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# Comedy and publicity in the society of the polis

> «Demosthenes claims that there is nothing more unfair than public repute (φήμη) ... And if Timarchus was handsome, and is mocked because of the traducement (διαβολή) of this fact and not because of his own behaviour, Demosthenes says that Timarchus surely shouldn't suffer for this».
>
> (Aeschines 1.125-6)

> «But as regards people's lives and behaviour, an unerring reputation (φήμη) automatically spreads through the city and publicises (διαγγέλλει) private actions among the citizens at large».
>
> (ib. 127)

> «Recently, at a comic performance for the rural Dionysia in Collytus, when the actor Parmenon spoke some anapaests to the chorus and referred to «some big Timarchus-like prostitutes», no-one took the reference to this boy [another Timarchus] but everyone thought that *you* were meant».
>
> (ib. 157)

Writing in 1844, the young Theodor Bergk felt able to state that a comparison of Old Comedy's place in its society to the position of journalism in the modern world was already a commonplace[1]. Although Bergk himself wished to qualify this comparison, he did so only from the point of view of political partisanship, which he thought typical of journalism but absent from Aristophanes and his genre; as regards the broad cultural pattern of publicity, he accepted the basic validity of the analogy. The development of the press as a genuinely popular medium of publicity, in the 18th and early 19th century, had quickly, it seems, impinged upon the scholarly

[1] Bergk 1844:193.

understanding of Old Attic Comedy. In his paper on 'Ancient Organs of Public Opinion', written in 1884, Richard Jebb devoted more space to Old Comedy than to any other single topic: this genre, he claimed, «was the great ancient analogue of journalism which seems to lead opinion by skilfully mirroring it...»[2]. The creation in the present century of even more widespread and potent mass media has naturally led to the up-dating of comparisons between comedy and journalism: Alan Sommerstein, for example, has drawn a parallel between Aristophanes and satirical shows on television[3].

If publicity can be taken to encompass the dissemination and circulation of information, rumour, news, gossip and scandal, principally about the lives and actions of individuals, then the question of Old Comedy's relationship to the currents of publicity within the polis is of obvious interest and importance. The ramifications of this question make it, in fact, a kind of nodal point for a cluster of long-standing and perpetually contentious issues about comedy's status within the political and social culture of Athens: thus, when we find a Marxist such as Nikolai Bukharin describing Aristophanes' plays as 'political journalism'[4], we know that much is at stake in the understanding of a dramatist's significance in and for his society. And that is why, as will emerge, my attempt to sketch one possible answer to this question will be obviously (and contentiously) implicated with a larger view of the nature of Old Comedy. The modern inclination to compare Old Comedy to the mass media of our own world has, I believe, contributed to the maintenance of a tradition of interpretation which stretches right back to antiquity, and whose central (largely unargued) assumption is that comedy was actively and potently involved not only in the reflection but also in the creation of publicity.

[2] Jebb 1907b: 144.

[3] Barrett and Sommerstein 1978:9. Cf. e. g. Henderson 1990:301 n. 112, 305 n. 124, who cites modern cases involving the mass media as though the comparison were unproblematic (so too Henderson, this volume 319).

[4] See Solomon 1979:87.



In its ancient form, this assumption manifests itself in the overtly moralistic belief that Old Comedy exploited the force of derisive laughter, on mass public occasions, to expose and chastise all varieties of miscreant, depraved and socially threatening behaviour[5]. Such a view may look somewhat naive and uncritical to us now, but it is my contention that there are modern descendants of this mentality which, while sometimes formulated in political or sociological terms that we may find more intellectually congenial, nonetheless make much the same unsustainable claims for the influence and power of comedy within the city. The modern historian who claims that in comedy 'the power of public opinion' was 'deliberately harnessed as a force of social control'[6], has a wider range of anthropological concepts at her disposal; but she seems to me, nonetheless, to be doing little more than reformulating the working assumption that we see throughout the scholia to Aristophanes. Although there is no hope of achieving a definitive refutation of such attitudes, my aim will be to show that they far outrun what our evidence entitles us to believe. Above all, I want to suggest that the relationship of comedy and publicity in the Athenian polis has a complexity and an elusiveness which ought to make us wary of any diagnostically confident analysis of causes and effects. I hope that I shall at least manage to characterise and tackle a little of this complexity by offering considerations which approach the issue from more than one angle; but my principal premise, as illustrated by the first two of my epigraphs from Aeschines' speech *Against Timarchus,* is that the nature of publicity in the classical polis was intrinsically unstable and disputable.

Excessive historical confidence seems to me to be a recurrent fault in the dominant tradition of interpretation to which I have already referred. We can see at work here, I suggest, a model of comedy's place within the processes of publicity which rests on two main premises: first, that comedy was both an important witness to, and an influential agent of, publicity[7]; second, that publicity is in

[5] See Halliwell 1984: 83-4.

[6] Humphreys 1978:229.

