

THE BAZAAR FISH MARKET IN FOURTH-CENTURY GREEK COMEDY¹

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A historian of ancient cuisine and culture once astutely remarked that “while Roman poets were wont to boast of their farms and their produce, Greeks wrote of the fish they bought at market and the prices they paid” (Dalby 1996.28). Though a good deal of scholarly attention has been paid to fish in the past two decades, this attention has been focused on the tenuousness (or abundance, depending on whom you consult) of the fish supply in the ancient Mediterranean world and the luxury value of fish.² While there is still debate, the general consensus now is that fish could have provided merely an occasional and supplemental source of calories and nutrition, and when large, fresh fish were bought, served, and eaten in quantities, these activities could signify elite, crazed, hedonistic, or undemocratic consumption.³ Much of this work on attitudes towards fish relies on comic poetry of

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 - 2 For the classic cultural-historical treatment of the powerful symbolism of fish and the politics and ethics of desire, see Davidson 1997 and 1993. For a cultural-historical account of fish in regard to wealth and status, see Purcell 1995. For the original pessimism about the fish supply, see Gallant 1985. Optimism about the fish supply can be found in Curtis 1991 and, now marshalling new evidence, Mylona 2008.
 - 3 For the moderate version of this consensus, see Wilkins 2000.300 and note 134. See Garnsey 1999.116–17 on the difference between small fry and large fish (with saltfish as partaking of both categories) in relation to rich and “humble” diets.

the fourth century B.C., whose fragmentary remains were preserved by later authors. Yet little attention has been paid to how fourth-century comic poets typify transactions involving the purchase of fresh fish (preserved fish will provide an interesting contrast), other than the fact that prices were high and fish sellers continually suspected of dishonesty.⁴

Complaints in comedy about the fish market's prices and its sellers have been read in two complementary ways. First, complaints about the high prices of fish and their sellers' refusal to lower that price have been considered a "cliché" developed by the genre from real-life supply problems.⁵ Furthermore, negative attitudes in ancient sources towards the market in fish have been viewed by scholars as reflecting a simple distaste for commercial activity *per se*.⁶ In this second reading, the marketplace is regarded as "the home of the shady deal" (Wilkins 2000.169). It is possible, however, to be more specific.

Negative comic treatments of the fish market, I will argue, derive from the lack of information (and the lack of communication of this information) in the market for fresh fish. That is, in talking about the fish market, comic poets of the fourth century B.C. relied on the expectations of an audience familiar with conditions similar to those that occur in modern bazaar markets in places such as North Africa, India, or Indonesia. These economies are defined, as far as anthropologists are concerned, by a lack of information as to pricing and quality of goods. Comic poets of the fourth-century B.C. played on similar conditions to turn their fish markets into places of a comically frustrating lack of information and agreement. The market for fresh fish, which, from the unhappy buyers' perspective, was personified by the fish sellers, would allow neither for information about quality nor for reasonable and fair negotiation of price.

4 Even a recently published dissertation (Mylona 2008) on fish in the ancient Mediterranean quickly passes over fish market transactions.

5 See Arnott 1996.98 for this view. Nesselrath (1990.291) identifies Antiphanes as the possible originator of the stock jokes about fish sellers and prices. Indeed, many of the fragments about fish sellers come from Antiphanes' work.

6 Wilkins 2000.170: "Comedy shares with much other Athenian literature an ambivalence, if not a dislike, towards those dealing in commerce." For the agora described in comedy, see Wilkins 2000.164–75; for fish sellers, 168–69 and 296–99.

BAZAAR

The passages that I will analyze describe market transactions between buyers and sellers. Though it has been generally recognized that these transactions involve haggling, the specifics of this haggling have largely been ignored, besides an occasional reference to certain cultural rules of bargaining.⁷ If we use our knowledge of modern bazaar economies as an analytical tool, we can see that the humor of these passages is better understood with the practices of these economies in mind.⁸ When I speak about bazaar economies, I am referring to the practices of markets found all over the world in which a wide variety of goods, from the smallest foodstuffs to expensive decorative wares, are sold by individuals in a central location. This type of economy should not be confused with that of the modern shopping mall. Though the mall offers a variety of goods and a central location, the interaction in a mall is between the buyer and a set of “impersonally defined institutions,” what current economic theories label a “firm-type” economy (Dana, Etemad, and Wright 2007.40). For example, if one buys a lamp at a mall store, the price tag tells the price, and the seller is the lamp store, not the salesperson, who consequently has no control over the price. A similar purchase in a bazaar market would require that one interact directly with the seller as an individual with whom one negotiates a price.⁹

Anthropologists identify lack of information as a defining feature of bazaar economies. Jennifer and Paul Alexander, who observed Javanese

7 To this end, Millett's (1991) ideas on pricing in the marketplace are foundational. Diggle appeals to these ideas of “unwritten rules of bargaining” in his analysis of Theophrastus's *Characters* (2004.345), which shares with the comic poetry of its time a strong interest in behavior in the marketplace. For a mention of bargaining in fish markets, see Dalby 2003 s.v. “Fish.”

8 For recent attempts to offer a bazaar model for imperial Roman markets, see Bang 2006.77–84 and 2008. Bang has been influenced in particular by Geertz's model (see, especially, 2008.197–201), which he uses to explain broader economic phenomena at an empire-wide level. As such, he is not concerned with reconstructing attitudes towards individual economic transactions themselves. His analysis shares with mine an emphasis on uncertainty in the bazaar.

9 It is an open question whether a seller may have been a relative, slave, or other “employee” of a fish operation “owner.” Yet we may suspect that, for example, the saltfish importer Chaerephilus and his sons, all mentioned in fourth-century comedy, may each have (along with others) acted as sellers of fish imported by their family. Such family “corporations” should not be thought of as impersonal modern corporations; they are very much a part of the bazaar market scene and rely on the same pricing mechanisms. See Clauss 1994.91 for Indonesian evidence of bazaar family businesses.

bazaar markets, neatly summarize the issue: “A critical feature of bazaar economies is that price and other economic information is . . . difficult to acquire” (Alexander and Alexander 1987.42). Bazaars simply do not have price tags or similar signage. If a person wants to buy something, face-to-face negotiation is required. Uncertainty about price, however, is only a small part of a larger problem, namely the lack of information about the quality of the goods.¹⁰

Due to their lack of detailed information about price and quality, buyers develop specific information-gathering strategies. In his seminal work on North African bazaars, Clifford Geertz shows how the problem of quality in bazaar economies results in the distinctive way in which buyers and sellers arrive at prices. One element isolated by Geertz (following the economist Albert Rees) is “intensive” as opposed to “extensive” search and bargaining. In this usage, “intensive” means “the exploration in depth of an offer already received, a search along the intensive margin, as contrasted to seeking additional offers, a search along the extensive” (Geertz 1978.31). Geertz uses Rees’ classic example of the “intensive” search in the used-car market, where one finds a “high heterogeneity of products (cars driven by little old ladies vs. taxicabs, etc.) as against the new car market, where products are considered homogenous, and extensive search (getting new quotations from other dealers) predominates” (Geertz 1978.31).

