

NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

A JOKE IN OLD COMEDY: ARISTOPHANES FRAGMENT 607 *PCG*

In his discussion of the vocabulary of metalworking Pollux says that it was the custom of blacksmiths to hang or apply to the fronts of their furnaces ridiculous objects (γελοῖα) to ward off envy (φθόνος) and that these objects are called βασκάνια as Aristophanes says (7.108). Although Pollux does not spell the matter out, he is implicitly, in citing Aristophanes as his authority, making the point that the correct Attic form for such objects is βασκάνια and not προ- or προσβασκάνια, the form used by those ignorant of the niceties of Attic usage.¹ The best part of two lines of Aristophanes follows to illustrate the correct usage (frag. 607 *PCG*):

πλὴν εἴ τις πρίαιτο δεόμενος
βασκάνιον ἐπικάμινον ἀνδρὸς χαλκῆως.

The full sentence will have been a less-vivid-future conditional, the intent of which must have been that no one would want to purchase such-and-such an object or so-and-so, unless they wished to purchase an apotropaic device for a blacksmith's furnace.² We can recover a little more of what the joke will have been from an incident in the *Life of Aesop*, while a plaque painted in Corinth in the sixth century B.C. showing a potter's kiln may help illuminate the visual aspect of the joke.

The *Life of Aesop* in the form that we have it belongs to the world of the Roman Empire and perhaps the High Empire rather than the first century A.D., the date to which the current *communis opinio* would assign it.³ Elements in it do go back at least to the fifth century B.C.⁴ It exists in three basic recensions.⁵ In it, Aesop is purchased

I am grateful to Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones for looking at an earlier version of this note.

1. The best treatment of the ancient notices on βασκάνια in Pollux and Phrynichus (*Praep. soph.* p. 53.6–10 Borries; *Ecl.* 60 Fischer) and of the reference in Plutarch (*Quaest. conviv.* 681f.) to προσβασκάνια is still Otto Jahn, *Über den Aberglauben des bösen Blicks bei den Alten*, *Berichte der kgl. sächs. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig Phil.-Hist. Cl.* 7 (1855), 66–68. Although LSJ⁹ only gives the form προσβασκάνιον, προσβασκάνιον is also found. Recension G of *Vit. Aesop.* 16 has it as does Phryn. *Ecl.* no. 60 Fischer and *Praep. soph.* p. 53.6–7 Borries, where it has been emended to προσβασκάνιον. It may well be that the form with προσ- should be read at Plut. *Quaest. conviv.* 681f. On all of this, see now M. W. Dickie, “Βασκάνια, προσβασκάνια and προσβασκάνια,” *Glotta* 71 (1993): 174–77.

2. πλὴν εἴ τις is also found at Ar. Av. 601.

3. So B. E. Perry, *Studies in the Text History of the Life and Fables of Aesop* (Haverford, 1936), 24–26; idem, ed., *Aesopica*, vol. 1 (Urbana, 1961), p. 5 and n. 16; Antonio La Penna, “Il Romanzo di Esopo,” *Athenaeum* 40 (1962): 270–73.

4. See Heinrich Zeitz, “Der Aesoproman und seine Geschichte: Eine Untersuchung im Anschluss an die neugefundenen Papyri,” *Aegyptus* 14 (1936): 225–56; La Penna, “Romanzo di Esopo,” 273–84; F. R. Adrados, “The Life of Aesop,” *QUCC* 1 (1979): 105–12.

5. The three recensions are: G, a manuscript of the tenth or eleventh century from a Basilian monastery in Grottaferrata near Frascati, now in the Pierpoint Morgan Library in New York, edited by B. E. Perry; W, named after the editor of a manuscript of this recension, Westermann; and the most recent, that of Maximus Planudes. On the identification of G, see Perry, *Studies*, viii–ix; idem, *Aesopica*, 1: xiv–xvi.