[7] Burnet 1924:9 regards being satirised by Aristophanes as 'a certificate of (pre-existing) notoriety'.

general more likely to be reliable than unreliable (the Aeschinean view, as we might, ironically, dub it). As an approach to Old Comedy, this habit of mind goes back to the ancient assumption that comedy could be taken very seriously as evidence for personal, social and political facts, but it has been reinforced, as I have indicated, by analogies between the Greek theatre and the modern mass media. Such analogies are not, of course, without real interest; carefully formulated, they might help us to focus on factors of critical significance. But their common use seems to me misleading in several ways, not least in presupposing that a form of entertainment restricted to performance on a small number of annual occasions[8] was thoroughly integrated into, and influential within, the general processes of publicity in the city. When, for example, John White assures us that Aristophanes 'could assume that his audience would instantly seize his allusions, however swift and subtle, to their fellow citizens', and adds that Athens 'was a compact town in which every man knew his neighbour's business'[9], we are faced with a pair of equally contestable assumptions.

The first of these, namely the idea of Athens as a 'face-to-face' society where 'everyone knew everyone else', has been endorsed by as prominent a historian as M.I. Finley, and by as significant an Aristophanic scholar as Thomas Gelzer[10]. There can, of course, be no question that by the scale of modern urbanisation Athens in the classical period was a modestly sized polis through which oral publicity could no doubt, given sufficient impetus, spread quickly and widely[11]. But it is nonetheless a gross simplification of the demographic patterns and social conditions of the city and its

[8] I am not, of course, forgetting local deme performances (for the theatres see Whitehead 1986a: 212-22), as in my third epigraph from Aeschines; but it is impossible to know how many Dionysia and Lenaea plays also received deme performances, and therefore hard to make specific allowance for this factor.

[9] White 1914:xv.

[10] E. g. M.I. Finley 1985:17 and n. 22; M.I. Finley 1975: 28 and n. 9, 82-3, is slightly more cautious. Gelzer 1970: 1532.

[11] Aesch. 1.127-31, 2. 144-5, Dem. 19.243-4, reflect on the traditional motif of the power of φήμη (e. g. Hes. *Op.* 760-64, with West; Aesch. *Ag.* 938).



territory to suppose that Athens could have constituted, in any homogeneous or straightforward sense, a face-to-face society[12]. If the face-to-face model, combined with the premise of comedy as a faithful mirror of publicity, were capable of explaining the entire range of satirical references found in Aristophanes, it would have to entail that Athenians were extensively familiar not only with most of their fellow-citizens' identities, but also with numerous personal details too — facial appearance, family background, sexual habits, and so forth. I cannot see how such a conclusion, which would make Theophrastus's κακολόγος (n. 19 below) into a norm not a comic aberrancy, could be sustained in the face of specific evidence from our sources that many Athenians did *not* know anything of one another or their business[13]. Aristophanes himself comically exploits this social phenomenon in the passage of *Thesmophoriazusae* (29-35) where Euripides' kinsman makes some inept guesses at the identity of Agathon the tragedian. It is worth remembering here that when Plato writes, in the *Laws*, of the need for citizens to know and recognise each other, he is thinking of *sub-divisions* of a total citizen body of 5040[14].

It might still be maintained, of course, that whatever the general character of Athenian society in this respect, comedy was concerned with prominent individuals who must have been the subject of intense and pervasive publicity: I suppose that some such point of view might be discerned, though it is not necessarily entailed, in ps.-Xenophon's claim that the stock victims of comic satire were 'rich or well born or powerful' (*Ath. Pol.* 2.18). Now it is no part of my case to deny that such widespread publicity did sometimes operate, nor that there are many figures mentioned in comedy who might be placed in this category. I do, however, question the assumption that

[12] Criticisms of the model are made by R.G. Osborne 1985: 64-5, and Ober 1990:31-3.

[13] Thuc. 8.66.3 is the most explicit general statement. For particular instances see e. g. Eup. fr. 195 K-A, Lys. 1.45, Plato *Euthph.* 2b7, *Chrm.* 153a5-6, *Lach.* 180d-181a, Dem. 19.244; cf. Dover 1968:1. A passage like Plato *Lys.* 204e reflects not social conditions in general, but the relations of small circles with common interests; likewise, perhaps, though not without irony, *Tht.* 149a.

[14] Plato *Laws* 738d-e; cf. the echo at Aristot. *Pol.* 1326b16-17 (with the whole context, 1326a5-b25).

*most* comic targets were necessarily of this kind, and question also whether such a background needs to be posited for every detail of the satire even of admittedly well-known figures. As regards the first of these points, when Aristophanes talks, at *Peace* 751, of his rivals satirising 'ordinary little men and women' (ἰδιώτας ἀνθρωπίσκους ... γυναῖκας), his comic polemics should not be trusted, but it is still suggestive that he presupposes the possibility that not everybody targeted by comedy could be considered of prominent public standing. Certainly there are passages in comedy where it would at any rate not be unreasonable to suppose that the poet is drawing on private sources of gossip, information or (of course) slander (cf. *Wasps* 1025-7), rather than widely available repute, to create his satirical joke[15]. One conceivable instance, though transformed by techniques of comic titillation and mock-scandal, is the treatment of Ariphrades' alleged perversion at *Knights* 1274-89. It is, however, consonant with my larger argument to observe that here, as sometimes elsewhere, the very idea of satirical exposure can be exploited as an entertaining fiction[16].