Intensive bargaining, then, is a dance, familiar to those who have witnessed haggling in bazaar markets, between seller’s offer and buyer’s counteroffer that eventually results in an agreed upon price and, therefore, a transaction. Extensive search, engaging with different dealers about the price of a similar item that one wishes to buy, does not usually result in a purchase, but is used in bazaar economies as a way to “test the waters” (Geertz 1978.32).¹¹ Furthermore, sellers are not the only persons one might ask about prices or other information, one’s fellow buyers also figure as

10 Based on his fieldwork in India, Fanselow 1990 suggests that heterogeneity in quality leads to bazaar market conditions.

11 We see a comic treatment of such a failed extensive search in Timocles’ *Epichairekakos* (“Mr. Schadenfreude”) (frag. 11 K-A = Ath. 6.241a–b). In that fragment, a parasite nicknamed “Lark” realizes he must buy dinner for himself because he has not been invited anywhere. He consequently runs around the market desperately asking how much various fish cost, even though he possesses only a few coins. It is clear from the fragment that Lark is not going to get any large fish for the money he has. Eventually, he heads to the anchovy sellers.

a source of information in the uncertain world of the bazaar: “Javanese carrying new goods are invariably asked, often by total strangers, how much they paid and how they conducted the bargaining” (Alexander and Alexander 1987.44).¹²

Finally, buyers’ uncertainties about bazaar economic conditions that give rise to these types of search and bargaining methods result in precisely the negativity about traders that has often been attributed to anti-commercial cultural values in antiquity. The attitude that traders are corrupt simply because they are traders is typical of bazaar economies. As Frank Fanselow, who studied Indian bazaars, puts it: “Since standards of quality are difficult to verify, there is general uncertainty about what exactly is and what is not adulterated, which leads to an atmosphere of suspicion that everything in the market is adulterated and no bazaar trader is honest” (1990.253).

Similarly, Javanese folktales are said to be full of stories about people being swindled at the market (Alexander and Alexander 1987.44). In all, the picture we have today of bazaar economic behavior and attitudes will fit quite nicely with the situation in Athenian comic fragments, and much of the humor of these fragments must be derived from a playfulness about the bazaar-like conditions of the marketplace.

FISHY BUSINESS

Many of the fragments in this paper may be found in Book 6 of Athenaeus’s *Deipnosophistae* (“The Dinner Sophists”). The *Deipnosophistae* is an expansive and intriguing Roman-era work (from around the turn of the third century A.D.) that pretends to be an account of a dinner party at which a host of scholars discuss, sometimes playfully, sometimes heatedly, ancient literature that pertains to dining culture. The speakers quote many passages from what to them (as to us) was ancient literature, and so the *Deipnosophistae* preserves many fragments of lost fourth-century comedies. Book 6 of the *Deipnosophistae* focuses largely on comic characters and character types, especially the nature of parasites, slaves, and, at its beginning, fish sellers in classical Attica.

12 The same seems to have been true in the period that I am discussing. For example, the “hillbilly” (*agroikos*) of Theophrastus’s *Characters* 4.15, on a trip into the city, questions a stranger about the price of goods such as hides and saltfish.

We must be aware of the bias of the context of the fragments.¹³ In the case of fish sellers, the bias is set out in the beginning by some speaker—it is not clear whether he is a parasite present at the dinner party or Athenaeus as narrator. This speaker declares that “fish sellers in Rome are not very different from the ones once made into comic characters in Attica” (6.224c). It becomes clear from the fragments quoted that the speaker characterizes all fish sellers as cheats and swindlers. This attitude of suspicion may stem from a clear pattern in the comic fragments about fish sellers, one that, as mentioned above, continues to be held in the scholarship today. We cannot, however, eliminate the possibility that our current belief is little more than a repetition of Athenaeus’s bias in selecting only passages that portrayed fish sellers negatively. Indeed, several of the passages not from Book 6, such as one from Book 3 where saltfish sellers are mentioned, which I will discuss below, can be used as a productive contrast to the negative treatment of fish sellers in the fragments from Book 6. These positive treatments of the saltfish market, however, do seem to arise from different circumstances in the original comedies and, as we shall see, only help to confirm Athenaeus’s view of the negative light in which Attic comedy held sellers of fresh fish.

Much like modern bazaar traders, fish sellers treated in the fragments of Attic comedy preserved in Athenaeus were not themselves producers (that is, in this case, fishermen), but were part of a chain of middlemen.¹⁴ These sellers could have purchased their fish from fishermen directly or from wholesalers. The distinct label given to the fish seller (*ichthuopôlês*) suggests that he is probably not a fisherman (*halieus*). It is clear, however, that fishermen could have sold their fish directly in Athens, even to consumers. For example, in Antiphanes’ *Rich Men* (frag. 188 = Ath. 8.342e–43a), a certain Maton is said to have seized the fishermen (*sunêrpaken tous halieas*), and a certain Diogeiton is said to have seduced (*anapepeiken*) them to bring their

13 See Dalby 1996.176–79 for an excellent discussion of the difficulties of using Athenaeus as a source. See also Pelling’s (2000) judicious synthesis and correction of previous scholarly work on the accuracy of Athenaeus’s quotations. As both notice, it is sometimes difficult to determine which words belong to an original source and which belong to Athenaeus. This problem does not apply equally to verse and prose quotations. Since the metrical fragments must also meet the criterion of meter, we can be far less suspicious of them (as Pelling notes, 2000.189). But the question of the accuracy of quotations from Middle Comedy is moot, since Athenaeus is often our only source and we have no way to compare their textual traditions.

14 For the bazaar’s “chain of middlemen,” see Fanselow 1990.

fish to him. From the context, it seems that these characters are *opsophagoi*, fish-devouring buyers not intending to resell the fish, but we cannot be sure.¹⁵ Contemporary Athenian evidence for a longer chain of middlemen is lacking, but *IG II*² 1103 (second century A.D.), an imperial rescript concerned with the high price of fish sold in Athens, allows for the sale of fish only by fishermen themselves or by fish sellers who buy directly from fishermen. Although this evidence is late, it at least shows that the sale of fish by third parties or parties at an even greater remove likely began to occur in Athens at some point in antiquity. Such evidence suggests that in ancient legal thinking about the price of fish, the supply chain rather than the availability of fish itself was a major concern.