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by a slave-dealer, who brings his new acquisition back to his establishment and sends him into his *triclinium* to greet his fellow-slaves, who are all extraordinarily good-looking. They are astonished that their master should have purchased such a very ugly creature and can only surmise that he has been bought as a *προσβασκάνιον* for the premises (16). In one version of the *Life*, G, the response of the slaves to Aesop is made into a discussion in which parts are assigned to different slaves:

οἱ δὲ δοῦλοι πρὸς ἑαυτοῦς· νῆ τὴν Νέμεσιν τί ἐγένετο τῷ δεσπότη τοιοῦτον κακοπινὲς σῶμα ἀγοράσαι· ἄλλος· οἶδας γὰρ διὰ τί αὐτὸν ἡγόρασεν· ἄλλος· πρὸς τί· ἵνα αὐτὸν προσβασκανον⁶ τοῦ σωματεμπορίου ποιήσῃ.

The slaves said to themselves: "By Nemesis, what has made our master purchase such a filthy creature?" One of them then said: "Don't you know why he has bought him?" When he was asked why, he replied: "So that he might employ him as an apotropaeum for the slave-shop."

In another version, W, the slaves are represented as speaking and thinking in unison:

τί γέγονε τῷ δεσπότη, ὅτι τοιοῦτον κακοπινὲς ἡγόρακε σωματίον· πλὴν πρὸς βασκανίαν τοῦ σωματεμπορίου αὐτὸν ὠνήσατο.

What has become of our master that he has purchased such a filthy creature? It can only be that he has bought him to protect the slave-shop from envious fascination.⁷

We have, accordingly, in the *Life of Aesop* a joke about an ugly slave whom no one would wish to purchase, did he not want a *βασκάνιον* to protect the premises against the Evil Eye of Envy. It is almost certainly the same joke or crack that Pollux quotes from Aristophanes. The form in which the joke is told in W even has a certain verbal resemblance to the form it takes in Aristophanes: πλὴν πρὸς βασκανίαν . . . ὠνήσατο (W) = πλὴν εἴ τις πρίατο . . . βασκάνιον (Ar.). We may, accordingly, surmise that the joke in Aristophanes was about a person and one who had some of the physical characteristics regularly attributed to Aesop; that is, a bald-headed dwarf with a hunched back, a pot-belly, and a pigeon-chest. It is presumably also about a slave, otherwise it is difficult, although not impossible, to make sense of the reference to purchasing. Who the speaker in Aristophanes is must remain unclear. It is possible that it is a slave joking with his fellow-slaves about a new slave purchased by his master. This seems to be a stock situation in some literary forms.⁸ The context, however, of the joke in Aristophanes may be quite a different one. That the slave purchased may like the Paphlagonian slave in *Equites* represent some well-known public figure is a possibility.⁹

6. Perry (*Aesopica*) in his *apparatus criticus* says he would prefer to read *προσβασκάνιον*.

7. Perry's assumption (*Studies*, 11–24) that W is a later syncopated and simplified version of G makes no allowance for the possibility that the *Life of Aesop* is like the *Lapidaries* and the *Cyranides* in the happy phrase of Halleux a "texte vivant" (Robert Halleux and Jacques Schamp, *Les lapidaires grecs* [Paris, 1985], xvi). On this phenomenon, see now David Bain, "Marcianus Graecus 512 (678) and the Text of the *Cyranides*: Some Preliminary Observations," *RIFC* 121 (1993): 431–32.

8. For slaves or underlings joking about their master's purchase of a new slave, cf. the maidservant of the wife of the Samian philosopher Xanthos, who, when she sees Aesop asks him whether he has a tail (*Vit. Aesop.* 30) and the mendicant-priests of the Syrian goddess, who, when their leader brings back the donkey he has purchased, who is Lucius transformed, and informs them that he has purchased a beautiful slave, suggest that he has found a bride for himself (*Luc. Asin.* 36; *Apul. Met.* 8.26). The common pattern was recognized by J. J. Winkler, *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' "Golden Ass"* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985), 284–85, who surmised that it belonged to the folktale.