In many cases of personal satire, the plausible background that might be imagined, if we need one at all in an area where there is so much scope for distortion as well as for sheer invention, will not be publicity of pan-polis character, but rather of the sort linked to particular groups and special interests. It is an essential qualification on the face-to-face model of Athenian society that we should do justice to the specialised, localised and even centrifugal forces in the social, political and cultural organisation of the polis[17]. The range of groups and institutions whose own particular forms and currents of publicity might sometimes be reflected or exploited in comedy,

[15] Aristot. *Rhet.* 1384b10-11 characterises comic poets as publicisers of their neighbours' faults: I am not certain how strictly this should be understood. At Machon 272-3 the courtesan Gnathaena is afraid that Diphilus will give her adverse publicity in one of his plays.

[16] For comic imitation of gossip or rumour see e. g. Aristoph. *Kn.* 980, 986, 1294, 1300, *Wasps* 241, 1268, *Frogs* 422, 428, fr. 596 K-A, Eup. fr. 99.2; Aristoph. *Ach.* 1150-55 purports to expose a private offence.

[17] Cf. R.G. Osborne 1985:89, with the whole of his ch. 4. For one case of group-centred publicity, note Dem. 21.134 (Meidias and his fellow knights).



hardly needs to be dwelt on here, but it certainly includes deme assemblies, army units, phratries, thiasoi, sussitia, hetaireiai and clubs, gymnasia, barbers' shops, and more besides. And even where we have good grounds for accepting that the identity of an individual referred to in comedy was well known, we cannot, as I have insisted, afford to believe that therefore *every detail* in such references was itself a matter of common knowledge or reputation. When Aristophanes gibes, say, at Cratinus's hair-style, Cleon's obtuseness as a school boy, or Peisander's eyebrows, there is no automatic plausibility in supposing that most of the audience could have recognised some item of existing publicity here, still less in imagining that they would have treated comic material of this kind as a reliable source of personal facts. This basic principle has extensive implications, though I cannot pursue them all here, for the sustained fictionalisation of recognisable individuals as dramatic figures on the stage.

We need, then, at the very least, to eschew any simple or uniform model of the relationship between Old Comedy and the circulation of publicity in Athens; and this means that, among much else, we need to work towards a recognition of the many complexities of rumour, reputation and information in a polis of the Athenian kind[18]. For the various and fluctuating workings of oral publicity, our Athenian sources give us plenty of glimpses that have some relevance to comedy — referring, for example, to the boasting of homosexual *erastai*, or the mischief of malevolent ex-*erastai* (something interestingly referred to by both Aristophanes and Plato), as well as the diffuse activities of meddlesome 'polypragmatists' and habitual gossip-mongers (λογοποιοί, κακολόγοι), the Theophrastean caricature of whom goes as far as practically to learn people's genealogies (as well as to practice slurs on their women-folk)[19]. Yet the picture that can be built up of the conditions of oral publicity in Athens suggests

[18] Ober 1990:148-51 seems to me to underestimate this complexity.

[19] Theophr. *Char.* 28.2-3; cf. Aristot. *Rhet.* 1384b5-11. For λογοποιοί and examples of deliberate spreading of publicity, see Andoc. 1.54, Lys. 16.11, 22.14, Dem. 21. 104, 24.15-16, Theophr. *Char.* 8. Publicity arising out of homosexual relations: Plato *Phdr.*232a-b, 234a (with Aristoph. *Wasps* 1025-7), and, on graffiti, Dover 1978:111-24.

an intricate multiplicity of currents, rather than the uniform, unfailing circulation of facts and beliefs which writers on comedy have tended to assume as the background to all the personal and satirical subject-matter in the genre. We must certainly not be misled, when assessing the general processes or conditions of Athenian publicity, into attaching much weight to that ubiquitous rhetorical topos, 'everyone knows...' or 'who does not know ...?'. Quite apart from the clear tendentiousness of this device in many particular cases of *diabole* in surviving speeches (not least, in Aeschines' assault on Timarchus from which I quoted at the start), we have Aristotle's explicit observation in the *Rhetoric* that the hearer of this topos 'assents to the proposition out of embarrassment, so as to be part of <sc. *what he takes to be*> the common possession'[20]. The device is, in other words, not dependable evidence for actual publicity, but a rhetorical instrument of persuasion.

My basic contention, so far, can be reformulated in a double form: first, that it is grossly unrealistic to suppose that the audiences of comedy were homogeneous in whom/what they knew and believed; secondly, that many of the personal references in comedy cannot have meant quite the same thing, cannot have been equally perspicuous in their details, to all those who heard them. I would like here to refer back to the third of my epigraphs from Aeschines' *Against Timarchus*, a document which, though later in date (345 B. C.) than the era of Old Comedy with which I am concerned, I nonetheless take to shed some light on cultural conditions which obtained throughout the classical period in Athens. Aeschines' anecdote about the performance at Collytus is, of course, itself a colourful variation on 'everyone knows'. Now one should not believe anecdotes; but one should try to learn from them. And what this one intimates — or, rather, betrays — is that satirical gibes in comedy did not always reflect a uniformly prevalent publicity, and that spectators were not always equally familiar with their subjects. Without these

[20] Aristot. *Rhet.* 1408a32-6; Ober 1990:149 seems to miss Aristotle's point. Colourfully tendentious use of the device is well seen at e. g. Andoc. 1.130, Hyp. 4.22, and Dem. 19.199-200. More realistic claims are e. g. Dem. 41.3, 45.63, Aeschin. 1.44 (where variability is acknowledged).



two tacit premises, the force of Aeschines' anecdote (that Timarchus's exceptional notoriety made doubt or ambiguity impossible) would vanish[21].