One element of bazaar practice completely absent from the fragments in Athenaeus's Book 6 catalogue of bad fish-selling practices is clientelization, "the tendency for repetitive purchasers of particular goods and services to establish continuing relationships with particular purveyors of them, rather than search widely through the market at each occasion of need" (Geertz 1978.30). In fact, Geertz noticed that in the bazaar, only "clientelized" transactions tended to succeed: "The productive type of bargaining is that of the firmly clientelized buyer and seller exploring the dimensions of a particular, likely to be consummated, transaction" (1978.32). No speakers in the quotations preserved in Book 6 mention regular purveyors whom they prefer.

The lack of evidence for clientelization, however, has less to do with underlying market practices (there most likely was, in fact, clientelization in the marketplace) than with the bias of the comic fragments in Athenaeus's Book 6 collection. Tellingly, in Book 3 of the *Deipnosophistae*, where saltfish is discussed and there is no worry about the evils of fresh-fish sellers, a case of clientelization does occur. Athenaeus preserves a fragment from Antiphanes' *The Barber* (frag. 126 K-A = Ath. 3.120a) in which a speaker orders a slave (probably): "Go to the fish-steak seller I usually buy from and wait . . ." (ἐλθὼν τε πρὸς τὸν τεμαχοπώλην περίμενε, παρ' οὗ φέρειν εἴωθα . . .).¹⁶ Since the passage is a four-line fragment, it is hard to tell whether that fish-steak seller is later satirized, but he certainly does

15 See Nesselrath 1997.282 and note 48 for other mentions of these characters in comedy as notorious *opsophagoi*.

16 Bothe (see *PCG* ad loc.) reads *eiōthas an*, "you would usually," instead of *eiōtha kân*, "I usually . . . even if."

not receive comic treatment in the passage we have.¹⁷ One might suspect that the fish-steak seller would not have been slandered unless the relationship soured, in which case all the commonplaces about fish sellers (which, again, should be thought of as reflections on conditions in the marketplace and not a class of individuals) would probably emerge anyway.

For markets in heterogeneous perishable goods, like the fresh-fish market (saltfish are an interesting exception, which I will discuss again below), information about quality is of key importance, and so the fragments in Book 6 reveal a constant worry about dishonest fish sellers altering their goods.¹⁸ For example in Xenarchus's *Porphyra* (frag. 7 K-A = Ath. 6.225c–d), a fish seller is described as staging a fight and swooning over his fish so that someone pours water over him and his fish. The speaker in the fragment attributes this performance to a law forbidding sellers to rinse their fish to make them seem fresher than they really are. “You would say they were just caught,” remarks the teller of the tale. The sale of rotting fish is related in another comic fragment, in which a blind buyer discovers his fish are bad only upon smelling the fish when he arrives home (Antiphanes *Adulterers* frag. 159 K-A = Ath. 6.225e). The blindness of the buyer and his inability to recognize the quality of the fish until they are purchased and at home represent quite strikingly the lack of information as to quality in the fresh-fish market. Similarly, in Antiphanes' *A Friend to Thebans* (frag. 217 K-A = Ath. 6.225f), the change in the affability of fish sellers, which is said to be inversely proportional to the quality of their fish, once again hints at an underlying concern with the quality of goods being offered and suspicion of the information offered by fish sellers.

In one respect, the fresh-fish market in comedies is a place of even

17 Athenaeus attributes the name Euthynus to the fish-steak seller, but the text of line 3 is garbled and lacunose, therefore that attribution cannot be verified. As a result, we are forced to take Athenaeus at his word. Some (e.g., *PCG* ad loc.) suggest a connection between this Euthynus and the character of the same name in Antiphanes' *Rich Men* (frag. 188.1 = Ath. 8.342e).

18 Fanselow (1990) argues that, first and foremost, heterogeneity of quality leads to the conditions that folk ethnographers describe as “bazaar.” It must be noted, however, that Fanselow considers perishable goods more subject to bazaar pricing mechanisms (bargaining) and less subject to concerns about quality because they are “displayed” and “relatively easily inspectable” (1990.252). Yet fourth-century fragments emphasize the trickiness of judging the quality of fresh fish on display, so we cannot say the same for our evidence.

The fragments that I analyze in this section are also addressed by Wilkins, who describes market traders being “satirized” for their unscrupulous dealings in the marketplace: “the home of the shady deal” (2000.168–69).

more uncertainty than the bazaar economies of the twentieth century. In Indian bazaars, Fanselow considers currency the only commodity whose value is regarded as “perfectly certain” (“with the exception of counterfeits”) (1990.251). In Attic comedy, sometimes not even the currency of the transaction is as certain as one would think. For example, in Diphilus’s *Busybody* (frag. 67 K-A = Ath. 6.225b), a seller does not specify what type of currency he is asking for (οὐχὶ προσθεῖς ὀποδαπῶν). A buyer pays for his fish with more valuable Aeginetan coin. When there is change to be made, the seller returns it in the less trusted Attic coinage.¹⁹ In this way, the speaker explains, the seller benefits in the currency exchange over and above making a profit on the fish. The main concern of the passage is that the buyer is being swindled, and this worry is attributed to the “breed” (*genos*) of fish sellers, which plots against people (*epiboulos*) like wild beasts (*thêria*). The fact that the fish seller wears his hair long raises the buyer’s suspicion that he is a former runaway slave who is obscuring the brand on his forehead. By likening the seller to a scheming wild beast and runaway slave, the speaker repeats the sort of prejudice found against traders in modern bazaar markets (and his words should not, therefore, be taken as evidence of the low status of fish sellers). In this case, the bias again seems to be a function of extreme uncertainties in the fish market. In all these passages, the concern about economic information being unavailable or faulty becomes personified by tricky fish sellers.

Finally, bazaar-like conditions may be glimpsed in fifth-century comic treatments of the fish market, but are not as prominently addressed as in fourth-century comedy. First, it must be noted in passing that fifth-century comedy could recreate market transactions on stage (as in *Acharnians*); we have no evidence of such in fourth-century comedy.²⁰ From

19 It is clear from the first line of this fragment that the action takes place outside of Athens, but we can hardly take that as a sign that the situation was any different in Athens.

20 Dicaeopolis’ barter market staged by Aristophanes in the *Acharnians* (beginning at line 719) is the obvious example of a market scene enacted on stage. That particular market setting has relevance to the plot in a way unlikely in the fourth-century fragments. The long market scene in the *Acharnians* is fundamentally different from the speeches in fourth-century comedy that report transactions between a buyer (or slave agent, if Nesselrath is correct) and nameless sellers, who could not be important to the plot in other ways.

