COMEDY AND CONFUSION IN CALLIAS' *LETTER TRAGEDY*

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A MONG THE MANY RICHES PRESERVED in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophis-tae* are the fragments of a curious play from fifth-century Athens, entitled alternately the *Letter Tragedy* (Γραμματικὴ τραγῳδία) or *Letter Show* (Γραμματικὴ θεωρία), and attributed to a poet named Callias. According to Athenaeus, the play featured an unusual chorus of women who represented the letters of the Greek alphabet, and at one point danced and sang out a humorous lesson in elementary syllabic formation. Athenaeus also claimed that the strophic structure of this song directly influenced the composition of Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles' *Oedipus,* and from this grandiosely concluded that "all the other" tragic poets adopted the antistrophic choral form from Callias. The absurdity of this claim, amusing though it is, casts great suspicion on Athenaeus' testimony about this play, and introduces a host of related questions, including the play's authorship, its date of composition, and, most acutely, its very content.

Despite the fact that some of the greatest Hellenists—Welcker, Wilamowitz, and Körte, to name a few—have commented on Athenaeus' account of the play, the *Letter Tragedy* has never been much more than a footnote in the history of Greek literature, largely because the problems it raises seem so desperately incapable of resolution.[1] Yet, as I argue below, even in their uncertain state, the fragments have the potential to augment our understanding of the dynamics of fifth-century drama in areas where our evidence is especially insufficient, such as on the question of how a comic poet might conceive of his relationship with tragedy, and how tropes of rivalry between the two genres might have played themselves out on the stage.

1. BASIC QUESTIONS

The problems of the *Letter Tragedy* begin with its authorship and date. Athenaeus attributes the play to a dramatist named Callias (on one occasion

1. Wilamowitz [1906] 1937, 398, sums up his frustration: "Deutlich wird diese uns niemals werden, denn was Athenaeus oder sein Epitomator gibt, ist so korrupt und so arg zusammengezogen, dass sehr viel einfach unverständlich ist." Körte too (1919, 1628) doubted whether the nature of Athenaeus' account would ever allow a satisfactory analysis.

he calls him "Callias the Athenian," 448b), and at first glance it is tempting
to assume that this is the same person as the otherwise attested fifth-century
comic poet Callias, active from at least 446 B.C. into the 420s.[2] But Athe-
naeus adds a small chronological signpost that makes this difficult: he notes
at 453c that Callias was active "slightly earlier than the time of Strattis," a
poet of Middle Comedy whose work is attested from 409 B.C. into the 370s.
If this were not confusing enough, the specific literary claim he makes for
Callias' *Letter Tragedy* is that it influenced Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles'
Oedipus, in particular, and all subsequent tragedy in general. Aside from the
problems of literary history inherent in this claim, it implies a date of com-
position for the *Letter Tragedy* well before 430, which would run counter to
a floruit held to be "slightly earlier than" Strattis.[3]

    F. G. Welcker, in his foundational study of the *Letter Tragedy* published
in 1832, offered one plausible explanation of the chronological discrepan-
cies in Athenaeus. As the title of his article suggested ("Das A.B.C. Buch
des Kallias in Form einer Tragödie"), he thought Callias was probably a
schoolteacher who composed the *Letter Tragedy* as a mock-pedagogical
treatise. There is, in fact, no compelling reason to doubt that the fragments
preserved in Athenaeus belonged to a bona fide dramatic text, and Welcker's
idea on this point now seems rather quaint ("Zweifelhafter ist es, ob Kallias
die Tragödie bloss zu seinem Vergnügen oder zum Gebrauch für die Kna-
benschule geschrieben haben möge"),[4] but his insight into the chronology
and transmission of the fragments had a great influence on later scholars.
Welcker accepted Athenaeus' remark that Callias composed his work around
the time of Strattis, and suggested that the anachronistic claims about the
play's influence on Euripides and Sophocles actually derived from jocular
references to Callias in a play by Strattis himself. In this hypothetical work,
Welcker imagined that Callias would have had a speaking part in which he
might himself have engaged in ridicule of the great tragedians.[5] T. B. L.
Webster offered in 1936 a variation on Welcker's hypothesis that allows us

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    2. On the chronology of Callias' career, see Geissler 1925, 2, 11, and 13, and Schwarze 1971, 90–91, al-
though it is worth noting that the evidence for dating Callias is hardly secure, based as it is on supplemented
didascalic inscriptions. (See Kassel-Austin 1983, 38–39.) Meineke 1839, 1.214, was tempted to see this Cal-
lias as the author of the *Letter Tragedy*, but remained diffident: "at eidem, ut videtur, Calliae tribuitur Γραμμα-
τικὴ τραγῳδία . . . Sed de hoc scripto nullus hic dicendi locus est." See Brożek 1939, 13–15 for a discussion
of the arguments for and against attributing the *Letter Tragedy* to the comic poet Callias; cf. also Kassel-
Austin 1983, 40. Brożek himself concludes that the phrasing of Athenaeus' remark about Strattis is too impre-
cise for us to make too much of it, and opts for a date before 431 (the year of Euripides' *Medea*). He also,
however, believes that this Callias is not the better-known comic Callias. He reasons (p. 14) that Athenaeus
thought to mention the date of *his* Callias precisely in order to distinguish him from the "other" Callias.
    3. The dating of Strattis is not much more secure than that of Callias (see note 2 above), and Athenaeus'
phrase "slightly earlier than Strattis" is hardly precise, so it may in fact be possible for the Callias of the
Letter Tragedy to be the Callias of Old Comedy. Still, Strattis was a poet of Middle Comedy, whose activity
extended at least up to 375 B.C. (see frag. 3 KA, and Geissler 1925, 78), and it seems unlikely that he would
have been active much earlier than 410.
    4. See the remarks of Brożek 1939, 25: "At vero fuerunt, qui eam libellum fuisse putarent, in quo litte-
rarum syllabarumque nec non musicae elementa, versibus conscripta, *pueris histrionum more in ludo agenti-
bus lusui simul et usui essent*. Sed chorum cur e mulieribus fecisset Callias—quas scimus temporibus illis
ludos litterarios non frequentasse—quin e pueris, quibus disciplinam laetiorem neque ita operosam redditu-
rus esset, non explanaverunt" (my emphasis). This is only one of several objections Brożek lists on p. 25 to
the idea that the play was actually an instructional book.
    5. Welcker 1832, 152–53; Brożek 1939, 12.

to retain nearly all of Athenaeus' salient points about the play, and even (for what it is worth) to identify Athenaeus' Callias with the homonymous poet of Old Comedy:

> The explanation of [Athenaeus' account of Callias' *Letter Tragedy*] may be this: Callias, who, if he is the poet of the old comedy, won his first victory in 446, wrote his alphabetic tragedy soon after the production of the *Medea* and *Tyrannus* and caricatured the alliterations and assonances in those plays; later Strattis, who produced plays at any rate from 409 to 375, said in one of his comedies that Euripides and Sophocles plagiarized Callias. This would not seem plausible unless *Medea, Tyrannus,* and the alphabetic tragedy were produced about the same time.[6]

In the most recent detailed discussion of the play, Egert Pöhlmann also argued that the *Letter Tragedy* was a comic parody of tragedy,[7] and that the eccentric claims about the play's effect on Euripides and Sophocles reflect the fact that Athenaeus mistook parody for actual influence on the targets of that parody. Unlike Webster, however, Pöhlmann accepts Athenaeus' dating of the play to the time of Strattis,[8] with 403 as a *terminus post quem,* the year in which the Ionian alphabet was officially adopted at Athens.[9] He reasons that the play's chorus, composed of the twenty-four letters of the Ionian alphabet, would only make sense in the context of a cultural event of that magnitude. Pöhlmann's argument is reasonable enough, and his account of the play's "paratragedy" is compelling, although it does mean that he must repudiate Athenaeus' chronology and his claims for the play's influence on tragedy.

The level of confusion in Athenaeus' account, however, is remarkable and has not yet received the full exegesis it deserves. Why, for example, might he have entertained the obviously exaggerated claim about the influence of the *Letter Tragedy* on subsequent tragedy? Why was his chronology so patently amiss? In what follows I would like to suggest some possible answers to these questions, answers that emerge when we take careful account of the context in which the passage is embedded and the nature of the play as a work of Old Comedy. In particular, I shall argue that the play itself contained boastful claims about the poet's influence on tragedy, and that these fantastically exaggerated claims were misconstrued as actual literary history by later commentators such as Athenaeus.