At this juncture, I would like to change tack a little, and ask whether the remains of Old Comedy as a whole allow us to discern any patterns of satirical choice or practice which would clarify the genre's status as either a reflector or an agent of publicity. Although the evidence available to us is far from perfect, it is not altogether random, since to some extent it preserves the work of Hellenistic compilers of lists of Κωμωιδούμενοι. One general statistic that can be extracted from this evidence is that of the approximately 170 individual butts who occur in Aristophanes, around 100 are recorded as having also been ridiculed by other poets; of the remaining seventy, more than half are mentioned only once in Aristophanes himself. I think it is immediately apparent that, whatever allowances we make for deficiencies of evidence, these figures will not lend themselves to a neat conclusion. But it seems clear enough that they do reinforce the case for complexity in comedy's relationship to publicity, for they point to considerable overlap between poets, but also to a significant degree of variation[22].

Let us accept, however, that there are here prima facie grounds for inferring that the basic identity of many comic targets must have been reasonably familiar, over a period of time, to Athenian theatre audiences. One immediate qualification is that this should not be translated, without corroboration in particular cases, into a general proposition about publicity, reputation, notoriety, etc. Rather, it is evidence, in the first place, precisely and specifically for familiarity *in comedy*. Comic theatre, we ought to recognise, has means of sustaining, even of creating, such familiarity for its own purposes; it need not always be parasitic on (still less, faithful to) publicity

[21] Note that there were certainly other Timarchuses alive at the time than the two to whom Aeschines refers: see Kirchner 1901-3: nos. 13627, 13635. On the possible confusions engendered by Athenian nomenclature see Demosthenes speeches 39 and 40.

[22] Detailed comparisons bear out both sides: (e. g.) eight individuals are known to have been mentioned in Phrynichus's *Monotropos* (Dionysia 414), and seven of them are also targets in *Birds*; but of the nine attested butts in the frs. of Eupolis' *Kolakes* (Dionysia 421), only one also turns up in *Peace*.

outside the theatre. It is pertinent here that repeated gibes against a given individual within a single play formed a regular practice of Aristophanes, and doubtless of other poets too[23]. Both *Wasps* and *Birds*, for instance, contain multiple jokes against more than a dozen characters each, while a figure like Cleonymus is the object of three swipes in each of four plays. Furthermore, many satirical targets have long 'lives' in comedy, lives which need not have been closely correlated with the larger sphere of social reputation or notoriety: something approaching half of those named in Aristophanes are current in comedy for a decade; and I have estimated that perhaps twenty or more of them (i.e. some twelve percent) are the subject of jokes over a period of at least two decades. These figures speak cogently of comedy's habit of returning again and again to many of the same satirical victims, turning some of them into figures of mirth so regular as to be almost personae in their own right, and in general tending to the creation of what should be regarded in the first instance, I am arguing, as distinctively comic 'reputations', rather than direct or simple indices of more widespread publicity, though that, of course, remains a plausible factor in many instances.

If we think of comedy partly generating and extensively shaping its own satirical material, it becomes easier also to interpret the nature of the various selections made by different poets, even where unquestionably prominent individuals were concerned. I have in mind especially the fact that figures known to have been publicly familiar could become the 'speciality' so to speak, of certain playwrights. As our data stand, individuals of the Aristophanic conspicuousness of Lamachus and (probably) Agathon are not mentioned in the remains of any other comic poet, while others, such as Ariphrades or Cleonymus, turn up only rarely elsewhere[24]. The caveats earlier expressed about the reliability of evidence apply again

[23] See e.g. Cratin. *Drapetides* frs. 62, 66 K-A (Lampon), Eupolis *Autolycus* frs. 51, 61 (Lycon), 63-4 (Autolycus), *Demoi* frs. 99, 135, ?144 (Theogenes), 103, 113 (Demostratus).

[24] There is a faint possibility that Agathon's name should be seen in CGFP 349.2. Cleonymus appears elsewhere in comedy only in Eup. fr. 352 K-A; Com. Adesp. 64 (Kock) barely counts as a further attestation.