That said, the analysis that I offer might be used on sellers in Old Comedy and such scenes of buying and selling as we have in, for example, the *Acharnians* and *Peace*. A start has been made in this direction. Scholars have suggested ways in which the *Acharnians* engages economic issues. Most salient is Olson’s argument that, in part, because Dicaeopolis “resents his unhappy new status as an urban cash-consumer of sta-

fourth-century comedy, as we have begun to see, we tend to have reports of (unhappy) buyers.²¹ Fifth-century comedy also offers reports of buyers of fish. The account of a happy buyer in Aristophanes' *Knights* may best show how fifth-century comedy could represent bazaar-market conditions in a way different from fourth-century comedy.

In Aristophanes *Knights* 642–50, we have a report of conditions in the fish market favorable for buyers. Bazaar-market conditions are implicit in the Sausage-Seller's announcement of cheap small fry (*aphyae*) to an elated Council that resulted, he claims, in motions for civic honors for him. In the passage, the Sausage-Seller seems about to suggest a marketing technique by which the Councilors can procure small fry at a low price: "And I recommended to them, making it their state secret, that to be able to buy lots of sprats for a penny . . ." (647–49; trans. Henderson). But the Sausage-Seller clearly intends to have the Councilors on a string and to have them listen ever so closely for what purchasing technique will be involved, bargaining or otherwise. There is, in fact, no special technique required; the Sausage-Seller announces that the Councilors simply need "to buy every bowl in the market they can get their hands on" (650).

The Sausage-Seller's ploy suggests that information about how to purchase items is desperately needed, a sure indicator of bazaar conditions. In this regard, the fifth-century Athenian market in fish was probably no less a bazaar than the fourth-century market, but fourth-century comedy seems to have focused more sharply on the idiosyncrasies of information-gathering and communication in transactions in the fish market. I will turn to another contrast between Old Comedy and fourth-century comedy below.

ple goods," he creates his fantastical protest world with its own market (1991.200). This new market relies mainly on barter, on commodities other than money, as the means of exchange. See, especially, Olson 1991.202 and note 24, and also Parker 1991. But Olson's reading has been questioned on these very terms. Compton-Engle insists that the difference between a barter economy and a monetized economy is not important to the *Acharnians* because "buying," not the medium of exchange, is the problem that Dicaeopolis addresses (1999.369, note 31).

- 21 Cf. Wilkins 2000.169: "The market vendor is seen from the purchaser's point of view." Of course, Dicaeopolis' famous critique of the market in the prologue of *Acharnians* (33–36) is an example in Old Comedy of a negative view of a buyer towards the hawking of goods, but his critique is too generalized to be of interest here and is resolved in the plot.

OF GENERALS AND FISH SELLERS

The bazaar-like foibles of the fourth-century comic fish market come to the fore in two fragments, one from the comic poet Alexis and the other from Amphis. The speakers in these fragments compare encounters with generals to those with fish sellers. In both cases, the fish seller is dismissive. Because of this fact, scholars have generally understood that it is a comic commonplace that fish sellers were thought to be, like generals, haughty.²² But as we will see in both cases, the interactions between fish buyer and seller are more meaningful if we take the character of the fish seller as representative of the difficulties of bazaar search and bargaining techniques, and, furthermore, if we understand that the buyers' frustration ultimately arises from a feeling that the fish market is a place where information is lacking and consensus on price is hard to achieve. A fragment from Alexis' *Man with a Cataract* shows as much (frag. 16 K-A = Ath. 6.224f):

τοὺς μὲν στρατηγοὺς τὰς ὄφρῦς ἐπὰν ἴδω
 ἀνεσπακότας, δεινὸν μὲν ἡγοῦμαι ποεῖν,
 οὐ πάνυ τι θαυμάζω δὲ προτετιμημένους
 ὑπὸ τῆς πόλεως μεῖζόν τι τῶν ἄλλων φρονεῖν.
 τοὺς δ' ἰχθυοπώλας τοὺς κάκιστ' ἀπολουμένους
 ἐπὰν ἴδω κάτω βλέποντας, τὰς δ' ὄφρῦς
 ἔχοντας ἐπάνω τῆς κορυφῆς, ἀποπνίγομαι.
 ἐὰν δ' ἐρωτήσης "πόσου τοὺς κεστρέας
 πωλεῖς δύ' ὄντας," "δέκ' ὀβολῶν," φησίν. "βαρύ.
 ὀκτῶ λάβοις ἄν;" "εἵπερ ὠνεῖ τὸν ἔτερον."
 "ὦ τάν, λαβὲ καὶ μὴ παῖζε." "τουσδί· παράτρεχε."
 ταῦτ' οὐχὶ πικρότερ' ἐστὶν αὐτῆς τῆς χολῆς;²³

When I see the generals with haughty looks on their face
 [literally "with their eyebrows pulled up"], I think they

22 For the commonplace *Hochnäsigkeit* or *hauteur* of generals and fish sellers in comedy, see Nesselrath 1990.294 and Arnott 1996.99.

23 See Arnott 1996.98–102 for a discussion of the textual issues of this fragment. In this fragment of Alexis and the ones that follow below, I have taken some of Arnott's textual suggestions and abandoned others. For example, Arnott convincingly insists that the correct reading in line 11 is Bernhardt's *tousdi* and not Dobree's emendation *tosoudi*. I have altered the text to reflect this suggestion.

are acting terribly, though I'm not surprised that those paid high regard by the city think a bit more highly of themselves than others. But when I see those damned fish sellers avoiding my glance, with their eyebrows as high as they can get with disdain, I'm so angry I can't breathe. If you ask, "How much are you selling these two mullets for?" he says, "Ten obols." "That's steep! Would you take eight?" "If you buy the other." "Here, take them and stop kidding." "Take these? Get outta here!" Doesn't that leave a bad taste in your mouth?²⁴

First, we must see that the humor at the end of the passage works best if one thinks of it in the light of bazaar economies. The form of haggling played upon here is not only intensive, but also multidimensional. Geertz includes the manipulation of "quantity and/or quality . . . while the money price is held constant" in his definition of multidimensionality in bargaining practices (1978.81). The fish seller's counteroffer reflects a nervy adjustment in quantity. The buyer had offered eight obols instead of ten for two fish. The seller will accept eight obols, but for one of the fish, not both, thus raising the price of that fish from five obols to eight obols.²⁵ The fish seller bargains the buyer up, instead of the buyer bargaining the seller down. The buyer indignantly restates his offer, but the seller refuses to consider the offer or to counteroffer. Among other things, the humor of the scene derives from the fact that the fish seller has reversed the expected roles of buyer and seller in a haggling situation, part of the intensive search important to the bazaar economy. The fact that the buyer has made what he thinks a reasonable counteroffer, only to be rudely dismissed, serves as the comic motivation for the scene.