2. ATHENAEUS, CLEARCHUS, AND COMIC BRAGGADOCIO

It is remarkable how indirectly Athenaeus obtains his information about Callias' play. The *Letter Tragedy* is mentioned in two sections of the *Deipnosophistae,* first in Book 7, then in Book 10. At the beginning of Book 7,

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6. Webster 1936, 180–81. For whatever reason, Webster does not cite any work by earlier scholars, though they clearly informed his own views.

7. Pöhlmann 1971. Pöhlmann was anticipated by Webster 1936 and others who also entertained the idea that Callias might have parodied certain aspects of tragic form. See nn. 5, 6 above.

8. To do so, of course, he must remain aporetic about the identity of Callias: "ob man deren [the play] Autor mit dem Komiker Kallias identifizieren darf, ist ungewiss." Pöhlmann 1971, 232.

9. Pöhlmann 1971, 235–38. Earlier scholars had also suggested that the adoption of the Ionian alphabet at Athens in 403 B.C. formed the background of Callias' *Letter Tragedy.* See, e.g., Welcker 1832, 150: ". . . dieses neue Alphabet liegt dem Buche des Kallias zu Grunde." Contra, Brożek 1939, 14.

one of the guests, a cynic philosopher (nicknamed Cynulcus) proposes to discuss an event known as the "Eating-Festival" (the Φαγήσια). When fellow-guest Ulpian encourages him to do so, he begins by citing the third-century peripatetic polymath, Clearchus, who had evidently mentioned the Φαγήσια in his treatise *On Riddles*.[10] In this passage (276a), Athenaeus simply alludes to Callias' play as an example of one of the riddling topics that can be found in Clearchus' monograph:

εἰ δ' ἀπιστεῖς, ὦ ἑταῖρε, καὶ τὸ βιβλίον κεκτημένος οὐ φθονήσω σοι· ἀφ' οὗ πολλὰ ἐκμαθὼν εὐπορήσεις προβλημάτων· καὶ γὰρ Καλλίαν ἱστορεῖ τὸν Ἀθηναῖον γραμματικὴν συνθεῖναι τραγῳδίαν, ἀφ' ἧς ποιῆσαι τὰ μέλη καὶ τὴν διάθεσιν Εὐριπίδην ἐν Μηδείᾳ καὶ Σοφοκλέα τὸν Οἰδίπουν.

... If you don't believe it, comrade, I own the book and will not begrudge it to you; you will learn a lot from it and will be rich in questions to propound. For he records that Callias of Athens composed the *Letter Tragedy*, from which Euripides in *Medea* and Sophocles in *Oedipus* drew the models of their choruses and plots. (Trans. Gulick)

The second reference to Callias' play occurs in Book 10, in a longer section devoted entirely to the question of riddles. A guest named Aemilianus begins the discussion rather abruptly (448b):

ὥρα ἡμῖν, ἄνδρες φίλοι, ζητεῖν τι καὶ περὶ γρίφων, ἵνα τι κἂν βραχὺ διαστῶμεν ἀπὸ τῶν ποτηρίων, οὐ κατὰ τὴν Καλλίου τοῦ Ἀθηναίου ἐπιγραφομένην γραμματικὴν τραγῳδίαν. ἀλλ' ἡμεῖς ζητήσωμεν πρότερον μὲν τίς ὁ ὅρος τοῦ γρίφου, τίνα δὲ Κλεοβουλίνη ἡ Λινδία προῦβαλλεν ἐν τοῖς αἰνίγμασιν–ἱκανῶς γὰρ εἴρηκε περὶ αὐτῶν ὁ ἑταῖρος ἡμῶν Διότιμος ὁ Ὀλυμπηνός, ἀλλὰ πῶς οἱ κωμῳδιοποιοὶ αὐτῶν μέμνηνται, καὶ τίνα κόλασιν ὑπέμενον οἱ μὴ λύσαντες.

It is time, my friends to make some inquiry into the subject of riddles; that will give us a brief interval, at least, away from our cups, though we shall not follow the method of the *Grammarian's Tragedy,* as it is entitled, by Callias of Athens. Let us, then, first ask what is the definition of the riddle. But ⟨we will not consider⟩ what it was that Cleobulina of Lindus propounded in her riddles—for our old friend Diotimus of Olympene has discussed them adequately; rather, how the comic poets make mention of them, and what penalty those who failed to solve them had to undergo . . . . (Trans. Gulick)

There follows a discussion of nearly five pages on the topic of riddles, led by a guest named Larensius, who takes as his starting point Clearchus' definitions, but offers along the way citations from a variety of Greek authors, especially comic dramatists of middle and new comedy. At 453c, Callias is introduced again ("Callias of Athens, about whom we inquired before . . .") at the beginning of the full description of the *Letter Tragedy* (453c–454b). I will return in detail below to the importance of riddles for our understanding of the passage, but the point I wish to stress here is that Athenaeus' knowledge of Callias almost certainly came secondhand through the mediation of Clearchus' treatise *On Riddles,* written some five hundred years ear-

10. The fragments of Clearchus' Περὶ γρίφων are collected in Wehrli 1948, 31–36, with commentary pp. 74–78.

lier. Any mistakes Athenaeus made in the details of his account, therefore, may derive as much from his source as from his own carelessness.[11]

Before Larensius actually quotes examples of Callias' riddling—his main purpose in adducing him in the first place—he evidently feels compelled to describe at some length the unusual nature of the play in which these riddles occur. At 453c, with no transition from his list of Clearchan riddle types, he launches into his account of Callias' *Letter Tragedy*. This is the passage from which the main chronological problem arises:

ὁ δὲ Ἀθηναῖος Καλλίας (ἐζητοῦμεν γὰρ ἔτι πρότερον περὶ αὐτοῦ) μικρὸν ἔμπροσθεν γενόμενος τοῖς χρόνοις Στράττιδος ἐποίησε τὴν καλουμένην γραμματικὴν θεωρίαν οὕτω διατάξας.

Callias the Athenian (for we looked into him earlier), who was active a little before the time of Strattis, composed the so-called *Letter Show,* along the following lines . . . .

Peculiarities abound here, not only with dating, but also with the play's title—here it is referred to as the *Letter Show* (Γραμματικὴ Θεωρία).[12] Callias' alleged proximity to the comic poet Strattis, as we saw, undermines Larensius' subsequent claims for the play later in the same passage, where he claims that the *Letter Tragedy* was an inspiration for Euripides' *Medea* (431 B.C.), and that it caused Sophocles to alter a line of his *Oedipus Tyrannus* (453c–f):

πρόλογος μὲν αὐτῆς ἐστιν ἐκ τῶν στοιχείων, ὃν χρὴ λέγειν [ἐκ τῶν στοιχείων] διαιροῦντας κατὰ τὰς παραγραφὰς καὶ τὴν τελευτὴν καταστροφικῶς ποιουμένους εἰς τἄλφα·

⟨τὸ⟩ ἄλφα, βῆτα, γάμμα, δέλτα, θεοῦ γὰρ εἶ,
ζῆτ', ἦτα, θῆτ', ἰῶτα, κάππα, λάβδα, μῦ,
νῦ, ξεῖ, τὸ οὗ, πεῖ, ῥῶ, τὸ σίγμα, ταῦ, ⟨τὸ⟩ ὖ,
παρὸν φεῖ χεῖ τε τῷ ψεῖ εἰς τὸ ὦ.

ὁ χορὸς δὲ γυναικῶν ἐκ τῶν σύνδυο πεποιημένος αὐτῷ ἐστιν ἔμμετρος ἅμα καὶ μεμελοπεποιημένος τόνδε τὸν τρόπον· βῆτα ἄλφα βα, βῆτα εἶ βε, βῆτα ἦτα βη, βῆτα ἰῶτα βι, βῆτα οὗ βο, βῆτα ὖ βυ, βῆτα ὦ βω, καὶ πάλιν ἐν ἀντιστρόφῳ τοῦ μέλους καὶ τοῦ μέτρου γάμμα ἄλφα, γάμμα, εἶ, γάμμα ἦτα, γάμμα ἰῶτα, γάμμα οὗ, γάμμα ὖ, γάμμα ὦ, καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν λοιπῶν συλλαβῶν ὁμοίως ἑκάστων τό τε μέτρον καὶ τὸ μέλος ἐν ἀντιστρόφοις ἔχουσι πᾶσαι ταὐτόν. ὥστε τὸν Εὐριπίδην μὴ μόνον ὑπονοεῖσθαι τὴν Μήδειαν ἐντεῦθεν πεποιηκέναι πᾶσαν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ μέλος αὐτὸ μετενηνοχότα φανερὸν εἶναι. τὸν δὲ Σοφοκλέα διελεῖν φασιν ἀποτολμῆσαι τὸ ποίημα τῷ μέτρῳ τοῦτ' ἀκούσαντα καὶ ποιῆσαι ἐν τῷ Οἰδίποδι οὕτως·

ἐγὼ οὔτ' ἐμαυτὸν οὔτε σ' ἀλγυνῶ. ⟨τί⟩ ταῦτ'
⟨ἄλλως⟩ ἐλέγχεις;

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11. On Clearchus' role in the transmission of Callias' play see Brożek 1939, 10–13, who saw Strattis as an additional source for the commentary about the play that found its way into Athenaeus.

