, I believe, supported by a parallel reference to the practice of iambic poets in 1451b14-15, which we shall consider shortly. It follows that the point Aristotle is making here is not, or at any rate not directly, one about 'the targeting of denigration against identifiable individuals.'<sup>21</sup> But does it have an indirect reference to that issue? It is essential to grasp here the distinction between the universality (in Aristotle's sense) of a comedy's plot, and universality (in some other sense) in its comic *point*.<sup>22</sup> An action warrants inclusion in the plot of a comedy only if it falls within a class of actions such that a person of a given kind would necessarily or probably perform such an action in the given circumstances; but what makes the action *funny* may be some quite unrelated factor—for example, the fact that it makes a respected individual look foolish.

There are at least two ways of targetting individuals consistent with Aristotle's definition of a universalised plot. First of all, a plot of the kind which Crates introduced may perfectly well (as my illustration was meant to suggest) be a vehicle for abuse of named contemporaries, if the characters who appear in it are the kind of person who would, necessarily or probably, abuse named contemporaries; and this is scarcely improbable, since in a comedy the characters

<sup>20</sup> In Heath (n.5) 53 n.111, I described the 'iambic ἰδέα' as 'non-mimetic'—a blunder: primitive ψόγοι were already mimetic (1448b25-7); the latter part of the note, referring to a 'continuous and complete plot', was more accurately expressed.

<sup>21</sup> Halliwell (n.3) 85, the standard interpretation.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Heath (n.5) 50, distinguishing (after Rau) between 'dramatic economy' and 'comic intention'.



will be morally inferior persons (φωυλότεροι). Secondly (a distinction which has not always been observed) the characters themselves may be identified as real individuals—that is, I may bring my victims onto the stage, portraying them as φωυλοί and making them misbehave.

This device of bringing real individuals onto the stage would not be available in Aristotelian comedy if 1451b11-14 (where we are told that comic poets use ‘random’ names, τὰ τυχόντα ὀνόματα) were meant prescriptively; but that cannot be what Aristotle intends. In context, he is appealing to the *actual* practice of comic poets to illustrate the theoretical point which he is making, and the remark must therefore be interpreted descriptively. Further, it can only be meant as a broad generalisation, not as a statement of unqualified validity; for it was not true of comic poets, even in Aristotle’s own day, that they used *only* invented names: mythological burlesques continued to be written,<sup>23</sup> and these used real names just as did tragedy (1451b15-16). The use of real names does not compromise the universality of tragic plots; so comedy’s use of invented names cannot be proposed as a condition of its universality, but is instead offered as evidence for it.<sup>24</sup> It follows from this that the limited truth of Aristotle’s generalisation about comic practice need not invalidate his point.<sup>25</sup>

Two points here should be emphasised. First, real contemporaries and mythological figures are on exactly the same level, so far as Aristotle’s argument in this section is concerned; in both cases the poet is dealing with γενόμενα ὀνόματα. If Lamachus or Socrates are to be excluded from comedy, so are Prometheus and Dionysus; but there is certainly no reason to exclude the latter on grounds of universality, as the case of tragedy proves. Secondly, Aristotle’s concept of poetic universality is wholly independent of the distinction between the real and the invented.<sup>26</sup> Though he says in 1451a36-7 that it is not the *function* (ἔργον) of the poet to speak of what has actually happened (τὰ γενόμενα), he accepts that what the poet speaks of may in fact be what has actually happened (1451b15-19, 29-31). The crucial point is rather the nature of the relationship between the particular agents and actions, whether real or invented, which the poet incorporates into his plot: do their interrelations instantiate the general

<sup>23</sup> See R.L. Hunter, *Eubulus* (Cambridge 1983), 22-30 (but the number of mythological burlesques declined in the latter part of the 4<sup>th</sup> century: see Hunter 23f., and T.B.L. Webster, *Studies in Later Greek Comedy*<sup>2</sup> [Manchester, 1970], 85). Halliwell (n.2) 274 n.32, speculates, on tenuous evidence, that Aristotle may have favoured mythological subjects for comedy. Note that even mythological comedies admitted abusive references to real contemporaries: Hunter 25.