Beyond its comic inversion of the bargaining process, this passage compares the inability of the speaker to place a value on fish to the city's ability to place a value on generals. In this passage, there is an implicit link between the honors (*timai*) granted to generals by the polis and the inabil-

24 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. In my translations, I attempt to render the passage into contemporary American English and not simply translate the Greek words into English words. For this reason, my translations may seem rather impressionistic. Compare Gulick's translation (1937) of the last line in this passage: "Are these actions not bitterer than gall?"

25 See Arnott 1996 and Olson 2007.274.

ity of the buyer to participate in the setting of a price (*timê*) for the fish. The participle *protetimêmenous* (“those paid high regard,” l. 3) with its root *tim-*, which is also the root of the Greek word for “price” (*timê*), describes the generals’ value (in the form of honor) as determined by the city. The speaker’s feelings towards the generals are softened, and the attitude of the generals is more palatable, because the polis, of which he is a part (I do not think this speech makes sense unless the speaker is a citizen or, at least, speaks from the perspective that makes sense to a citizen), has ways to place a value (*timê*) on a general by, for example, voting honors (*timai*) for him.²⁶ In an even broader sense, the generals were evaluated as elected officials, as they were required to be scrutinized publically before (*dokimasia*) and after (*euthuna*) their terms.²⁷ Yet in the comic fish market, no such information finding by any buyer is possible. The fish sellers do not include the buyer in the process of gathering price information about the fish.

In a comic fragment from Alexis’ contemporary Amphis, the generals, sellers, and price negotiations in the fish market are once again linked in a way that points to a similar comic treatment of bazaar-market conditions. In Amphis’ *Vagabond* (frag. 30 K-A = Ath. 6. 224d-e), a character declares:

πρὸς τοὺς στρατηγοὺς ῥᾶόν ἐστιν μυρίαίς
μοίραις προσελθόντ’ ἀξιωθῆναι λόγου
λαβεῖν τ’ ἀπόκρισιν <ῶν> ἂν ἐπερωτᾷ τις ἢ
πρὸς τοὺς καταράτους ἰχθυοπώλας ἐν ἀγορᾷ.
οὗς ἂν ἐπερωτήσῃ τις † λαβὼν τι τῶν

26 Commenting on these characters, Arnott (1996.99) downplays the political identity of the generals. While his point is well taken that the generals in Athens were increasingly military figures in the fourth century, they still relied on the polis’ approbation for their prestige. See, especially, Ober 1991.119–21.

Furthermore, it is very likely that these generals would have had seats of honor in the theater itself. In Theophrastus’s *Characters*, the man who is *areskos* (“obsequious”) always tries to sit near the generals in the front row seats (5.21). See Diggle 2004.236 on this passage for ancient and modern references to the generals’ seating position. Diggle sees a contrast between Aristophanes’ time, when the generals would not necessarily have been given front row seats (as he thinks is evident from Aristophanes’ *Knights* 573–76), and Theophrastus’s time, when they would have been granted them by law. The fragments about generals we have from Alexis and Amphis (below) may suggest that, as prominent audience members, the generals would have been a particularly obvious target when it came to looking for a symbol of what the polis valued.

27 See, e.g., Hansen 1974 and 1991 for extensive discussions of generals as elected officials.

παρακειμένων, ἔκυπεν ὥσπερ Τήλεφος
 πρῶτον σιωπῇ (καὶ δικαίως τοῦτό γε·
 ἅπαντες ἀνδροφόνοι γάρ εἰσιν ἐνὶ λόγῳ),
 ὡσεὶ † προσέχων δ' † οὐδὲν οὐδ' ἀκηκοὼς
 ἔκρουσε πολύπουν τιν'· ὁ δ' ἐπρήσθη —
 — — — — — καὶ τότε οὐ λαλῶν ὅλα
 τὰ ῥήματ', ἀλλὰ συλλαβὴν ἀφελὼν “τάρων
 βολῶν γένοιτ' ἄν”. “ἢ δὲ κέστρα;” “κτὼ βολῶν.”
 τοιαῦτ' ἀκοῦσαι δεῖ τὸν ὁψωνοῦντά τι

It's a million times easier to go up to the generals, be given the time of day, and get an answer to what a guy's asking, than to go up to the goddamn fish sellers in the market. If someone asks them a question, the guy grabs some tool lying beside him²⁸ and, at first, stoops like Telephus, without saying a word (and that's about right, because, in a word, they're all murderers), and then as if he had heard nothing he starts to pound some octopus. The person asking turns red . . . the salesman [finally responds?] even then not speaking in whole words. No, he cuts off every other syllable: “Itta be fobles [i.e., four *obols*].” “What about the mullet?” “Gdobles [i.e., eight *obols*].” This is the kinda stuff you have to hear when you are buying a fish.

Commentators and translators tend to focus on the character's criticism either of the fish seller's haughtiness (like that of generals) or his street talk, but there is more to silence than haughtiness and more to the clipping of syllables than vulgarism, if it is indeed that.²⁹ The point of the

28 Or alternatively, “If someone picks up one of the fish lying around and asks a question.” The crux of the problem is that *labôn* alone does not quite make sense here. Kock suggested *analabôn* (pick up), which has its supporters (most recently, Olson 2007). Also there is the issue of whether *labôn* refers to the buyer or seller. See *PCG* 2.227–28 and Olson 2007.362–64 for apparatus and commentary.

29 Meineke (*FCG* 3.315, quoted in *PCG* ad loc.) first noted the “vulgarism.” It has become the consensus (cf. Olson 2007.362). Most of the “vulgar forms” are actually textual restorations supported by the meter and made by editors such as Schweighäuser. That slight problem aside, there is nothing in the passage to suggest that the fish seller is using street talk. For the textual problem, see Arnott 2000.

passage, from the start, is that fish sellers are particularly sparing of information to the point that when forced to talk, they speak as economically (pun intended) as possible. Underlying the humor here is not a concern about the fish sellers' haughtiness or the corruption of language, but the lack of economic information available in the market for fresh fish.

The beginning of this passage is of special interest because, as we have seen in the last passage, price information gathering in the marketplace is much worse than in the political sphere. The phrase in Amphis' play that I have translated into colloquial American English as "be given the time of day" is in Greek ἀχιωθῆναι λόγου, "to be deemed worthy of an account." The speaker analogizes buying fish with the attempt of an ordinary person to obtain information about the affairs of his city. Though difficult, the generals apparently do occasionally yield to requests for information. But in the case of fish sellers, the matter is much worse. The comedy of the passage is heightened if we realize that the speaker depicts the fish seller as viewing the buyer's attempts at purchasing fish as not "worth a *logos*," since he does not speak (*legein*) and then, when he does speak, does not even use complete words (*logoi*) but rather chopped up syllables to answer him. As in modern bazaar markets, information in the comic fish market is hard to acquire and incomplete when it is acquired.