12. Brożek 1939, 15, citing Körte 1905, 435 (note that Brożek transposes the volume number [XL instead of the correct LX] of *RhM* in which Körte's article appears), entertains the possibility that "Τραγῳδία" was not part of the real title of the play, on the grounds that both "κωμῳδία" and "τραγῳδία" could be used in antiquity in place of titles, especially under the influence of library cataloguing practices. Brożek however, argued that the alternate title "Θεωρία" derives from Clearchus, who used the word to describe the play's "theory" of letters (cf. Athenaeus 457c, where θεωρία appears in this "instructional" sense, again in the context of riddles). "Titulum igitur in argumentum grammaticae tragoediae depingendum non nihil conferre et vocabulum τραγῳδίαν per ludibrium aperire opinor τραγικόν quoddam in fabula agi" (p. 16).

διόπερ οἱ λοιποὶ τὰς ἀντιστρόφους ἀπὸ τούτου παρεδέχοντο πάντες, ὡς ἔοικεν, εἰς τὰς
τραγῳδίας.

Its prologue is composed of the letters of the alphabet, and it is to be read in such a man-
ner as to divide the letters according to the punctuation and bring the conclusion, in a
manner of a tragic dénouement, back to the letter alpha, thus: "Alpha, beta, gamma, delta,
ei (which is the god's letter), zeta, eta theta, iota, kappa, labda, my ny xei, o, pei, rho,
sigma, tau, y, phei and chei next to psei, and coming down to o." The chorus of women is
composed by him with the collocation of letters in pairs, set to metre and accompanied by
tunes in the following manner: "Beta alpha ba, beta ei be, beta eta be, beta iota bi, beta o,
bo, beta y by, beta o bo;" and again in the answering strophe of song and of metre:
"Gamma alpha, gamma ei, gamma eta, gamma iota, gamma o, gamma y, gamma o," and
so for the remaining syllables in each case alike; they all have the same meter and lyric
form in the answering strophes. Hence it may not only be suspected that Euripides com-
posed the entire *Medea* in imitation of this, but it is also evident that he borrowed the
lyric form as well. As for Sophocles, they say that when he heard Callias' work he boldly
ventured to cut the sense of his verse by the metre, and hence wrote this verse in *Oedipus:*
"I will pain neither myself nor thee. Why || vainly ask these things?" Thus it was from
Callias, it appears, that all the other poets adopted the antistrophic structure in their trag-
edies. (Trans. Gulick)

This passage, with its description of the play's alphabetic prologue and a
female chorus of Attic letters singing a jingle about syllabic phonology, is
as frustrating as it is tantalizing. Even apart from the problems of chronol-
ogy, the claims made for the play at 453e are simply astonishing: there La-
rensius says that Euripides "based the composition of the entire *Medea* on"
the *Letter Tragedy* (τὸν Εὐριπίδην . . . τὴν Μήδειαν ἐντεῦθεν πεποιηκέναι
πᾶσαν), and that he borrowed "the lyric form" (τὸ μέλος αὐτό) from Callias
as well. Even more obscure is the remark about Sophocles: no one has sat-
isfactorily explained what Larensius might mean when he says that Sopho-
cles, upon hearing Callias' play, "divided his poetry by means of the meter"
(διελεῖν . . . ἀποτολμῆσαι τὸ ποίημα τῷ μέτρῳ). Nor is it clear what relevance
such a procedure would have for line 332 of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The final
absurdity comes when Larensius concludes from this that "all the other poets
adopted the antistrophic structure in their tragedies" (διόπερ οἱ λοιποὶ τὰς
ἀντιστρόφους ἀπὸ τούτου παρεδέχοντο πάντες . . . εἰς τὰς τραγῳδίας).[13] What
might account for these bizarre and extravagant claims about Callias here?

   Athenaeus' text itself seems to provide some possibilities. Simply put, the
passage quoted above, 453b–454c, suggests that Callias himself, within the
course of the *Letter Tragedy,* encouraged his audience (and later critics) to
imagine that his play changed the very form of tragedy, however absurd

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13. For attempts to explain how Callias' play might in fact have influenced Euripides and Sophocles (tak-
ing seriously, that is, Larensius' claims about the direction of influence, and its implied chronology), see,
e.g., Welcker 1832, 154–55; Hense 1876, 582–83; Brożek 1939, 32–39, 40–43; Koller 1956, 30–32; and
Arnott 1960, 178–80. This passage (as well as 276a, cited above, p. 150) implies that Callias was responsible
for certain innovations in choral lyric, although Arnott (interpreting the term διάθεσις in 276a) argued as well
that Callias influenced the very plot structure of subsequent tragedy. Koller argued that Callias' innovations
involved a loosening up of the relationship between word, melody, and accent in choral songs. Melody, he
argued, began to eclipse the word in importance and allowed more easily for the repetition of melody in suc-
cessive strophes. He inferred from Athenaeus that such melodic repetition was probably not standard in early
tragedy, which is why Athenaeus would go out of his way to note that "they all had the same meter and lyric
form in the answering strophes . . . ." Contra, Winnington-Ingram 1958, 43.

such a claim would have seemed on logical or practical grounds. The struc-
ture of this section seems to indicate that Athenaeus' assertions about Cal-
lias' influence on tragedy are extrapolated directly from the passages he has
been describing. To begin with, Athenaeus notes the influence of Callias on
Euripides in a "result clause" immediately after quoting part of the choral
song and remarking on its antistrophic form (453e):

ὥστε τὸν Εὐριπίδην μὴ μόνον ὑπονοεῖσθαι τὴν Μήδειαν ἐντεῦθεν πεποιηκέναι πᾶσαν,
ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ μέλος αὐτὸ μετενηνοχότα φανερὸν εἶναι.

Translated literally:

The result [of considering the passages quoted from Callias] is not only that one might
suspect that Euripides based his entire *Medea* on this, but that it is clear he also borrowed
the lyric element itself from him.

He ends the thought about Callias' literary influence with the claim that it
was "from him that all the other poets adopted the antistrophic structure in
their tragedies" (διόπερ οἱ λοιποὶ τὰς ἀντιστρόφους ἀπὸ τούτου παρεδέχοντο
πάντες, ὡς ἔοικεν, εἰς τὰς τραγῳδίας). Immediately following these remarks
about Callias' alleged influence on tragic choral composition, Athenaeus
resumes his description of the play as if picking up at the moment where
he had just left off: "After the chorus, he brings on stage again a speech by
the vowels . . ." (καὶ μετὰ τὸν χορὸν εἰσάγει πάλιν ἐκ τῶν φωνηέντων ῥῆσιν
οὕτως). The intervening commentary, in other words, seems to have been
inspired by the content of the chorus he had been quoting. We cannot, of
course, tell whether this reflects the reading and excerpting practices of Ath-
enaeus or his source Clearchus, but in either case one gets the impression of
a critic reading a text of the play and offering commentary on it as he reads.
If Athenaeus' description of the play derives from such a close interaction
with an original text, it is easy to see how Callias himself could have made
grandiose claims for his poetry within his play, which ended up miscon-
strued in Athenaeus as a general fact of literary history. It is further clear that
the commentator is adding a summary evaluation of his own with the words
ὑπονοεῖσθαι and φανερόν: "The result is not only that one might suspect that
Euripides based his entire *Medea* on this, but that it is clear he also borrowed
the lyric element itself from him." In other words, although Callias may
well not have explicitly claimed to have influenced the composition of Eu-
ripides' *Medea,* he must have claimed somewhere in the play to have had
some kind of significant effect on tragedy, for this would allow a later critic
such as Clearchus or Athenaeus to "suspect" that his influence might have
been specifically felt in an individual play. And if, for example, Callias had
made any claims whatsoever for a relationship between his lyrics and those
of tragedy, a later commentator could easily be inspired to conclude from
this that he "clearly" must have influenced the form of Euripidean lyric.[14]

14. Pietzsch 1861, 25 believed that the phrasing of 453e (ὥστε . . . ὑπονοεῖσθαι . . . φανερὸν εἶναι) re-
flected the author's "modesty" in attempting to offer his summary account of Callias' influence. Brożek
(1939, 13) felt the commentator sensed something was unusual about the claims he recorded: ". . . mirabilia
se referre de Euripide et Sophocle Calliae aemulis auctorem ipsum sibi conscium fuisse puto . . ." But how-
ever "mirabilia" the claims seem, Brożek believed there was some truth behind them.