<sup>24</sup> Comedy can in fact use an invented name, and still satirise an identifiable individual: e.g. Paphlagon in *Knights*; but this play is still (irrespective of the name) περὶ τὸ καθόλου in Aristotle’s sense, since it dramatises a single set of necessary or probable occurrences involving Cleon (51b8-9), not τί... ἔπραξεν ἢ τί ἔπαθεν (51b11).

<sup>25</sup> The generalisation about tragic practice in 1451b15-16 is explicitly qualified in 19-21, where the qualification is relevant to Aristotle’s argument; I see no reason to doubt that he would have admitted an analogous qualification about comic practice, but there was no reason in this context to make it explicit.

<sup>26</sup> Contradictions arise if one introduces the real/fictive distinction into this passage: cf. Halliwell (n.3) 105 n.1.

principles of necessity or probability?<sup>27</sup> What is crucial, then, if a comic poet introduces a Lamachus or a Heracles on stage, is that he does not make his plot out of a miscellaneous selection of his (real or invented) actions, but out of just those actions (real or invented) which are causally coherent with each other. An iambic poet, by contrast, is free to use any set of causally unrelated events (real or invented) apt to his satirical purpose, since he is not subject to the constraints of a universalised plot-structure; this is the point of Aristotle's reference to iambic poets in 1451b14-15 (οὐχ ὥσπερ οἱ ἰαμβοποιοὶ περὶ τὸ<sup>28</sup> καθ' ἕκαστον ποιοῦσιν, recalling the 'iambic ἰδέα' in 1449b8).

Aristotle's definition of 'universal', and the whole development of his argument in c. 9, prove (I have argued) that the innovation attributed to Crates was the abandonment of causally unstructured plots, not the abandonment of individual abuse. Nevertheless, it is also true that Crates appears to have been less given to abuse than, for example, Cratinus.<sup>29</sup> It seems likely enough that there was a *contingent* connection between Crates' innovative plot-structures and his less abusive style; the cultivation of one source of interest and enjoyment will naturally have attended (or been attended by) the diminished importance of another. But the contingency of this connection is reflected in the way that other, more abusive poets, took up his innovation. In the brief 'history' of comedy in Koster's *Prolegomena* V 12ff. (a source not free, admittedly, of misinformation) the earliest Athenian comic poets are said to have introduced their characters ἀτάκτως; this is a fair description of what Aristotle would call 'episodic' drama. Cratinus himself is credited with bringing this disorder under some measure of

<sup>27</sup> See the comments on the plot of the *Odyssey* in 1451a24-9 (where ἅπαντα ὅσα αὐτῷ συνέβη corresponds to τί Ἀλκιβιάδης ἔπραξεν ἢ τίεπαθεν in 1451b11). Pace Else (n.6), 313, the choice of Alcibiades as an example does not refer to comedy (which would spoil the development of the argument), but is still part of the allusion to historiography.