9. I am indebted to a reader for this attractive idea.

Both the joke in Aristophanes and that in the *Life of Aesop* depend on their audience's knowing that people protected their premises or the equipment that they used against the Evil Eye of Envy by suspending figurines or masks either at the entrance or, if they were craftsmen who used ovens or furnaces, by attaching the figurine or mask to the oven. Phrynichus, defining a βασκάνιον, says that it is a man-like creation that departs in some small measure from human nature (ἀνθρωποειδὲς κατασκευασμα, βραχὺ παρηλλαγμένον τὴν ἀνθρωπείαν φύσιν), which craftsmen hang before their places of work to protect the products of their work from fascination by the Evil Eye (*Praep. soph.* p. 53.6–10 Borries). The objects are, in other words, either figurines of human beings or representations of some part of the human body with some feature or features so pronounced that the object takes on a grotesque or ridiculous appearance.¹⁰ Many such figurines and masks representing the human figure or face in a grotesquely misshapen form are known.¹¹

In later times these grotesque creations were also realized in mosaic. Such mosaics were strategically placed at the entrance to the house. One, as it happens, occurs in the so-called House of the Evil Eye at Antioch-on-the-Orontes. It shows a hunchbacked ithyphallic dwarf holding two forked sticks; he moves to the right but his head is turned to face the viewer; above it is written: καὶ σύ.¹² Its function as an apotropaic device against βασκάνια cannot be in doubt. The late Doro Levi, who published the mosaic, saw the relevance to the mosaic of the anecdote in the *Life of Aesop* about the hunchbacked Aesop being only fit to be a βασκάνιον.¹³

The character in Aristophanes at whom the joke is directed will in all likelihood have been ugly and perhaps a slave. There may also have been a further aspect to the joke that rested on the phallus worn by the actor at whom the jest was aimed.¹⁴ To judge from vase-paintings and from Aristophanes *Nubes* 537–39 the phallus worn by characters playing male rôles was preternaturally large, not necessarily visible, and certainly not necessarily rigid.¹⁵ The visibility, size, and condition of the phallus will have varied with the rôle played. If the actor referred to in the fragment of Aristophanes was wearing a particularly large and prominent phallus, his appearance will have reminded the audience even more forcefully of those figurines of grotesques endowed with an especially large member that were used by craftsmen to ward off the Evil Eye of Envy.

That priapic figurines and figurines with preternaturally large phalluses were widely used in later antiquity to ward off envious and spiteful forces is not in doubt.¹⁶ That such figurines were called βασκάνια or προ- or προσβασκάνια emerges from the pseudepigraphic *Epistle of Jeremy*, currently dated to the end of the first century A.D. Its author, denouncing the inefficacy of images, compares wooden statues of the

10. C. A. Lobeck, *Aglaophamus*, vol. 2 (Regensburg, 1829), 971, suggested that they were the clay figurines of Hephaestus mentioned by sch. in Ar. Av. 436. Jahn, *Über den Aberglauben*, p. 67, n. 152, corrects this.

11. The relevance of these figurines to the story in the *Life of Aesop* was recognized long ago by Jahn, *Über den Aberglauben*, 67.

12. Doro Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Princeton, 1947), pl. IV.a.

13. "The Evil Eye and the Lucky Hunchback," in *Antioch-on-the-Orontes III* (Princeton, 1941), 229.

14. On male characters in Old Comedy wearing a phallus, see A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*² (Oxford, 1968), 220–22; K. J. Dover, *Aristophanes, "Clouds"* (Oxford, 1968), 168; Laura M. Stone, *Costume in Aristophanic Comedy* (New York, 1981), 72–101; Oliver Taplin, *Comic Angels and Other Approaches to Greek Drama through Vase-Painting* (Oxford, 1993), 102–3.