A fragment from Antiphanes' *Timon* (frag. 204 K-A = Ath. 7.309d-e) features comic treatment of other types of bazaar bargaining practices and, again, personifies in fish sellers the lack of useful information in the market. In this fragment, a buyer says that while he was shopping extravagantly at other market stalls (only because he is doing so for a wedding, he reminds us), he asked a fish seller to throw in an additional goby (lines 4-8):³⁰

ἡμῖν δὲ τοῖς θνητοῖς ἐπριάμην κωβίους.
ὥς προσβαλεῖν δ' ἐκέλευσα τὸν τοιχωρύχον,
τὸν ἰχθυοπώλην, "προστίθιμι," φησί, "σοὶ
τὸν δῆμον αὐτῶν· εἰσὶ γὰρ Φαληρικοί."
ἄλλοι δ' ἐπώλουν, ὥς ἔοικ', Ὀτρυνικούς.

For us mortals, I bought some gobies. When I told the thief,
the fish seller that is, to throw in an extra (*prosbalein*),

30 "Gobies" are small fish that were bought in large quantities; see Thompson 1947.37 and Dalby 1996.72.

“Sure I will,” he said, “I’ll throw in their *dêmos*: they’re from Phaleron.” Thanks! Others would be selling me ones from Otryne, I’m sure.

The fish seller replies that he will “throw in their *dêmos*” a pun on δῆμος (“deme”) and δημός (“fat”) as Charles Gulick, Athenaeus’s first Loeb translator, rightly noted.³¹ The fish seller then tells the buyer that the gobies are from Phaleron. The buyer comments sarcastically to the audience that others were, of course, selling him gobies from Otryne. There appears to be a joke here insofar as Phaleron was on the water (and, thus, a source of fish) and Otryne apparently a city or inland deme, and, therefore, an impossible source.³² The glibness of the fish seller and his punning refusal to bargain on the buyer’s terms can be viewed fruitfully in light of bazaar economy practice and attitudes.

Both the bargaining for additional quantity and the pun on “throwing in their fat” are interesting in light of a bargaining technique for foodstuffs in Javanese markets called *tambahan* (“extras”) (Alexander and Alexander 1987.53). The buyer may bargain for an extra quantity of the same item when the “value of the commodity is low, or the selling unit [of currency] is small” (Alexander and Alexander 1987.53). When something expensive is purchased, other things may be bargained for, such as the addition of extra fat when meat is purchased (Alexander and Alexander 1987.53). The pun on fat/deme in the passage from Antiphanes seems to play on precisely these practices. The buyer engages in bargaining as buyers in the Javanese bazaars would if they were buying an inexpensive item (by asking for extra), but the seller treats the buyer, who was seen to be spending lavishly for a wedding, as if he, the seller, were a seller of expensive meat and offers “extra fat.”³³ But there is a further joke: the seller does not offer any fat (*dêmos*), but rather gives the source of the fish (their deme), Phaleron. The buyer’s sarcastic commentary (“I suppose others were selling ones from

31 3.391, note f. For a similar pun on *dêmos*, see Ar. *Vesp.* 39–41.

32 Much ink has been spilled on the location of Otryne, but Schaps (1982) is undoubtedly right in saying that there is a joke here and that the deme is one where fish would *not* be found. For other interpretations of this passage, see Schaps 1982.327–28. To translate the joke, Schaps equates Phaleron with Brooklyn’s Sheepshead Bay (a place where fishing vessels come in with their catch) and Otryne with Wall Street.

33 That beef fat was separated and weighed for sale in Athens is likely given the description in Ar. *Vesp.* 40.

Otryne!”) suggests that Phaleron is an expected source of gobies for the Athenian fish market and that the information given by the seller is, in fact, unwanted and unneeded.³⁴

Such contemptuous treatment of buyers by sellers of less expensive items occurs in fifth-century comedy, but is more closely linked to politics.³⁵ In Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, Bdelycleon speaks of how sellers of less expensive goods accuse buyers of more expensive goods of tyranny (488–99). A small-fry seller so accuses the purchaser of grouper (*orphôs*, a large fish related to the bass).³⁶ In turn, a vegetable seller accuses the buyer of small fry of tyranny for buying vegetables to go with his fish.³⁷ In the fourth-century parallel, the pun on *dêmos* (fat/neighborhood), though superficially related to the political structure of the city, has little to do with political inclination. The emphasis is on comic trickery related to bazaar practices (the pun on fat/deme) and, then, on the frustratingly useless additional information intentionally provided by the fish seller (“They’re from Phaleron!”). This passage quite strikingly ties together two “bazaar” problems: the difficulty of bargaining (getting price information) and of gathering useful information about the items one is buying.

If there is any doubt about the connection between the uncertainty in quality and price of *fresh* fish and negative feelings towards fish sellers, we need only regard the treatment of saltfish sellers in Attic comedy. Saltfish (*tarichos*) by its very nature is preserved, and, therefore, its quality cannot have been a great concern. In fact, we know that even saltfish that was starting to break down, undergoing the same process that produced the ancient fish sauce *garum*, was thought of as salvageable.³⁸ Athenaeus records a proverb quoted by Clearchus of Soli: “Rotten (*sapros*) saltfish likes marjoram” (3.116e; trans. Olson). Furthermore, in Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, getting saltfish seems fairly easy, hence Bdelycleon’s frustrated pronouncement that the word tyranny, once never heard, is “nowadays a much better deal (*axiôtera*) than saltfish” (491), meaning something like the expression

34 See Jones 1999.110–11, note 88 for mentions of Phalerian small fry in comedy (e.g., Ar. *Ach.* 901, *Av.* 76).

35 See Davidson 1993.53–54, with bibliography.

36 Dalby 2003 s.v. “Grouper,” with bibliography.

37 See Davidson 1993.59 and Sommerstein 1983 ad loc. for comments on the vegetable seller.

38 For the process, for which there is more Roman evidence, see Curtis 1991 and Thurmond 2006.

“a dime a dozen.” We must not imagine, however, that the availability and cheapness of saltfish precluded the gathering of price information about it. After all, in a bazaar-economy move, Theophrastus’s *agroikos* (hillbilly) on his way into town asks a random person the price of hides and saltfish (4.15).

Though it was still desirable to gather information about the price of saltfish, the saltfish market must not have been subject to quite the same frustrating and mysterious conditions in terms of price and quality as the fresh-fish market. Indeed, the fourth-century comic poet Nicostratus, in his *Antyllus* (frag. 5 K-A = Ath. 3.119e–f), offers an absolutely glowing account of a transaction with a saltfish dealer (lines 3–8):

Earth and gods almighty, I bought an enormous scaled
filet (*tilton megiston*), a good deal at a drachma (*axion
drachmês*), for two obols from a downright gentlemanly
(*panu kalou te kagathou*) saltfish seller (*tarichopôlou*). We
couldn’t eat it all if we tried over the course of three days,
no, not even twelve. That’s how oversized it was!