<sup>28</sup> Kassel, with most other editors, prints A's τὸν (a minority adopt B's τῶν), but τὸ (the inferred reading of William of Moerbeke's lost ms: 'circa particulare faciunt') is preferable (A has the same error at 51b10, where editors rightly adopt τὸ from B). Note first that the only parallel for τὸν καθ' ἕκαστον seems to be *Rhet.* 1380b21-2 (ἡ γὰρ ὀργὴ περὶ τὸν καθ' ἕκαστόν ἐστι), which Kassel deletes; contrast 1382a5 ἡ μὲν ὀργὴ αἰεὶ περὶ τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα, οἷον Καλλίαν ἢ Σωκράτην. Secondly, since τὰ εἰκότα in 51b13 is equivalent to τὰ καθόλου (cf. 51a38, 51b9 etc.) the antithesis between comedy and iambus should rest on the opposites συστήσαντες τὸν μῦθον διὰ τῶν εἰκότων and περὶ τὸ καθ' ἕκαστον ποιοῦσιν; comedy's use of 'random names' is cited (as I suggested above) as *evidence* of the universality of comic plots, but is not itself the main point of contrast. Thirdly, this interpretation secures the parallel with 49b8-9, where mature comedy and the 'iambic ἰδέα' are distinguished precisely in terms of καθόλου ποιεῖν λόγους καὶ μύθους. The logic of the passage, therefore, is: poetry is universal; in the case of comedy (which is περὶ τὸ καθόλου in its plot-construction, whereas iambus is περὶ τὸ καθ' ἕκαστον) this is clear from its use of invented names; it does not, however, follow that tragedy is not also περὶ τὸ καθόλου, since its practice of using real names is explicable on other grounds.

<sup>29</sup> See Halliwell (n.2) 273 n.30, on the fragments, and note *Proleg.* III 30 Koster, on Pherecrates: καὶ αὐτὸ τοῦ μὲν λοιδορεῖν ἀπέστη, where Koster interprets αὐτὸ as 'in vicem; ut iam Crates' (unfortunately this suggestion is itself based partly on the standard misinterpretation of Aristotle's allusion to Crates). In Heath (n.5) 53, it was rash to cite the notice of Pherecrates in relation to Crates' plot-structures; the sentence continues simply: πράγματα δὲ εἰσηγούμενος καινὰ ἠδδοκιμῆι γινόμενος εὐρετικός μύθων. This source does comment on the care which poets of Middle Comedy—by which he means Antiphanes *at al.*—took over plot: κατασχολοῦνται δὲ πάντες περὶ τὰς ὑποθέσεις, III 44.

control, but did not escape it entirely (ἀλλ' ἔτι μὲν καὶ οὗτος τῆς ἀρχαιότητος μετεῖχε καὶ ἡρέμα πως τῆς ἀταξίας); Platonius likewise attests that Cratinus began his plots well, but failed to carry them through ἀκολούθως (*Proleg.* II 6-8).<sup>30</sup> But it was Aristophanes who continued the development of comic technique to new levels (μεθοδευσας τεχνικώτερον τῶν μεθ' ἑαυτοῦ, *Proleg.* V 21-2); and the importance of coherent plot-structure in Aristophanic comedy can be established on internal evidence.<sup>31</sup>

I note incidentally that it is not clear how much Aristotle means to attribute to the poets of Sicilian comedy. Their contribution is not described in exactly the same terms as Crates' innovation: on the one hand, the composition of plots, on the other the composition of 'universal' plots; as we have seen, these are not equivalent terms for Aristotle. That is to say, the point may be, not that Crates was the first Athenian comic poet to compose universal plots, but that the Athenian Crates was the first comic poet to do so. On the latter interpretation, the Sicilians' plots will have been episodic.<sup>32</sup> Aristotle does not explicitly deny that Sicilian comedy used universal plots, and it is dangerous to press the implications of a text as concisely (and sometimes carelessly) expressed as the *Poetics*; but given the different descriptions of the Sicilians' and Crates' plots, the implication seems *prima facie* to be there, and I suspect that this is what Aristotle meant.