here, but these illustrations are at any rate thought-provoking. Yet on the simple model of comedy as a reflector or amplifier of publicity, we should surely not expect to find as much variation as we do between the work of different poets. If, for example, Cleonymus's alleged act of ῥιψασπία was as much of a scandal as most Aristophanic commentators have been prepared to believe, why does no other poet than Aristophanes seem to have made very much of it? Similarly, it makes good sense, I suggest, to read Aristophanes' treatment of Lamachus as a particular, highly individual satirical choice and conception, rather than the exploitation of strong current publicity. To describe Lamachus as 'an obvious choice', because of his 'crests and Gorgon shield and fiery talk'[25], is to confuse what Lamachus has *become* in the satirist's hands (a fictionalised *miles gloriosus*) with what he was to begin with (an important military figure, but not necessarily an object of much popular interest); and it certainly will not account for his absence from Aristophanes' rivals. In such cases, the satirical creation of one poet may actually have preempted his rivals: avoidance of 'plagiarism' or derivativeness no doubt had some purchase in this as in other respects — perhaps more so than Aristophanes' complaints about the band-wagon of Hyperbolus plays (*Clouds* 551-9) would lead us to believe[26]. Aristophanes' striking satire of Agathon, early in the latter's career, may have been an instance in which one poet's choice of target led to the avoidance of this figure by other playwrights[27].

[25] Sommerstein 1973:43. Henderson 1990:305-7 insists that Aristophanes wished to impugn Lamachus's 'integrity' as the proponent of an 'aggressive war-policy': I find his case vitiated both by naivety about the thrust of the satire, and by a quasi-Thucydidean superciliousness about the Athenian demos.

[26] On the themes of plagiarism and derivativeness in Old Comedy, see Halliwell forthcoming.

[27] A somewhat different case is that of Cratinus, who is not mentioned by other poets in the fragments of the genre. Here the explanation should be sought, in part at least, in the special relationship of rivalry with the older poet which Aristophanes seems deliberately to have cultivated; see Halliwell forthcoming.

With Cleonymus, I think we can be more incisive, for we have sufficient grounds for identifying him as an associate of Cleon's[28]; and several other Cleonians — Phanus, Theorus, Thouphanes, Aeschines — happen also to be names which we hear in Aristophanes but nowhere in the remains of other contemporary poets. What is more, Aristophanes' treatment of Cleon himself was surely a piece of satirical 'specialisation', arising in part, and somewhat contingently perhaps, from the aftermath of *Babylonians*. It is insufficiently noticed how relatively little a part Cleon seems to have played in other comedies than those of Aristophanes[29]. If this is right, it is a further and very telling illustration of the inadequacy of viewing and understanding comic satire purely as a faithful mirror or documentor of current publicity, for on that principle we would have expected Cleon to dominate the comic stage throughout the 420s.

This observation on Cleon prompts a larger question about topicality in comedy, to which I would now like to devote some attention. Topicality requires the existence of a certain intensity of current publicity, but its parameters are relative to culturally variable possibilities and expectations. The degree of topicality (changing potentially from day to day in the mass media) which we are now so accustomed to in much popular humour and entertainment, was severely excluded from the scope of Old Comedy by the circumstances and time-scale of Athenian theatrical production — not only by the relative infrequency of performances, but also by the conditions under which plays were submitted for a chorus and subsequently rehearsed. While the late inclusion of references to very recent events remained possible on a small scale, it seems indisputable that the central ideas of most comedies, and much of their verbal substance too, must have existed many weeks, even

[28] On Cleonymus see Storey 1989 and Heath 1987:28. For the Cleonian connection see *Wasps* 592-3 (with Meiggs and Lewis 1969:188), with the suggestiveness of *Kn.* 951-8, and the conjunction with Cleonian Theorus at *Clouds* 400. It is possible that Cleon and Cleonymus were on the boule in the same year, 426-5.

[29] There is insufficient reason for the standard belief that Cleon bulked large in Eupolis' *Chrusoun Genos*: see frs. ??300, ?304, 316 K-A. Note also the absence of Cleon's name from the fragments of Eupolis's *Poleis*, though a great many other names occur there.



months, before performance[30]. Topicality of certain kinds cannot, therefore, have been either expected or practised.

It would be wrong, of course, to deny that topical colour was sometimes of interest to comic poets: *Wasps* 62, whatever precisely it alludes to in Cleon's recent career, gives us an oblique acknowledgement that Aristophanes took some notice of it. But what we might think of as topical in Aristophanes, at least, is usually little more than an embellishment, not a central concern — as, to take obvious instances, with the references to the Pylos campaign in *Knights*, the death of Cleon in *Peace*, or the battle of Arginusae in *Frogs*. If we study the full gamut of satirical material in Aristophanes and the fragments, topicality of a strongly 'up-to-date' kind appears not to have been a major feature of the genre. My earlier comments on the time-span or longevity of individual reputations in comedy are pertinent here, since this factor hardly bespeaks a constant search for newly notorious targets. One reason why reading Aristophanes might leave one with a somewhat misleading sense of the topicality of his plays is the straightforward fact that the majority of satirical themes are handled in the dramatic present. A nice exemplification of this is the trial of Laches in *Wasps*, which is given the glamour of a current *cause célèbre* by the way in which the old jurors anticipate it as they stumble towards the courts (240-44). If one accepts, as I think one must, that Laches cannot have been tried or due for trial on *Sicilian* charges during the official year 423/2, then while one might still seek to identify a scenario that would provide a topical background to the subject (sharp current antipathy between Cleon and Laches over peace policies, with Cleon raking over Laches' past), it becomes undeniable that the contemporaneity given to the material is to some degree fictive[31]. Similar conclusions might be upheld in relation to the Thracian mercenaries in *Acharnians* (echoing events of 431-29?), the putative Spartan peace proposals of *Acharnians* 652-3, the apparent description of a trial of Thucydides son of Melesias at

[30] See Ruppel 1913, Dover 1972:170-72, 180-1.