The tone of this passage differs significantly from the negative treatment that fresh-fish sellers receive. The saltfish seller is rated a gentleman rather than a runaway slave, thief, or similar abusive label. Though the buyer is glad he paid two obols, he insists that the fish could well have gone for a drachma (six obols), three times as much as he paid. This seeming aside tells us a great deal. In the saltfish market, the buyer is able to determine what he thinks would be a good deal (*axios*). Pricing information and pricing mechanisms, therefore, are represented as less obscure than they are in the fresh-fish market. Though pricing and information gathering techniques would have been similar, the market for saltfish is represented as much less “bazaar” in terms of lack of information on price and quality and, consequently, saltfish sellers are not targeted as are their fresh-fish counterparts.

REGULATION

In the preceding passages, price and quality information in the fresh-fish market are quite out of the hands of buyers, so it is fitting that comedy attempts to solve these problems through something that is in its control, mock legislation. For example, Aristonicus’s comic legislative act

in Alexis' *Melting Pot* (frag. 130 K-A, ll. 3–10 = Ath. 6.226a–b) orders fish sellers to establish one price and not lower it:³⁹

τῶν ἰχθυοπωλῶν ὅστις ἂν πωλῶν τι
 ἰχθὺν ὑποτιμήσας ἀποδῶτ' ἐλάττονος
 ἧς εἶπε τιμῆς, εἰς τὸ δεσμωτήριον
 εὐθὺς ἀπάγεσθαι τοῦτον, ἵνα δεδουκότες
 τῆς ἀξίας † ἀγαπῶσιν † ἢ τῆς ἐσπέρας
 σαπρὸς ἅπαντας ἀποφέρωσιν οἴκαδε.
 κἀνταῦθα καὶ γραῦς καὶ γέρον καὶ παιδίον
 πεμφθεὶς ἅπαντες ἀγοράσουσι κατὰ τρόπον.

If a fish seller sets a price he's asking for a fish and then sells it for less than the price he said, immediately throw him in jail, so that in fear (they sell them?) for the right price or bring them all back home at night rotten. Then the old lady, the old man, and the young slave who has been sent will all shop the way they ought to.

In modern bazaar economies, traders do not recognize the idea of a “right price.”⁴⁰ Indeed, this legislation attempts to correct such attitudes and force fish sellers to recognize that there *is* a “right price.”⁴¹ The humor of the passage is predicated on the buyer's belief that a “right price” exists,

39 I follow the suggestions in Arnott's (1996.379–80) textual commentary on these lines, which is a true tour de force worth reading in its own right.

40 The concept of a “just price” or “proper price” is foreign to traders in Javanese markets (Alexander and Alexander 1991.499).

41 Arnott 1996.377 and Davidson 1997.190 believe this law smacks of genuineness. Remark-
 ing on these sorts of “laws,” Davidson also points out that due caution is needed since
 “imaginary laws . . . are a favourite theme of comedy,” but that “on the other hand, there
 was nothing to stop the people of Athens passing decrees on anything they felt strongly
 about” (1997.344, note 9). Both Davidson and Arnott notice a similarity between this pas-
 sage and the famous “price fixing” passage in Plato's *Laws* (11.917b–c).

To these examples, Stanley (1979.17) would have us add Aristotle's sentiment
 in *NE* 1133b14–15: διὸ δεῖ πάντα τετιμηῆσθαι· οὕτω γὰρ αἰεὶ ἔσται ἀλλαγὴ, εἰ δὲ τοῦτο,
 κοινωνία, “Therefore everything ought to have a completely fixed value [or, ‘ought to be
 priced in money’]; thus exchange will always be possible, and if this is the case, then
 association between individuals will be possible.” It is not clear, however, that this enig-
 matic passage has to do with price fixing at all (see Finley 1970.11 n. 35, who translates
tetimēsthai as “to be expressed in money”) or as a way of ensuring the “right price,” rather
 than a way of thinking about polis society (cf. Danzig 2000.424).

that fish sellers know this price, and that their willingness to sell at varying prices is a sign of their deceitfulness. To a buyer, this “right price” is simply “a cheap price, a good deal,”⁴² a standard Attic meaning of *axios* when it refers to price.⁴³

Aristonicus’s legislation addresses a system that resembles the bazaar, where prices for similar goods are multiform, that is, different for different people.⁴⁴ Without clear prices, an Athenian would perceive that one person paid more than another and might always feel as though he paid too much or more than the “right price,” namely, a lower price than he paid.⁴⁵ Aristonicus’s legislation forces the fish sellers to try to sell the fish at their initial high price and then, when that is too high, to take the loss. The fish sellers are forbidden by the legislation to sell for less than their originally named price, so their transactions are likely to fail. Their originally named price would be at the high end of the range in which they wished to sell their fish, and neither they nor their customers would expect this initial price to be the price agreed on by the buyer. This price would be too high at the beginning of the day when the fish were fresh. As the day wore on, the quality of their fish would decrease as dramatically as their odds of selling them at that high price. The legislation seems to suggest that the fish sellers will eventually capitulate and start selling their fish at that chimerical “right price.”

Beyond providing the assurance of a fixed price, the legislation would have a punitive aspect that would grant buyers a moral victory. If fish sellers fail to offer their fish at the “right price,” they will be left at the end of each day with unsold, rotten fish. The legislation thus revisits on the fish

42 In contrast, Arnott asserts that this passage largely draws on exaggeration and *para prosdokian* for its comic effect (1996.377). He finds it difficult to justify the humor of legislation that would preserve already high fish prices (due to a presumed “fish shortage”). The legislation actually seeks to do the opposite, albeit in a roundabout way.

43 E.g., Theophrastus’s *Characters* 18, where the *adoleschos* (“blabbermouth”) talks about “how cheap (*axioi*) wheat has been in the market.”

44 Rothbard’s classic (and only) example of multiform pricing is the sale of goods in Middle Eastern bazaars at varying price levels to tourists who neither have any idea about market prices nor wish to resell their goods (1962.648). Rothbard, however, did not realize that market insiders also were subject to multiform pricing.