I conclude with two provisos. First, Aristotle's requirement of causal connection in comic plots should not be taken so rigidly as to exclude designed inconsequentiality, where that either is obtrusive and laughable in its own right, or else unobtrusively helps to make the play as a whole work better. There is Aristotelian warrant for this claim; we know from the discussion of poetic problems in c. 25 that Aristotle applied his general criteria flexibly and pragmatically, and that the ultimately decisive consideration for him was always the end or function of the poetic genre in question (1460b23-4 ἀδύνατα πεποιήται, ἡμάρτηται. ἀλλ' ὀρθῶς ἔχει, εἰ τυγχάνει τοῦ τέλους τοῦ αὐτῆς). Secondly, the requirement of causal integration applies precisely to the comic *plot*, not to the comic *text*, so that Aristotle's account is consistent with the digressive textual elements that one finds plentifully in Aristophanes. But these are points which I have discussed at length elsewhere, and will not labour here.<sup>33</sup>

## 5. Pain

Aristotle describes comedy as an imitation of inferior people (μίμησις φαυλοτέρων 1449a32-3), but does not regard this description as sufficiently exact.

<sup>30</sup> His source may have been the third-century Alexandrian scholar Dionysiades of Mallos: R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship* (Oxford 1968), 160.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Heath (n.5) 43-54.

<sup>32</sup> A.W. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy* (Oxford 1927), 404 (= 277 in the revised edition): 'Aristotle would hardly have given the title of μῦθοι to any but more or less coherent or connected structures'; but 1451b33-5, on episodic μῦθοι, refutes this claim. μῦθος was not in itself a term of approbation for Aristotle; hence the importance he attaches to defining the criteria of *good* plots.

<sup>33</sup> For a detailed examination of Aristotle's theory of unity see chapter 4 of my *Unity in Greek Poetics* (Oxford 1989); a brief discussion, with application to Aristophanes, in Heath (n.5) 51-4.

Not all kinds of inferiority (κακία) are relevant, but only that species of the disgraceful (αἰσχρόν) that is laughable (γελοῖον). To be precise, the laughable excludes what is painful or destructive (1449a34-5 τὸ γὰρ γελοῖον ἔστιν ἀμάρτημά τι καὶ αἶσχος ἀνώδυνον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν). This exclusion is designed to place comedy in direct antithesis to tragedy; in the discussion of tragic plots, πάθος is defined as a πράξις φθαρτικὴ ἢ ὀδυνηρά (1452b11-12), such as the particular kind of pleasure which tragedy seeks (that which comes from fear and pity through imitation, 1453b11-13) makes peculiarly appropriate to the genre.<sup>34</sup> The kind of pleasure at which comedy aims, by contrast, is achieved if enemies are reconciled ‘and nobody is killed by anybody’ (1453a35-9).<sup>35</sup>

It is important to grasp that Aristotle’s characterisation of the laughable in 1449a34-5 is meant to place comedy in opposition to tragedy, not one kind of comedy in opposition to another. Halliwell remarks that Aristophanes ‘invites laughter... towards cases of grave physical pain’, and sees in this passage an attempt ‘to define the realm of the truly comic in such a way as to contradict some of the uses of laughter which had found a place in earlier parts of the comic tradition.’<sup>36</sup> If one wished to take the passage in that way, one would have to add, ‘and in later parts of the tradition too’; Cnemon’s experiences in the *Dyscolus* are funny, but not painless.<sup>37</sup> There is, in fact, no more justification here than in 1448b37 (cf. (2) above) for restricting τὸ γελοῖον to the refined comedy which Aristotle is supposed to have admired; here, as in (4), there is no evidence that the passage is meant prescriptively rather than descriptively. Admittedly, Aristotle’s comment is not true descriptively without qualification; but as a generalisation (especially one designed primarily to distinguish comedy from tragedy) it has a certain evident validity. In a more extended discussion, Aristotle could have qualified the generalisation in a way entirely consistent with his overall theory: since he did not regard all painful and destructive events as evocative of fear and pity (1452b34-3a7), he need not have thought that pain and destruction are always inimical to laughter. One would (it might be argued) have to take into account who suffers (their moral character and their role in the economy of the plot), and how the suffering is presented.<sup>38</sup> In *Acharnians*, for example, Lamachus’ agony is laughable in part because of the adversarial role he has played throughout the play, and in part because our response to it is undercut by the ἀλαζονεία of the

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Rhet.* 1386a7ff. for ὀδυνηρὰ καὶ φθαρτικὰ in the analysis of pity.