Athenaeus or Clearchus, in other words, may very well have misconstrued (perhaps even deliberately; see section 4 below) claims embedded by the poet within the *Letter Tragedy* about its author's past influence on tragedy, for claims about the influence of the *Letter Tragedy* itself.

As a genre, Old Comedy provides a comfortable venue for precisely this sort of poetic self-aggrandizement. The chorus in particular is a conventional vehicle for the poet's self-promotion, often within the parabasis, and it is possible that the choral passage quoted in Athenaeus from Callias' *Letter Tragedy* was as self-referential as many passages familiar to us from Aristophanes. Although the Aristophanic examples never make as monumental a claim about the poet's contributions to literature as I am suggesting for Callias (namely, that he altered the entire course of a genre), they are nevertheless all concerned with staking out the poet's identity as distinct from his rivals, and they praise his contributions for technical innovation and a sense of "progressivism." One thinks of the parabasis of *Knights* 503–14, for example, which opposes comic producers of the "old school" to the daring, modern poet, or the section of the *Wasps'* parabasis, where the poet voices his complaints that his intelligence and literary innovations have been lost on an unappreciative audience (1043–59). Perhaps the most explicit example of such claims in Aristophanes occurs in the well-known parabasis of *Clouds* (549–62), where the coryphaeus claims that the poet was responsible for several specific comic innovations that were subsequently appropriated by his rivals.

Given the abundance in extant comedy of self-promotional pretensions to literary importance, therefore, it is certainly credible that at some point in the *Letter Show* Callias made, or had a character make, the ludicrously exaggerated and fantastic claim that he had actually influenced the lyric structures of Athenian tragedy. Such a claim might very well have occurred in a parabasis (where such claims are commonest in Aristophanes), and could easily account for confusion among later commentators, who often took autobiographical statements in comedy at face value.[15]

One might feel some anxiety, to be sure, that the parabatic examples from Aristophanes are not fully analogous to the situation I have suggested for Callias, in that the claims about Aristophanes' innovations in his plays are for the most part chronologically "legitimate," and not absurdly inflated, as they are in Callias. That is, in all the examples cited above (and many others in Aristophanes) the parabatic authorial voice speaks of a literary past that bears a realistic relation to the present: "there was once an old school of comedy," the poet says, "comedy was routine and uninspired in the past, but the poet now before you has changed that, both in his earlier plays and in the play now in progress." In the case of Callias, however, the audience at a date late in the century (assuming Pöhlmann's terminus of 403) would be asked to accept an incredibly exaggerated and historically suspect claim that the

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15. As Lefkowitz 1981, 111 has put it: "When they draw material from *parabaseis*, where the poet traditionally expressed his own political [and I would add, literary] views, biographers give the poet unwarranted importance by taking his exaggerations seriously."

poet was responsible for influence on a *different* literary genre some decades previously, at a time when it was chronologically unlikely, if not impossible, for him to have had the alleged influence.[16]

Disingenuous claims—even outright "falsehoods"—are, however, well known in extant comedy, and they suggest a generic license to fabricate comically fantastic notions and to promulgate disinformation with impunity. Most of the time, the patent incongruity or absurdity of such cases allows an audience, or future readers, to retain an appropriate perspective about them; but on occasion they engender the kind of confusion that we may be witnessing in Athenaeus.

Aristophanes, at *Peace* 700, for example, mentioned that his rival Cratinus had recently died, even though, as is often pointed out, it is extremely unlikely that he had. Aristophanes may have meant that Cratinus' literary powers had waned by that point to such an extent that he was as good as dead; or perhaps he was trying to make a joke about Cratinus' legendarily excessive drinking (an allusion to which follows in line 704).[17] The point is that the joke about Cratinus' death in *Peace* has perennially confounded commentators, because it makes truth claims about known historical events or characters that appear to be factually incorrect.[18]

It is not, therefore, difficult to imagine that Callias might have made patently false and humorously arrogant claims of his influence on tragedy in the *Letter Tragedy,* even if the chronological impossibility of such claims would have seemed obvious to the audience. The more ludicrous the claims, after all, the more amusing they would be. It is difficult, in any event, to believe that Athenaeus or Clearchus would have made such improbable claims about Callias' influence without some sort of prompting from the texts they could consult. If we suppose that Callias himself planted the suggestion in his play—or even across several plays[19]—at least then we can understand the source of the confusion.

3. CALLIAS' PARATRAGIC DESCRIPTION OF LETTERS

Athenaeus' account of the *Letter Tragedy,* in fact, offers some hints that the play itself contained material that could easily lead later commentators astray. After the description of the prologue and the alphabetic chorus, and the claims about the play's influence on Euripides and Sophocles, Athenaeus'

16. If we entertain an early date for Callias' *Letter Show,* more or less contemporaneous with Euripides and Sophocles, it becomes even easier to imagine that Callias would have made boastful claims about his colleagues in tragedy. At least in this case we would not need to worry about stretching the limits of chronological verisimilitude, as we do when we maintain a late date for a play that contains boasts retrojected several decades.

17. On the various interpretations of this passage, see Olson 1998, 211–12.

18. One of the anonymous referees reminded me that Aristophanes (as I argue for Callias) also made false claims about his own poetic practice in the parabasis of *Clouds,* where the coryphaeus claimed that the play did not engage in a number of lowbrow dramatic devices which in fact did occur in the play. For a recent discussion of this passage, see Hubbard 1991, 96–102.

19. Aristophanes himself often repeated boasts about his achievements across plays. Such Aristophanic cross-referencing has been well discussed by Hubbard 1991. The parabasis of *Wasps* (1009–59), for example, reiterates certain of the poet's claims to public service and literary innovation previously articulated in *Knights* and *Clouds.* See Hubbard 1991, 114–21.

speaker notes further, similarly improbable, ways in which Callias influenced tragedy. The discussion has moved away from Callias' antistrophic structure, and now maintains that he was also the "first to describe a letter in iambic verse, a letter, vulgar in meaning . . ." (454a):

δεδήλωκε δὲ καὶ διὰ τῶν ἰαμβείων γράμμα πρῶτος οὗτος ἀκολαστότερον μὲν κατὰ τὴν διάνοιαν, πεφρασμένον δὲ τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον·

> κύω γὰρ, ὦ γυναῖκες. ἀλλ' αἰδοῖ, φίλαι,
> ἐν γράμμασι σφῷν τοὔνομ' ἐξερῶ βρέφους.
> ὀρθὴ μακρὰ γραμμή 'στιν· ἐκ δ' αὐτῆς μέσης
> μικρὰ παρεστῶσ' ἑκατέρωθεν ὑπτία.
> ἔπειτα κύκλος πόδας ἔχων βραχεῖς δύο.

ὅθεν ὕστερον, ὡς ⟨ἂν⟩ ὑπονοήσειέ τις, Μαιάνδριος μὲν ὁ συγγραφεὺς μικρὸν διὰ τῆς ἑρμηνείας τῇ μιμήσει παρεγκλίνας συνέγραψεν ἓν τῶν παραγγελμάτων φορτικώτερον τοῦ ῥηθέντος . . .