45 Davidson explains price fixing as a response to supply issues: “With prices fluctuating with every catch, it would have been difficult to fix prices too rigidly. A ban on haggling is one way round it” (1997.190). But this comic legislation does not seem to address supply issues. Athenians, for example, did try to control the fluctuating prices of grain, and not by banning haggling. More on the grain market below.

sellers the expectations of the fish buyers in bazaar-like conditions. In the minds of buyers, lack of quality information and difficult pricing mechanisms are likely to send a buyer home with rotten fish and no money. Now the tables are turned; the legislation sends the fish sellers home with the same. There is an additional comic touch here for us readers: with their laws, the comic poets express a desire to end the very market conditions that make their other comic fish market scenarios work so well.⁴⁶

If we can believe *Athēnaïōn Politeia* 51.1, the Athenians did at least try to regulate their markets outside of comedy. That document describes the function of the *agoranomoi* as inspectors of the quality of goods for sale.⁴⁷ From the comic fragments we have seen, one might suppose that the *agoranomoi* would have been used in comedy to help solve the problem of quality, but they do not appear in that role. A speaker in the *Deipnosophistae* mentions that the comic poet Sophilus suggested in his *Androcles* that there was a need for *opsonomoi* (“fish-market inspectors,” Ath. 6.228b = test. 2 K-A).⁴⁸ We may take this call for *opsonomoi* as a sign that the fish market was a place under regulated, at least in some way, by the *agoranomoi*.

Given the propensity, though, for comic characters to clamor for *agoranomoi* to remove banned persons from the market⁴⁹ or to stop persons from buying everything,⁵⁰ Sophilus’s *opsonomoi* might have been intended to stop crazed buyers from snatching up all the fish in the market.⁵¹ The speaker in the *Deipnosophistae* (if he, in fact, was familiar with Sophilus’s text) hints that this interpretation might be correct, since he likens Sophilus’s

46 Compare Fanselow’s idea that the bazaar market only exists when “scrupulousness is not rewarded and unscrupulousness not punished” (1990.262).

47 τούτοις [sc. *agoranomoi*] δὲ ὑπὸ τῶν νόμων προστέτακται τῶν ὀνίων ἐπιμελεῖσθαι πάντων, ὅπως καθαρὰ καὶ ἀκίβδηλα πωλήσεται (“To these [*agoranomoi*] the laws assign the inspection of all goods on sale to make sure that they are sold pure and unadulterated”). No mention is made of price fixing by *agoranomoi*. An inscription from the Piraeus from 320/19 B.C. (*IG* II² 380) puts the *agoranomoi* in charge of making sure the agora and the avenues are clean and level for festival processions, and also that people do not dump their chamber pots in the streets.

Another *agoranomic* inscription published by Steinhauer (1994) has been interpreted as a price fixing decree (Bresson 2000 defends this view). The inscription, however, is probably late (1 B.C. at the earliest) and probably not to be interpreted as aimed at fixing prices. Descat (1997), for one, argues the list was published for tax purposes.

48 The passage is not quoted *in extenso*.

49 E.g., Dicaeopolis’ call for them to throw out informers, Ar. *Ach.* 824, and his threat to have them deal with Lamachus (968).

50 As in Alexis’ *Phaedo* or *Phaedrias* (frag. 249 K-A = Ath. 8.340b) discussed below.

51 Not, as Gulick 1937 suggests, “to fix prices.”

law to a scene in Diphilus's *The Merchant* where a Corinthian speaks about how the Corinthians are authorized by law to watch people who spend extravagantly (frag. 31 K-A = Ath. 6.227e–28b). If the person has no means to support his spending, he is executed. In the end, the Corinthian accuses his interlocutor of spending too much, preventing other buyers from getting what they want, and driving up wine prices to boot.

A similar use of *agoranomoi* occurs in Alexis' *Phaedo* or *Phaedrias* (frag. 249 K-A = Ath. 8.340b), where a speaker asks someone to do the duty of an *agoranomos* and stop Callimedon from buying everything in the fish market. This concern about the inability to access goods has nothing to do with the quality of goods, and so comic *agoranomoi* seem neither to perform their known tasks nor to relate in any way to concerns about the price or quality of products. Despite the fact that these concerns were present in comedy, comic authors do not seem to have used agoronomic figures to address them.⁵² Rather, comic poets count on the lack of price and quality control as a catalyst for their humor.

In contrast to the unregulated fish market, Athens rather closely scrutinized grain sellers. Not only do we read of price fixing and “antitrust” measures aimed at the grain market, but also of special officials who were put in charge of keeping close tabs on the quality and price of the grain supply, such as the *sitophylakes*, *emporieu epimeletai*, and the ten elected grain officials (who have no special title) of the Athenian grain tax law of 374/3 B.C.⁵³ The Athenian law (Agora I 7557, published with thorough commentary and analysis by Stroud 1998) offers particularly interesting evidence for quality and price control. The law regulates in great detail the delivery to the Athenian people of the grain resulting from the Athenians' tax on the islands of Lemnos, Imbros, and Scyros. In the second half of the law, the Athenians are directed to elect ten officials who will ensure that the grain is weighed at a particular dry weight and the barley kept free of darnel (*aira*) (that toxic weed Theophrastus thought of as a degeneration of wheat and barley and that he noticed caused headaches, *H.P.* 8.8.3) (ll.

52 It is telling that Davidson (1997.188–89) must resort to Apuleius's *Golden Ass* to find evidence for *agoranomoi* as watchdogs defending buyers faced with unscrupulous fish sellers.

53 For details about antitrust measures, see Lysias *Against the Grain Dealers* with Figueira 1986. For *sitophylakes* and *emporieu epimeletai*, see *Ath. Pol.* 51.3–4. For a summary of regulatory measures in the Athenian grain market, see Garnsey 1988.139–42. See Stroud 1998 for the grain tax law of 374/3 B.C.

21–26). Furthermore, the ten elected officials are ordered to sell the grain at the price the Assembly sets (“let the *dēmos* set the price of the wheat and barley at which those elected are obliged to sell,” ὁ δὲ δῆμος ταξάτω τὴν τ[ι]μὴν τῶν πυρῶν καὶ τῶν κριθῶν ὅπόσου χ[ρ]ὴ πωλῆν τοὺς αἰρεθέντας· ll. 44–46). The point of regulating the grain market was to provide good quality staple grain to the general populace at a reasonable markup. Little care, however, seems to have been taken to reassure the fish-buying populace that market conditions were somewhat in the control of the people. As a result, the bazaar-like conditions we see treated in comedy were guaranteed to remain in place in classical Athens.

In all, the fish market described in fourth-century comedy seems to be similar to those in modern bazaar economies. Although we need to be cautious about reconstructing the actual conditions in the fish market from jokes about it, it is clear that the expectations of the audience would have been very similar to those of buyers in bazaar economies. The audience of fourth-century comedy would have been aware of a lack of quality and price information in the fresh-fish market. As in bazaar economies of the twentieth century, sellers bore the brunt of the criticism about these conditions, not because they were, in fact, dishonest, but rather because bazaar-market sellers are *perceived* to embody the trickiness of gathering information on price and quality in the marketplace. In light of that fact, the comic fish market should be considered not only, as scholars have insisted, a place where the desires of the Athenians were on display to all, but also where both information and communication were in short supply.

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