[31] MacDowell 1971:164 rightly rules out a Sicilian charge; but his preferred hypothesis seems to me unduly confident in Aristophanes' reliability, and his suggestion that *Wasps* 'persuaded Kleon not to prosecute' is far-fetched.

*Acharnians* 703 ff., or the proscription of Diagoras at *Birds* 1071 ff. (where contemporaneity is narrowed down to the very *day* of performance!)[32].

Once we allow for mock-topicality as a comic technique, its operations can be suspected in many passages. This is one further way of opposing literal-minded tendencies in interpretation of ostensible comic allusions to contemporary events. When, for example, Calonice tells Lysistrata that her husband has been away on service for five months in Thrace, 'guarding Eucrates' (*Lys.* 103), readers ancient and modern have jumped to conclusions about the misdemeanours of a serving Athenian general. But it is very unsafe automatically to assume that Eucrates (if general at all) was currently suspected of corruption or other impropriety: the joke's *para prosdokian* mechanism neither requires nor implies a specific basis in reality, though it is at least equally possible, if a historical point is wanted, that Aristophanes is partly exploiting a less topical innuendo — the memory that Eucrates had been accused in 415 over the affair of the Hermocopidae[33]. It might be added here that comedy does of course fairly regularly ridicule strategoi during their tenure of office. This can count, I suppose, as some kind of topicality, but the key point is surely that it would be paradoxical to hypothesise some justifying publicity in most cases, since this would yield the patent absurdity of the Athenians frequently electing military officers who were widely held in disrepute. The mockery of serving generals is to be understood not, for the most part, as an index of actual doubts about their credentials or performance, but as an indulgence of a special comic ἄδεια, effective immunity to prosecution, where one provision of the law of κακηγορία was concerned[34].

Even where some immediately topical background seems certain, we need to avoid constricting the point of a joke or reference to the

[32] *Ach.* 652-3: see Gomme et al. 1945-81: ii. 391; Diagoras: see Rosenmeyer 1972:232-8 and Dover 1976:26-7.

[33] Cf Halliwell 1984:85 and n. 14. Even to trust Aristophanes' 'five months' (as do Andrewes in Gomme et al. 1945-81: v. 127, Henderson 1987: 79-80) seems to me unsafe. The link with the Hermocopidae depends, of course, on identifying Eucrates as the brother of Nicias.

[34] Halliwell 1991.



mirroring of such topicality. Every passage needs treating on its merits, which is a way of reiterating my earlier contention that comedy's involvement in the currents of publicity in the city cannot be reduced to a uniform or invariable model. A good illustration of this point, and one now supported by a consensus of scholarly judgement, is the significant difference, despite superficially similar phrasing, between the probably non-topical reference to Peisander and the 'office-seekers' at *Lysistrata* 490-92, and the likely allusion to the contemporary atmosphere of oligarchic conspiracy a little later in the same play, at 577-8[35]. I wish to contend, therefore, that the role of topicality in Old Comedy fluctuates considerably and irregularly. As a general phenomenon its importance should certainly not be exaggerated, and it is not nearly prevalent enough to support the idea that the airing and amplification of current publicity was central to comedy's purposes.

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Most of my argument so far has been concerned to raise objections to, and place qualifications upon, the idea that comedy functioned as a reflector of current publicity in Athens. I want to address a few final and compressed thoughts to the further question of whether, or how far, comedy itself can be supposed to have been an instigating agent or organ of publicity: i.e. to what extent it may have fed material into, and thus affected and influenced, the processes of popular reputation, belief and information in the polis. This question has often been affirmatively answered by the same tradition of interpretation which I have had in my sights throughout. One modern writer whom I quoted earlier has gone so far as to link the force of comic satire with ostracism[36]. I can only say that I find this comparison utterly preposterous: ostracism entailed real and direct impairment of one's citizen status; comic ridicule demonstrably failed to prevent its targets from continuing (e. g. ) to

[35] For various views cf. Sommerstein 1977:113f., Westlake 1980:47-9, Andrewes in Gomme et al. 1945-81:v. 189, Henderson 1987 *ad locc.*

[36] Humphreys 1978:229. A more subtle, but still overconfident, case for comic influence is made by Henderson 1990. Various dissenting views are put by Heath 1987, Chapman 1978:62-3, Stow 1942.

be elected as generals, to make successful proposals in the assembly, and to receive recognition within the polis in many other ways (cf. p. 337 below). Moreover, while we know that some people really were ostracised, can we confidently identify a single instance in which comedy damaged a person's standing or reputation? I remain highly sceptical. We certainly cannot afford to erect a case on the basis of what comic poets say about themselves: naturally, they are able to pretend, with splendid aplomb, to influence of various kinds: the Athenian allies will come running with their tribute because of Aristophanes' attacks on the corrupters of democracy; *Knights* knocked Cleon flat; Aristophanes is a Heraclean champion of the demos against its enemies; etc. But such claims are elements in the comic explananda and cannot be used to frame the explanation.