Callias is the first to describe a letter in iambic verse, a letter vulgar in meaning, and phrased in this way: "For I am pregnant, ladies. Yet through modesty, my dears, I will tell you the name of the babe by means of letters. There is a long, straight stroke; at the middle of it, on each side, stands a small reclining stroke. Next comes a circle having two short feet . . ." Following this example, as one may suspect, the historian Maeandrius, diverging a little from exact imitation in his method of expression, composed one of his Precepts even more vulgarly than the one just quoted . . . . (Trans. Gulick)]

Clearly this passage implies a joke, obscure to us now and probably also to Athenaeus. The letters described are ψ and ω, and taken together, as ψω, probably formed the basis for an obscene joke.[20] Whatever its precise meaning, the purpose of the verbal description of the letters in Callias was, as we would expect from a comedy, humorous. Immediately following the quotation from Callias, Athenaeus mentions some others who adopted the conceit of describing letters, though Athenaeus is characteristically vague in revealing his exact notion of influence. The first example, the historian Maeandrius, presents no problem: he is later than Callias in date (third century B.C.), and it is conceivable that he would have imitated Callias' description of the obscenity's letters. But then the fifth-century tragic poets appear again—first Euripides (454b), then Agathon (454d), then, after a jump to the fourth-century Theodectes of Phaselis, back to Sophocles (454f):

20. The obscene potential of the two letters was noted as early as Daléchamp in 1583 (whose "annotationes et emendationes in Athenaeum" were collected in Casaubon 1600), who suggested that ψω was a form of ψῶα = "foetidus ventris crepitus." Brożek 1939, 29 elaborates: "Nam poeta odore taetro gravidam finxit mulierem et vocabulum invenit, cuius non solum quemvis merito pudeat quodque aenigmatice dictum dehinc risum movisse videtur ingentem, sed quod duas quoque in se continet litteras, tum novas, easque ultimas alphabeti Ionici, quippe Ψ et Ω." Other obscene possibilities exist as well (e.g., ψωλή, ψωλός, ψώλων, all words involving a penis with retracted foreskin). Svenbro 1993, 185 adds to Brożek's observation: "These two letters are the ones with which the seventeenth and last stanza of the 'syllabic chorus' . . . must have ended . . . ; and given that the joke is made on the stage, we may add that these two letters have a pictographic character that could well be exploited for obscene purposes." Pöhlmann 1971, 237–38 suggests that this scene was integral to the satire of the newly adopted Ionian alphabet: "Man kann sich leicht ausmalen, welche komödiantischen Möglichkeiten in dem Einfall steckten, eine Frauenperson, vielleicht die personifizierte Γραμματική, den ionischen Bastard ψωξ gebären zu lassen, als dessen Vater man wohl den Archinos in Anspruch nehmen darf."

Εὐριπίδης δὲ τὴν ἐν τῷ Θησεῖ τὴν ἐγγράμματον ἔοικε ποιῆσαι ῥῆσιν. βοτὴρ δ' ἐστὶν
ἀγράμματος αὐτόθι δηλῶν τοὔνομα τοῦ Θησέως ἐπιγεγραμμένον οὕτως . . . (454b)

. . . while Euripides, too, seems to have composed that speech in his *Theseus* in which
letters of the alphabet are described . . .

τὸ δ' αὐτὸ πεποίηκε καὶ Ἀγάθων ὁ τραγῳδιοποιὸς ἐν τῷ Τηλέφῳ. ἀγράμματος γάρ τις
κἀνταῦθα δηλοῖ τὴν τοῦ Θησέως ἐπιγραφὴν οὕτως . . . (454d)

The tragic poet Agathon did the same thing in his *Telephus*. For there also an illiterate
man discloses the written form of the name Theseus . . .

καὶ Θεοδέκτης δ' ὁ Φασηλίτης ἄγροικόν τινα ἀγράμματον παράγει καὶ τοῦτον τὸ τοῦ
Θησέως ὄνομα διασημαίνοντα . . . (454d)

So Theodectas of Phaselis introduces an illiterate rustic who also clearly describes the
name of Theseus . . .

καὶ Σοφοκλῆς δὲ τούτῳ παραπλήσιον ἐποίησεν ἐν Ἀμφιαράῳ σατυρικῷ τὰ γράμματα
παράγων ὀρχούμενον . . . (454f)

Sophocles, also, wrote something similar to this in the satyric play *Amphiaraus,* intro-
ducing there one who danced the forms of the letters. (Trans. Gulick)

In Euripides' *Theseus,* the entire name of Theseus is described letter by let-
ter, by an illiterate herdsman, a scene also repeated, according to Athe-
naeus' speaker, Larensius, in Agathon's *Telephus.* Sophocles, too, it seems,
employed the device in his satyr play *Amphiaraus.* After this remark about
Sophocles, Larensius proceeds directly to other forms of riddles, and Callias
fades completely from the scene. Never in the course of this digression about
the description of letters on stage does Larensius show any interest in the
chronological coherence of his examples. What, then, are we to make of the
opening of 454, where Larensius said that Callias was the *first one* to describe
letters on the stage (δεδήλωκε . . . πρῶτος οὗτος), and so clearly implied that
all the other examples of the conceit that he quoted were influenced by
Callias' *Letter Tragedy*? We find ourselves in the same situation as before:
even if we dated Callias' play early, and made him a contemporary of Sopho-
cles, Euripides, and Agathon, it is still difficult to believe that Callias' de-
scription of the letters of an obscene word would have itself spawned a series
of imitations among the tragic poets. Once again, it seems as if the lines of
influence were just the reverse, namely that Callias parodied such scenes
found *first* in tragedy. Certainly everything we know about the mechanics of
tragic parody in Old Comedy points in this direction, for paratragedy is by
nature reactive, responding as it does to already existing texts and undercut-
ting their pretenses by incorporating them into comic contexts.[21] Given the
nature of paratragedy, then, it makes much more sense to view the descrip-
tion of an obscene word in Callias as a comic distortion of a conceit used
seriously in tragedy. It is not insignificant, in any event, that the play's title,

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21. See Rau 1967, 10–17 for an excellent taxonomic overview of paratragedy. As he summarizes: "Der
Witz der Parodie wie alles Komischen liegt zuallererst in einem *sinnfälligen* Widerspruch, Kritik wird erst
wirksam im Weiter*denken,* ist also, von der Absicht des echten Komikers her gesehen, etwas Akzes-
sorisches" (p. 17, his emphasis).

Letter Tragedy, strongly suggests that the entire play was modeled on and poked fun at the tragic form.[22]

If we credit Athenaeus' account, of course, we are encouraged to believe that the *Letter Show* inspired the parody of comedy within tragedy. But while such "paracomedy"[23] is not unheard of in Greek tragedy, it is not especially common, and when it does occur, it tends to rely on the deployment of comic type-scenes rather than specific comic passages targeted for allusion.[24] Moreover, the very content of a scene—a character describing the actual physical shape of letters—suggests that a direction from tragedy to comedy would be more likely than the reverse. That is, if such a scene were first found in a comedy, it would almost certainly be a moment of great hilarity, as the scene with the pregnant woman in the *Letter Tragedy* must have been. As such it would have shown just how much comic potential the conceit had: it could take the form of a comic *praeteritio* (getting words across to an audience without actually saying them), or it could encourage an audience to ridicule the illiteracy of characters who had to resort to describing letters in order to communicate a written message. In any case, it is hardly conceivable that any tragic poet would have explicitly modeled one of his own scenes on such a scene from comedy, which could only have made a knowing audience chuckle. It makes much more sense, rather, to suppose that the tragic poets played such letter scenes straight from the start, and that a comic poet such as Callias saw it as easy fodder for comic travesty.

Just as I suggested for Athenaeus' earlier claim for Callias' influence on tragic choruses, in considering 454 I would likewise argue that there was something in the *Letter Tragedy* that, taken at face value, could lead a later reader astray to the extent that he would believe that the scene in which letters are described was "invented" by Callias. Athenaeus' phrasing at the opening of 454, after all, is highly reminiscent of the trope of the πρῶτος εὑρέτης, the "first inventor," as it is commonly applied in Old Comedy to poets who claim to have inaugurated a particular style or device.[25] At Aristophanes *Frogs* 939, for example, Euripides, in his contest for poetic superiority with Aeschylus, describes how he "slimmed down" tragedy:

> ἀλλ' ὡς παρέλαβον τὴν τέχνην παρὰ σοῦ τὸ πρῶτον εὐθὺς
> οἰδοῦσαν ὑπὸ κομπασμάτων καὶ ῥημάτων ἐπαχθῶν

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22. Brożek's view (1939, 16) that the title reflects actual tragic content (e.g., deploring the increasing use of the Ionic alphabet in the later decades of the fifth century) seems unnecessary (though Brożek concedes that whatever was tragic in the play must have been tempered with comedy "nonnullis fabulae locis").

23. I use "paracomedy" as the inverse of paratragedy; that is, allusion to comedy by tragedy. It should not be confused with Sidwell's idiosyncratic use of the term (1995, 65) to refer to the technique by which a comic poet satirizes his rivals "by presenting his plays as though by another poet."