<sup>35</sup> If Orestes were reconciled with Aegisthus, this would indeed be αἰσχρόν in Greek eyes, the kind of behaviour one would expect of a morally inferior person. For the possibility that a real burlesque of the myth may be in question—for example, Alexis’ *Orestes*—cf. Halliwell [n.2] 272 n.28 (see also T.B.L. Webster, *Hermes* 82 [1954], 296).

<sup>36</sup> Halliwell (n.3) 85. Note the substitution of ‘truly comic’ (excluding some kinds of laughter) for Aristotle’s quite general term ‘the laughable’. For a defence of this reading of the passage as a ‘persuasive definition’ see G.F. Held, *TAPA* 114 (1984), 161-6; I remain unconvinced.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. A.W. Gomme & F.H. Sandbach, *Menander* (Oxford 1973), 268: ‘The tormenting of a man who is physically incapacitated, even if he is less badly injured than he believes, would, if played quite seriously, be unpleasant.’ (I note that this example is cited also by Held [n.36] 163.)

<sup>38</sup> If a wicked character suffers, this will satisfy our moral sense and evoke no fear or pity; cf. 1453a1-4, with J. Moles, *Phoenix* 38 (1984), 325-35, on τὸ φιλόνητον. But *Rhet.* 1377b31-8a1 should remind us that our judgements of moral character are not made in abstraction from other prejudicial factors—my formulation in the text tries to take account of this; cf. Heath (n.18) 80-4.

Messenger's pseudo-tragic report (1174-88)<sup>39</sup> and of his own exaggerated and indeed mendacious protestations (1190-4). That Aristotle would have accepted this line of argument is suggested by 1453a35-9; for as well as the reconciliation of enemies, in which no one comes to any harm, the double ending, in which the good flourish and the bad come to grief, is also described as a plot-structure appropriate to comedy.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, then, Aristotle cannot have believed that the comic is without qualification incompatible with the painful and destructive.

## 6. Conclusion

Aristotle's account of comedy has proved to be consistent with Aristophanic practice in each of the aspects we have considered. It does *not* follow that Aristotle admired Aristophanes' plays; there are different degrees and styles of indecency and personal abuse, and the available evidence<sup>41</sup> does not allow us to conclude with confidence that Aristotle believed Aristophanes to have hit on the best degree and style (or that he had done so at one particular stage of his long and varied career). But in view of the prevailing consensus, it needs to be said with rather greater emphasis that the available evidence does not support the opposite conclusion either. In this *impasse*, one might well find it hard to resist the view that Aristophanes is keeping significant company in 1448a25-8, where his name is linked with those of Homer and Sophocles;<sup>42</sup> but the question cannot be resolved with certainty. It is more important that we try to understand as clearly as we can the general implications of Aristotle's statements of principle.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> On this speech see A.H. Sommerstein, *CQ* 28 (1978), 390-5.

<sup>40</sup> The γὰρ in 1453a36 seems somewhat elliptical; but the decisive point is clear: the two plot-kinds characterised as appropriate to comedy have in common the absence *not* of a painful or destructive πάθος, but of one evocative of fear and pity; 1449a34-5 must be read in an accordingly qualified sense.

<sup>41</sup> Still excepting the *Tractatus Coislinianus*: see n.1.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Janko (n.1), 249, followed by J.M. Bremer, *Mnemosyne* 41 (1988), 167; cf. Else (n.6) 105 (who is characteristically suspicious of authenticity); *contra* (e.g.) Halliwell (n.2) 273 and n.30.

<sup>43</sup> I am indebted to Roger Brock for illuminating discussion of an early version of this paper; Stephen Halliwell and Geoffrey Arnott commented helpfully on subsequent drafts.