15. See esp. Taplin, *Comic Angels*, 102–3.

16. For a discussion of the apotropaic use of the phallus, see K. W. Slane and M. W. Dickie, "A Knidian Phallic Vase from Corinth," *Hesperia* 62 (1993): 486–94.

gods, covered in gold or silver, to a προβασκάνιον in a vegetable-patch: the latter is like a branch in a garden on which every bird perches, while the statues are like a corpse cast away in darkness (69–70).¹⁷ The uselessness of the προβασκάνιον lies then in its not scaring birds away and in their perching on it, probably on its phallus, as if it were a mere branch. The writer would seem to be referring to the *saturica signa* that Pliny the Elder says were dedicated in the forum and in gardens as a protection against envious fascination (*HN* 19.50).¹⁸ By *saturica signa* Pliny presumably means ithyphallic statues of Priapus and other similar deities. That they were notoriously unsuccessful in scaring off birds we know from Horace, who has a statue of Priapus pray that he may not be stained by bird-droppings (*Sat.* 1.8.37–38).¹⁹

The surmise that the Aristophanic joke is directed at an actor wearing a phallus is based on the assumption that the phallus was from an early date the most striking feature of many βασκάνια. It is proper to emphasize that this is very much a matter of conjecture. We are singularly badly informed about apotropaic devices in general and phallic apotropaic devices in particular in Greece proper, especially in the period 600–200 B.C. There are nonetheless just enough examples of phalluses employed in what can only be an apotropaic context to leave little room for doubt that it was so used in Greece from the sixth century B.C. onwards. There is from Itanos in Crete from the sixth century a phallus inscribed on the city-wall with an inscription beside it expressing a wish for the town's well-being,²⁰ while on a bastion of the city-wall of Samos there are blocks, set some distance apart, but on the same course of stones, carrying reliefs respectively of a Gorgon-head mask and a phallus.²¹ The city-wall of Samos is to be dated to around 310 B.C.

The form that a βασκάνιον to protect a workshop would have taken in Aristophanes' day in Athens is also necessarily a matter of conjecture. There is, however, one piece of evidence that already in the sixth century ithyphallic figurines were to be seen in the workshops of craftsmen. A pinax of that time, one of many dedicated to Poseidon and Amphitrite at a shrine on the slopes of the hill called Pentaskouphi some distance to the west of the Potters' Quarter of Corinth, shows in profile a small, bearded, steatopygous male figure holding in both hands an exaggeratedly large phallus that bends round upwards, as it were, to face him. He stands above the fire-door of a kiln, perched on top of which is a Little Owl (*Athena Noctua*), its body in profile and its head turned towards the viewer to stare at him with its great eyes.²² We may surmise that the figure represents, perhaps in a somewhat idealized form, the figurines that potters used to protect their kilns against fascination by envious forces.²³ Its iconography owes something to that of Corinthian padded dancers, although the exaggerated phallus is a departure from that tradition. While we

17. ὥσπερ γὰρ ἐν σικυηράτῳ προβασκάνιον οὐδὲν φυλάσσειν, οὕτως οἱ θεοὶ αὐτῶν εἰσὶν ξύλινοι καὶ περικύρσοι καὶ περιάργυροι. τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον καὶ τῇ ἐν κήῳ ῥάμνῳ, ἐφ' ἧς πᾶν ὄρνειον ἐπικάθηται, ὥσαυτως δὲ καὶ νεκρῷ ἐρριμμένῳ ἐν σκότει ἀφωμοιώνται οἱ θεοὶ αὐτῶν ξύλινοι καὶ περικύρσοι καὶ περιάργυροι.

18. "hortoque et foro tantum contra invidentium effascinationes dicari videmus in remedio saturica signa."

19. "mentior at siquid, merdis caput inquinare albis / corvorum."

20. Ferdinand Dummler, "Inschrift aus Itanos," *Ath. Mitt.* 16 (1891): 127–29.

21. H. J. Kienast, *Die Stadtmauer von Samos: Samos X* (Bonn, 1978), 26 with pl. 22.2.3. I am indebted to Dr. Kienast for drawing my attention to the wall.