Plato, it is widely assumed, seems to have thought that he knew of a case of real comic influence, though actually it is far from clear how serious a role in the dissemination of διαβολή against Socrates he attributes to comedy as such. Here I strongly incline to the view recently put by Malcolm Heath, that the relevant passage of the *Apology* is not so much blaming comedy for the traducement of Socrates, as belittling Meletus by suggesting that his travesty of Socrates was no better than the self-evidently grotesque persona in *Clouds*[37]. Moreover, without impugning Plato's perceptiveness, we can surely wonder whether, given the personal meaning to him of Socrates' life and death, he could have made an accurate appraisal of the effects of a comic play on the cumulative formation of an individual's reputation over a quarter of a century. (Could anyone, indeed, be in a position to make such an appraisal, especially when they had been too young to witness the original, and unsuccessful, reception of the play?) In fact, Plato's own evidence can anyway be used to rebut the idea that comedy was a decisive influence in this case, for the *Apology* itself makes it clear that the Aristophanic caricature of Socrates exploited, without having created, what were stock, stereotyped public conceptions of *philosophers in general*[38]. We are moving here, I think, in a domain of popular prejudices and

[37] Heath 1987:9-10; cf. Rosen 1988:62 n. 8.

[38] Plato *Apol.* 23d; cf. *Phdo* 64b, Xen. *Mem.* 1. 2. 31.



values which is larger than the scope of publicity in the sense with which I have been working.

But even if we could (as we cannot) identify a real impingement by *Clouds* and other plays upon Socrates' reputation in the city, nothing of general import would follow from this. We would still have to set against it the many other instances in which we can see that comedy did not in any obvious way affect the standing of individuals: for that is surely an inescapable, if commonly evaded, inference for all those major targets of satire who continued to play prominent roles in public or cultural life during the period of their exposure to comic derision. This key observation is no mere argument from silence. It is not only that there is a lack of attested influence upon public opinion where major objects of ridicule (Cleon, Lamachus, Euripides, and many others) are concerned. Rather, I would say, it is self-evident that we are dealing with satire which actually *depended upon* the continuing prominence of these individual targets — the prominence 'justified' the satire by giving it a flavour, say, of piquant scurrility. And if that is so, the mockery of such figures, far from being a symptom of their general disrepute, is itself effectively an index of comedy's incapacity to make a serious impact upon their public status. So this point belongs with my earlier observation about the difference between the familiarity of an individual and the familiarity of what may be said about him, or done to him, on the comic stage. In the kind of cases to which I have just referred, we are by definition dealing with conspicuous figures, but the satirical treatment of them may in some respects, I am suggesting, effectively *invert*, without consequently damaging, the nature of their public standing.

Indeed, in view of the degree of satirical freedom which Athenian comedy enjoyed in the second half of the fifth century, I submit that it could hardly have been otherwise: comedy simply could not have been tolerated in the form which it took, and even, as I have argued elsewhere[39], been given effective exemption from restrictions and inhibitions which applied widely in public life, if it had possessed any real and recognised power to shape the opinions or attitudes of

[39] Halliwell 1991.

large numbers of citizens. The function of comedy as mass entertainment at major festivals required the cultural assumption that it could be enjoyed in a spirit which was effectively self-sufficient and did not discernibly impinge on behaviour outside the theatre. 'Discernibly' is the vital term here: comedy, unlike many institutions of political and social life, was not in any explicit way linked to patterns of choice or action within the polis. Of course, there must have been a perpetual possibility of subliminal or indeterminate influence from comedy, as from any experience whatsoever, upon the minds of any or all of the individuals in its audiences. But if an Athenian audience appreciated (for instance) the satirical portrayal of a man as vile, corrupt, double-dealing, and cowardly, yet continued to elect him as general in time of war, or to listen with interest and approval to his proposals to the ecclesia, then we are entitled to conclude that public opinion about him was not substantially modified by comic performances.

My position is not intended in any way to militate against the significant observation that because comedy can influence spectators at various levels, some of them subconscious, it can always be regarded, by those who have some reason for so doing, as potentially dangerous or threatening. This is quite sufficient, in principle at any rate, to explain the rare signs of strain affecting comedy's festive privileges in the fifth century[40] — including a special incident such as Cleon's reaction to Aristophanes' *Babylonians* in 426, where comic treatment of matters relating to Athens' empire could have been thought a riskily sensitive theme, at this tense stage of the war, for entertainment in front of the allies' tribute-bearing representatives. But there is nothing in such a political reaction to a play to tell us definitively what the play might have meant to either its author or most of its audience. If a reaction such as Cleon's (so far as we can conjecture its nature) were generalised in a coherent fashion, it would have to become something like a political theory of comic theatre. As such, it might be highly interesting, but it would not necessarily tell

[40] The evidence for such strain is slighter than it is often claimed to be; (e. g. ) the reference to 'the lawsuits [sic] brought by Kleon' (Henderson 1990:273) is not based on firm evidence. I have reconsidered the whole subject critically in Halliwell 1991.



us any more about the practical complexities of comic influence in the Athenian polis than does, say, Plato's psychological and moral view of comedy.