24. One known example where a tragic text may allude to a specific passage in comedy is Euripides' *Helen* 1107–13, which has often been thought to allude to Aristophanes' *Birds* 209–16, produced two years earlier, in 414 B.C. Cf. Dover 1972, 148–49 and Dunbar 1995, 205. I should note that the "paracomedy" I have in mind here is a more specific phenomenon than the "tragicomedy" so well discussed in Seidensticker 1982. Seidensticker is mainly concerned with generically comic elements in Greek tragedy, which rarely seem to allude to a specific "target" text in known comic drama. That is, most of Seidensticker's examples of tragicomedy would not also be considered "parody."

25. See Pöhlmann 1971, 237 who also notes the trope of the poet as πρῶτος εὑρέτης.

No, as soon as I first took over the art from you, swollen as it was with bombast and overweight vocabulary, I began by reducing its swelling and removing its excess weight with a course of bite-size phrases . . . . (Trans. Sommerstein)

Likewise at *Frogs* 1004, the chorus addresses Aeschylus as a great poetic inventor, as follows:

Ἀλλ᾽ ὦ πρῶτος τῶν Ἑλλήνων πυργώσας ῥήματα σεμνά . . .

Now you who were first of the Greeks to build towering structures of majestic words . . . (Trans. Sommerstein)

Finally a passage from the parabasis of Aristophanes' *Peace* (739–55) employs this trope in a classic example of authorial self-aggrandizement.

πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ τοὺς ἀντιπάλους μόνος ἀνθρώπων κατέπαυσεν
740 εἰς τὰ ῥάκια σκώπτοντας ἀεὶ καὶ τοῖς φθειρσὶν πολεμοῦντας·
τούς θ᾽ Ἡρακλέας τοὺς μάττοντας καὶ τοὺς πεινῶντας ἐκείνους
ἐξήλασ᾽ ἀτιμώσας πρῶτος, . . .
. . . .
οὐκ ἰδιώτας ἀνθρωπίσκους κωμῳδῶν οὐδὲ γυναῖκας, ἀλλ᾽ Ἡρακλέους
ὀργήν τιν᾽ ἔχων τοῖσι μεγίστοις ἐπεχείρει,
διαβὰς βυρσῶν ὀσμὰς δεινὰς κἀπειλὰς βορβοροθύμους.
Καὶ πρῶτον μὲν μάχομαι πάντων αὐτῷ καρχαρόδοντι,
755 οὗ δεινόταται μὲν ἀπ᾽ ὀφθαλμῶν Κύννης ἀκτῖνες ἔλαμπον . . .

First of all, he, alone of all men, stopped his rivals always making fun of rags and waging war on lice; then he was the first to outlaw and expel from the stage those Heracleses who kneaded dough and went hungry; . . . Nor has he satirized the little man or woman in private life; rather with a spirit like that of Heracles, he tackled the greatest monsters, striding through terrible smells of leather and the menaces of a muckraker's rage. And first of all these I fought with the Jag-toothed One himself, from whose eyes shone terrible rays like those of the Bitch-star, while around his head licked serpent-like a hundred head of accursed flatterers. . . . (Trans. Sommerstein)

In view of such Aristophanic parallels, it is not unlikely that Callias made claims about his influence of a similar sort in the *Letter Tragedy,* first about the nature of his choruses, and then about the "novelty" of describing letters on the stage. Needless to say, it matters little whether such claims of poetic originality and invention were true (indeed, they rarely were for Aristophanes) for them to have had their desired, comic effect.

4. THE *LETTER TRAGEDY* AS RIDDLE

Finally, it is crucial to remember that Callias' *Letter Tragedy* is embedded in Athenaeus in a discussion of riddles, and that the primary reason why the speaker, Larensius, quotes from the play at such length is so that he may document the many types of riddle that he finds in Clearchus' treatise on that subject. The entire passage at 448b, which introduces the topic of riddles to the assembled company, is, in fact, somewhat enigmatic in itself. In particular, Athenaeus has his first speaker, Aemilianus, teasingly remark at

448b that, although they will enter into a discussion of riddles, they will not conduct their investigation "in the manner of the *Letter Tragedy,* as it is entitled, by Callias the Athenian." Exactly what κατὰ τὴν Καλλίου . . . γραμματικὴν τραγῳδίαν means remains a puzzle, but the context suggests that it has some connection with the task at hand of discussing riddles; quite probably it refers to the penalty sometimes inflicted on the person who could not solve the riddle.[26] Several lines later, at any rate, Aemilianus states that in their attempt to define the riddle (τίς ὁ ὅρος τοῦ γρίφου. . .) they will be concerned to investigate "how the comic poets make mention of them, and what penalty people had to suffer when they failed to solve them" (πῶς οἱ κωμῳδιοποιοὶ αὐτῶν μέμνηνται, καὶ τίνα κόλασιν ὑπέμενον οἱ μὴ λύσαντες). This statement, in turn, anticipates the definition of the riddle that Larensius quotes from Clearchus in his answer to Aemilianus' challenge (448c):

> καὶ ὁ Λαρήνσιος ἔφη· "ὁ μὲν Σολεὺς Κλέαρχος οὕτως ὁρίζεται· 'γρῖφος πρόβλημά ἐστι παιστικόν, προστακτικὸν τοῦ διὰ ζητήσεως εὑρεῖν τῇ διανοίᾳ τὸ προβληθὲν τιμῆς ἢ ἐπιζημίου χάριν εἰρημένον.' ἐν δὲ τῷ περὶ γρίφων ὁ αὐτὸς Κλέαρχός φησιν ἑπτὰ εἴδη εἶναι γρίφων . . . ."

> And Larensis [*sic*] answered: "Clearchus of Soli gives this definition: 'a riddle is a problem put in jest, requiring, by searching the mind, the answer to the problem to be given for a prize or forfeit.' And again in the treatise *On Riddles,* Clearchus says there are seven kinds of riddles. . . ." (Trans. Gulick)

Because the fragments of Callias' *Letter Tragedy* are not quoted for many pages (they begin at 453c), well into Athenaeus' typically discursive presentation of the various riddle types (and then with no explanation of how the fragments illustrate the topic at hand), it is easy to forget that Callias was being cited as another example of a (comic) poet who employed riddles. But both Aemilianus' phrase at 448, οὐ κατὰ τὴν Καλλίου . . . γραμματικὴν τραγῳδίαν, and Larensius' extensive quotations from Callias' play, make it clear that riddles played a conspicuous part in its performance and reception. The *Letter Tragedy* certainly impressed Larensius' authority, Clearchus, enough for him to have cited the play at some length in his own treatise on the subject of riddles.

Clearchus evidently found plenty in the *Letter Tragedy* to assist him in constructing his taxonomy of riddles. The prologue of the play began with what appears to have been a riddling conceit, and insofar as it was composed of the letters of the alphabet, the audience or reader had to perform some action on the words in order for it to have its desired effect (453c):

> πρόλογος μὲν αὐτῆς ἐστιν ἐκ τῶν στοιχείων, ὃν χρὴ λέγειν διαιροῦντας κατὰ τὰς παραγραφὰς καὶ τὴν τελευτὴν καταστροφικῶς ποιουμένους εἰς τάλφα.[27]

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26. See Brožek 1939, 8, for several alternative (though highly speculative and somewhat contrived) explanations.

27. It is unclear exactly what is meant by διαιροῦντας κατὰ τὰς παραγραφάς and καταστροφικῶς. The problems and early bibliography are discussed at length in Brožek 1939, 21–24. Gulick in his Loeb translation (1930, 4.555) translates καταστροφικῶς as "in the manner of a tragic *dénouement,*" which seems not only tendentious, but also rather opaque, especially when more common meanings are available. Brožek (citing evidence from ancient pedagogical practices) is probably correct that the adverb simply implies that the progression from alpha to omega is then reversed, going from omega to alpha.

Its prologue is composed of the letters of the alphabet, <u>which one must speak in such a</u> <u>manner as to divide the letters</u> according to the punctuation <u>and bring the conclusion</u> <u>back</u> to the letter alpha (καταστροφικῶς) . . . .