22. Berlin, Staatliche Museen der preussischen Kulturbesitz F683/757/829/822. Illustrated in: *Antike Denkmäler*, vol. 2, pl. 39, no. 12; Gerhard Zimmer, *Antike Werkstattbilder, Bilderheft der Staatlichen Museen preussischer Kulturbesitz* 42 (Berlin, 1982), 31, Abb. 14.

23. So H. D. Jocelyn, "A Greek Indecency and its Students: ΛΑΙΚΑΖΕΙΝ," *PCPS* 26 (1980): 16.

should be careful not to assume that what happened in Corinth also occurred in Athens, the pinax is an indication that such ithyphallic figurines were used by craftsmen in the Greek world long before Aristophanes' day.

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APPROPRIATION AND REVERSAL AS A BASIS FOR ORATORICAL PROOF

The central theme of Cicero's *Pro Roscio Amerino* is the opposition between urban and rural. The defendant is purportedly a rustic in the best Roman tradition, and so a morally upright man. The prosecution, he claims, is made up of urban cut-throats and wastrels, and they, not the defendant, were responsible for the murder of Roscius' father (e.g., *Rosc. Am.* 39, 88, 94, 152). This opposition between urban and rural had been invoked by the prosecution, apparently in an attempt to portray Roscius as a wild half-man cut off from civilization (*Rosc. Am.* 74 "hunc hominem ferum atque agrestem fuisse, numquam cum homine quoquam conlocutum esse"; cf. §§39, 94). This was a traditional stereotype,¹ but Cicero, accepting the claim that Roscius is a rustic, uses a different traditional stereotype—the earnest and honorable young farmer of New Comedy.² On this understanding of his character, Roscius must be innocent.

Such appropriation and reversal of the opponent's argument is a common tactic in Cicero's orations. Yet it is not discussed in his rhetorical works and only glanced at in Quintilian's handbook.³ This gap between theory and practice can be explained by the interaction of this strategy with existing rhetorical categories. The strategy falls between these categories and is lost. Nonetheless, even without explicit precepts, the strategy of appropriation is encouraged by the basic structure of rhetorical invention: both sides draw arguments from a relatively small pool (a process I will term "schematization"), and so are forced into this kind of direct confrontation. Nor is the use of this strategy motivated only by formal factors internal to rhetorical theory. There are also practical considerations relating to the creation and verification of knowledge in the courtroom setting. Formal and epistemological considerations converge to make appropriation an attractive strategy in Roman oratory.

Cicero uses appropriation not once, but twice in *Pro Roscio*. (Here, as in what follows, I use "appropriation" as shorthand for "appropriation and reversal.") In addition to the argument about rustic character, Cicero also appropriates a subsidiary prosecution argument about motive. The prosecution had argued that Roscius' father had relegated him to the family's country estates to show disfavor, while retaining his other son with him in Rome (*Rosc. Am.* 42),⁴ so Roscius had his father killed to avoid the risk of being disinherited (*Rosc. Am.* 53). Cicero counters that to be put in charge

1. See Ann Vasaly, *Representations: Images of the World in Ciceronian Oratory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993), 158–60. Throughout I cite Vasaly's book rather than her similar, but somewhat briefer treatment in "The Masks of Rhetoric: Cicero's *Pro Roscio Amerino*," *Rhetorica* 2 (1985): 1–20.

2. See Vasaly, *Representations*, 160–61 and especially *Rosc. Am.* 46–47.

3. The tactic is used in *De Oratore* 1.55 (cf. 1.43), but without comment there or elsewhere. Nor is it systematically discussed in the modern literature; cf. n. 19 below.

4. Of course none of this assumes that Cicero gives a "fair" presentation of the other side's views, but he will have had to base his appropriation on what they said. (I will make the sense of "base on" more specific