The stance which I am urging towards the issue of comic influence upon publicity, is that we must distinguish between the testable and the untestable. Let us by all means allow for the likelihood that some comic statements or images affected, whether directly or indirectly, the beliefs of some Athenians. Let us also allow for the possibility of vaguer types of psychological, moral and other effects upon members of comic audiences. But let us not confuse indeterminate and intricate channels of influence, which we are no longer able to reconstruct or estimate[41] (and, indeed, rarely able to assess even in our *own* lives), with the processes of large-scale public persuasion whose existence or absence should, in principle, be visible in particular, overt patterns of behaviour. And in so far as we have any means of making judgements on this second level, I have contended that we should pay considerable attention to the fact that many comic targets continued to be popular and successful in the very areas and activities in which they were ridiculed in the theatre.

The overall view which I have been taking of comedy's relationship to the currents of publicity in Athenian society can partly be summed up as one of methodological scepticism[42]. I have repeatedly and unavoidably defined this position by contrast to what I regard as the excessive historical confidence, as well as the somewhat reductive conception of the interplay between comic drama and its society, that can be traced in much traditional interpretation of comic satire. The upshot of my case is threefold: that we should make as few assumptions about background publicity

[41] Some of the claims made by Ober 1990:152-5 are both speculative and, in my view, specious.

[42] One can make here a final criticism of the analogy with modern mass media from which my argument started. Modern historians and sociologists are faced with formidable problems in assessing the relative elements of 'reflective' and 'creative' publicity in the functions of the mass media, even though there is no basic doubt about the involvement of these media in real and active processes of public opinion. How much greater, therefore, must be the difficulty of appraising the status of an art-form like Old Comedy which has an intrinsic capacity to play with pretence and fiction of every kind.

as are strictly necessary to understand comedy's treatment of individuals and events in the Athenian polis; that we should not hypothesise active comic influence upon the trends of publicity, except where we have positive indications for doing so; and that we should counterbalance the ways in which comedy is ostensibly (i.e. fictionally) engaged in the affairs of the polis with a sustained though flexible recognition of the genre's intrinsic liberty to recreate, manipulate, distort and disguise those affairs in the interests of its own festive requirements of imagination and laughter. And as this last way of putting the point suggests, the question of comedy's relationship to publicity in the polis is not, after all, a historical issue that is strictly or properly external to the genre: for, in order to have any hope of producing an illuminating answer to it, we need to bring to bear our entire understanding of the character and spirit of Old Comedy as a cultural phenomenon in its time and place.



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# Il commediografo e il demagogo

1. In due celebri passi degli *Acarnesi*, la commedia rappresentata alle Lenee del 425, Diceopoli, il personaggio aristofaneo più scopertamente autobiografico, allude al violento attacco mossogli da Cleone l'anno prima, in seguito alla rappresentazione dei dionisiaci *Babilonesi*[1]: «So io quali guai mi fece passare Cleone a causa della commedia dell'anno scorso: mi trascinò dinanzi al Consiglio e la sua lingua mi sommergeva di calunnie e di menzogne; urlava quasi fosse Cicloboro: un vero diluvio. E fui sul punto di morire soffocato dalla melma dei suoi imbrogli» (vv.377-382); «Non me ne vogliate, spettatori, se, pur essendo un mendico, mi appresto a parlare della Città, fra voi Ateniesi, in una commedia: anche la commedia conosce il giusto; ed io dirò cose terribili, ma giuste. Ora Cleone non mi calunnierà dicendo che parlo male della Città alla presenza degli stranieri. Siamo tra di noi, l'agone è quello lenaico: non sono ancora presenti stranieri, e non sono arrivati né i tributi né gli alleati dalle loro città. Ma ora siamo noi soli, il fior fiore della farina» (vv.496-507). E all'attacco del 426 si fa riferimento anche nella parabasi: ai versi 630-631 il corifeo afferma che «i nemici del poeta

[1] Sulla figura 'autobiografica' di Diceopoli si vedano almeno de Ste. Croix 1972: 363; Kannicht 1983; Russo 1984: 61-62; Perusino 1987: 30; Foley 1988; Henderson 1990: 306. Che Aristofane recitasse nella parte di Diceopoli è ipotesi che, prospettata da Bailey 1936, è stata ripresa da Ghiron-Bistagne 1976: 148, e, più di recente, da Sutton 1988 e da Slater 1989. Che Diceopoli parli non a nome del poeta, ma di Callistrato (che curò la regia e dei *Babilonesi e* degli *Acarnesi),* ritengono quanti sono del parere che non il poeta, ma il regista, fosse ufficialmente riconosciuto come autore della commedia rappresentata: si vedano, da ultimo, MacDowell 1982b; Kraus 1985: 61 (ma più cauto alle pp. 168, 173); Gilula 1990: 102 n.6. Va infine ricordato che, secondo E.L. Bowie 1988, nel personaggio di Diceopoli si dovrà riconoscere la persona storica di Eupoli: ma si vedano le cogenti obiezioni di L.P.E. Parker 1991.

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**Paestan bell-crater.** Museo Provinciale, Salerno.

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