The description of the chorus immediately following the mention of the pro-
logue (453d–e) also implies that the audience must be attuned to the alpha-
betic conceit that generated the humor of the song. After the choral passage,
as Larensius relates, there followed a speech by the vowels that, once again,
must be read in a specific manner in order for it to "work" (453f):

καὶ μετὰ τὸν χορὸν εἰσάγει πάλιν ἐκ τῶν φωνηέντων ῥῆσιν οὕτως (ἣν δεῖ κατὰ τὰς παρα-
γραφὰς ὁμοίως τοῖς πρόσθεν λέγοντα διαιρεῖν, ἵν' ἡ τοῦ ποιήσαντος ὑπόκρισις σῴζηται
κατὰ τὴν δύναμιν)·

ἄλφα μόνον, ὦ γυναῖκες, εἶ τε δεύτερον
λέγειν μόνον χρή. [Ch.] καὶ τρίτον μόνον γ' ἐρεῖς
[A.] ἦτ' ἄρα φήσω [Ch.] τὸ τέταρτόν τ' αὖ μόνον
ἰῶτα, πέμπτον οὗ, τό θ' ἕκτον ὗ μόνον
λέγε· [A.] λοίσθιον ⟨λέγειν⟩ δὲ φωνῶ σοι τὸ ὦ
τῶν ἑπτὰ φωνῶν, ἑπτὰ δ' ἐν μέτροις μόνον.
καὶ τοῦτο λέξασ' εἶτα δὴ σαυτῇ λάλει.

After the chorus, he again introduces a speech by the vowels, <u>which one must speak, as</u>
<u>in the case of the foregoing, in such a manner as to divide them according to the punctu-</u>
<u>ation; in that way the mode of performance intended by the poet can be preserved accord-</u>
<u>ing to its particular force;</u> thus: "Alpha by itself, and secondly ei by itself, you must
pronounce, my ladies. [Ch.]: Yes, and the third vowel you will say by itself. [A.]: Then I
will say eta. [Ch.] Say iota fourth in its turn alone, fifth ou, the sixth y, all alone. [A.] But
the last of the seven vowels, the omega, I will pronounce for you to say, <u>and then the</u>
<u>seven will be put into meter by themselves.</u> After you have pronounced that, then say it
to yourself." (Trans. Gulick, modified)

As Larensius puts it, "one must, just as before [i.e., in the case of the pro-
logue], read the speech by dividing it according to the punctuation" (ἣν δεῖ
κατὰ τὰς παραγραφὰς ὁμοίως τοῖς πρόσθεν λέγοντα διαιρεῖν). The reason he
states for this is revealing: "so that the mode of performance intended by the
poet can be preserved according to its particular force" (ἵν' ἡ τοῦ ποιήσαντος
ὑπόκρισις σῴζηται κατὰ τὴν δύναμιν).[28] As Larensius realized, the speech
forms a kind of riddle, the goal being to work in all the vowel sounds into
a fixed metrical scheme. This must be what he means when he speaks of the
poet's "ὑπόκρισις."[29] The last speaker in the quotation makes this clear: "But
the last of the seven vowels, the omega, I will pronounce for you to say, <u>and</u>
<u>then the seven will be put into meter</u> . . ."

The *Letter Tragedy,* as Clearchus realized, clearly relied on the audience's
understanding that it presented on the stage a succession of riddling con-
ceits, and here, I believe, may lie the key to understanding its content and
chronology. I would suggest that in the course of his treatise Clearchus cited
Callias' play as itself a kind of γρῖφος, which might be phrased as follows:

28. On the phrase κατὰ τὴν δύναμιν, cf. Brożek 1939, 29, who understands it to mean: "secundum pro-
nuntiationis vim atque artem a poeta praescriptam."
29. Brożek 1939, p. 29, n. 1 records Casaubon's translation of ὑπόκρισις as the poet's "artificiosa actio."

"what comedy produced around the time of Strattis can be said to have changed the course of tragedy earlier in the century?" Or, put another way: "what comedy influenced Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles' *Oedipus,* but was composed much later?" If we look carefully at the larger context in which the discussion of Callias occurs, such an explanation seems very natural; indeed, it may be the only way of accounting adequately for the apparent abruptness with which the *Letter Tragedy* is introduced to the discussion in the first place.

Callias, we will recall, is first mentioned in Book 7, at 276a, where, in a discussion of the Φαγήσια, the speaker, Cynulcus, makes an odd logical connection between Clearchus' book on riddles and Callias' play. He makes the following remark after quoting from the philosopher:

εἰ δ' ἀπιστεῖς, ὦ ἑταῖρε, καὶ τὸ βιβλίον κεκτημένος οὐ φθονήσω σοι· ἀφ' οὗ πολλὰ ἐκμαθὼν εὐπορήσεις προβλημάτων· <u>καὶ γὰρ</u> Καλλίαν <u>ἱστορεῖ</u> τὸν Ἀθηναῖον γραμματικὴν συνθεῖναι τραγῳδίαν, ἀφ' ἧς ποιῆσαι τὰ μέλη καὶ τὴν διάθεσιν Εὐριπίδην ἐν Μηδείᾳ καὶ Σοφοκλέα τὸν Οἰδίπουν.

If you don't believe it, comrade, I own the book and will not begrudge it to you; you will learn a lot from it and he will be rich in questions to propound. <u>For he records</u> that Callias of Athens composed his *Letter Tragedy,* from which Euripides in *Medea* and Sophocles in *Oedipus* drew his models of their choruses and plots. (Trans. Gulick, modified)

The phrase καὶ γὰρ . . . ἱστορεῖ ("for he records . . .") makes that sentence an *explanation* of the preceding one, and is our first indication that the composition itself of the *Letter Tragedy* (καὶ γὰρ . . . ἱστορεῖ . . . γραμματικὴν <u>συνθεῖναι τραγῳδίαν</u>)—and the claims made therein about Callias' relationship with Euripides and Sophocles—figured in Clearchus precisely because they illustrated something about riddles. It is, indeed, strange that the only detail about the play mentioned by Cynulcus is its alleged influence on the tragedians. The syntax of Cynulcus' remark makes it clear that the claim came directly from Clearchus (. . . ἱστορεῖ [i.e., Clearchus] . . . ποιῆσαι . . . Εὐριπίδην . . . καὶ Σοφοκλέα), but the fact that Cynulcus also highlights it (as the identifying quality of the play, no less) leads me to believe that it actually originated in the play itself. Cynulcus seems to be saying, therefore, that Clearchus' book is an excellent source of "brain-teasers," as we might call them (πολλὰ ἐκμαθὼν εὐπορήσεις προβλημάτων), and a fine example of such a πρόβλημα can be found in Callias' *Letter Tragedy*—a comedy, in other words, that might be said (in riddling discourse) to have "retroactively" influenced tragedy.

If Clearchus did, in fact, regard Callias' play as itself something of a riddle, the later detailed discussion of the play in Athenaeus begins to make more sense. This discussion, as I noted earlier, occurs at 453c, suddenly and with no indication of how it was contextually motivated. It falls in the middle of a section purporting to lay out Clearchus' taxonomy of riddles,[30] but

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30. Larensius begins his discussion by stating that there were seven Clearchan riddle types, but he only mentions three (those that depend on the letter, syllable, or noun for their riddling effect, 448d) before he distracts himself with riddles found in literature. It is likely, however, that the literary examples are drawn from Clearchus. Cf. Wehrli 1948, 76 on other passages in Clearchus relating to riddles.

which, in typical fashion, evolved into a free-associative compendium of citations largely drawn from comedy. But insofar as these citations are all intended to illustrate various kinds of riddles, it is likely that the *Letter Tragedy* was introduced to serve a similar function. It is surely significant, after all, that the three categories of riddle that are explicitly ascribed to Clearchus' treatise by Larensius at 448c–d foreshadow the alphabetic-grammatical conceits of Callias' play:

> ἐν δὲ τῷ περὶ γρίφων ὁ αὐτὸς Κλέαρχός φησιν ἑπτὰ εἴδη εἶναι γρίφων. "ἐν γράμματι μέν, οἷον ἐροῦμεν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἄλφα, ὡς ὄνομά τι ἰχθύος ἢ φυτοῦ, ὁμοίως δὲ κἂν ἔχειν τι κελεύῃ τῶν γραμμάτων ἢ μὴ ἔχειν, καθάπερ οἱ ἄσιγμοι καλούμενοι τῶν γρίφων· . . . ἐν συλλαβῇ δὲ λέγονται γρῖφοι, οἷον ἐροῦμεν ἔμμετρον ὁτιδήποτε οὗ ἡγεῖται βα, οἷον βασιλεύς, ἢ ὧν ἔχει τελευτὴν τὸ ναξ, ὡς Καλλιάναξ, ἢ ὧν τὸν λέοντα καθηγεῖσθαι, οἷον Λεωνίδης, ἢ ἔμπαλιν τελικὸν εἶναι, οἷον Θρασυλέων. ἐν ὀνόματι δέ, οἷον ἐροῦμεν ὀνόματα ἁπλᾶ ἢ σύνθετα δισύλλαβα, οὗ μορφή τις ἐμφαίνεται τραγικὴ ἢ πάλιν ταπεινή . . . ."

And again in the treatise On Riddles, Clearchus says there are seven kinds of riddles. "Depending on a letter, as when we are to tell, for example, the name of a fish, or a plant beginning with *a;* similarly, when the propounder requires a word which contains or does not contain a certain letter, like the riddles called the s-less; . . . Then there are riddles depending on a syllable, where, for example, we are to name something measured that begins with ba, like basileus (king), or that ends in -nax, like Callianax, or that has the lion for its leader, like Leonidas, or contrariwise at the end, like Thrasyleon. Or riddles involving a whole noun, where, for example, we must give either simple or compound nouns of two syllables, wherein the form has a pompous, or conversely, a low implication;" . . . . (Trans. Gulick)

As it happens, Clearchus' three categories are played out nearly exactly in the three parts of the *Letter Tragedy* discussed at 453–54. First, Larensius begins his description with the prologue "composed of the letters of the alphabet" (ἐκ τῶν στοιχείων).[31] As I noted earlier, while he does not specify exactly how these letters form a riddle, he notes that they only make sense when the reader (or audience) construes them in a particular way (ὃν χρὴ λέγειν διαιροῦντας κατὰ τὰς παραγραφάς), which is, of course, what one must do to understand a riddle. Next follows the description of the chorus of individual letters whose song is a jocular lesson in the formation of *syllables*[32] (ὁ χορὸς δὲ γυναικῶν . . . μεμελοπεποιημένος τόνδε τὸν τρόπον· βῆτα ἄλφα βα, βῆτα εἶ βε, [etc.] . . . καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν λοιπῶν συλλαβῶν ὁμοίως ἑκάστων τό τε μέτρον καὶ τὸ μέλος ἐν ἀντιστρόφοις ἔχουσι πᾶσαι ταυτόν, 453d–e), and immediately after that, the "speech by the vowels" (. . . ἐκ τῶν φωνηέντων ῥῆσιν, 453f) mentioned earlier, which makes a kind of riddle out of

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31. στοιχεῖα, although technically defined as a basic sound element of speech, became essentially synonymous with γράμματα: cf. LSJ II.1.

32. A song called "Swingin' the Alphabet" from the 1938 Three Stooges short, *Violent was the Word for Curly,* bears an uncanny resemblance to the song in Callias' play. The relevant scene has the Stooges impersonating three German professors at a women's college called Mildew (possibly modeled on Bryn Mawr). When put in front of a class, Moe leads the students in a musical number that might have been lifted right out of Callias: he instructs them to add all the vowels to each consonant and sing them as a Swing-based jingle: "B-a, bay; B-e, bee, B-i, bicky-bi; B-o, bo . . . " and so forth for all the consonants. The similarities are so strong (the conceit of syllabic formation, the jocular lyric form, the chorus of females who offer harmonic accompaniment to the Stooges-cum-γραμματισταί) that one wonders whether the writers of the movie were frustrated classicists.

instructing a character in vowel pronunciation. This leads Larensius, finally, to his claim about Callias as the "first to describe letters in iambic verse" (454a), and the discussion of others who borrowed this conceit from him. As his examples make clear, the point of these descriptions of letters is to create a riddle which one solves by putting the letters together in one's mind, as they are described, into a *word* (ὄνομα). Callias' character, for example, describes the name of a baby through its constituent letters, in the form of a riddle, because she claims to be embarrassed to say the word itself (. . . ἀλλ᾽ αἰδοῖ, φίλαι, ‖ ἐν γράμμασι σφῷν τοὔνομ᾽ ἐξερῶ βρέφους), and Euripides in his *Theseus* was alleged to have imitated the device from Callias, where an illiterate herdsman had to describe the letters of Theseus' name in order for it to be intelligible (. . . βοτὴρ δ᾽ ἐστὶν ἀγράμματος αὐτόθι δηλῶν τοὔνομα τοῦ Θησέως, 454b).[33] It is easy to see, therefore, that Callias' *Letter Tragedy* was cited by Clearchus, and later by Athenaeus' Larensius, precisely because it helped them catalogue riddles so efficiently.

It is regrettable, of course, that Larensius himself does not explain clearly how Callias' play fits into the rest of his disquisition of riddles. But when we consider the riddle-types he described in the paragraphs immediately preceding his description of the *Letter Tragedy,* it becomes apparent that the play is adduced not only because it contains further examples of these riddle-types, but also, more significantly, because the work itself functions as one of these examples. This would then explain why no special introduction to the play would be necessary in Larensius' remarks; that is, Callias' play was simply one more citation (albeit an extended one) in the succession of riddling examples trotted out between pages 448 and 453. Indeed, the *Letter Tragedy,* conceived of as a riddling entity in itself, shows a clear affiliation with one of the most common types of riddle discussed in that section, namely the riddle that presumes the question: "When is X simultaneously not-X?" (like our "When is a door not a door?" Answer: "When it's ajar . . ."). Larensius, clearly mining Clearchus' treatise, offers several examples of this before he comes to Callias. From Alexis and Eubulus he cites the following at 449d–50a:[34]

καὶ ᾽Αλεξις δὲ ἐν ῞Υπνῳ τοιούτους γρίφους προβάλλει·

> οὐ θνητὸς οὐδ᾽ ἀθάνατος, ἀλλ᾽ ἔχων τινὰ
> σύγκρασιν, ὥστε μήτ᾽ ἐν ἀνθρώπου μέρει
> μήτ᾽ ἐν θεοῦ ζῆν, ἀλλὰ φύεσθαί τ᾽ ἀεὶ
> καινῶς φθίνειν τε τὴν παρουσίαν πάλιν,
> ἀόρατος ὄψιν, γνώριμος δ᾽ ἅπασιν ὤν.
> Β. αἰεὶ σὺ χαίρεις, ὦ γύναι, μ᾽ αἰνίγμασι—

33. For further discussion of this passage, see p. 157 above.

34. On Alexis' *Sleep,* see Arnott 1996, 680, with relevant general bibliography on riddles in classical antiquity. On Eubulus' *Sphingocario,* a play in which a character with the slave-name Cario propounded riddles in the role of the Sphinx, see Hunter 1983, 199–200. Other plays from Middle Comedy that featured riddles include Alexis' *Cleobulinae* (almost certainly influenced by Cratinus' play of the same name from the previous century; cf. Arnott, 293), *Orchestris* (cf. Arnott, 505 on frag. 172), Antiphanes' *Problema* (frag. 192 KA) and *Sappho* (frag. 194 KA). As we might expect, Athenaeus is the main source for the fragments of all these plays.

Alexis, in *Sleep,* propounds such riddles as these: "It is not mortal nor yet immortal; rather, it has a nature so mixed that its life is neither in man's estate nor in a god's, but its substance ever grows fresh and then dies again; it may not be seen by the eye, yet it is known to all. [B.] You always delight, woman, in puzzling me with riddles." (Trans. Gulick)

Εὔβουλος δ᾽ ἐν Σφιγγοκαρίωνι τοιούτους γρίφους προβάλλει, αὐτὸς καὶ ἐπιλύων αὐτούς·

> ἔστι λαλῶν ἄγλωσσος, ὁμώνυμος ἄρρενι θῆλυς,
> οἰκείων ἀνέμων ταμίας, δασύς, ἄλλοτε λεῖος,
> ἀξύνετα ξυνετοῖσι λέγων, νόμον ἐκ νόμου ἕλκων·
> ἓν δ᾽ ἐστὶν καὶ πολλὰ καὶ ἂν τρώσῃ τις ἄτρωτος.
> τί ἐστι τοῦτο; τί ἀπορεῖς; Β. Καλλίστρατος.
> Α. πρωκτὸς μὲν οὖν οὗτος. Β. σὺ δὲ ληρεῖς ἔχων.
> Α. οὗτος γὰρ αὐτός ἐστιν ἄγλωττος λάλος,
> ἓν ὄνομα πολλοῖς, τρωτὸς ἄτρωτος, δασὺς
> λεῖος. τί βούλει; πνευμάτων πολλῶν φύλαξ . . .

Eubulus in *Sphinx-Cario* propounds these, solving them himself. "[A.] It has no tongue, yet it talks, its name is the same for male and female, steward of its own winds, hairy, or sometimes hairless; saying things unintelligible, to them that understand, drawing out one melody after another; one thing it is, yet many, and if one wound it, it is unwounded. Tell me, what is it? Why are you puzzled? [B.] It's Callistratus! [A.] No, it's the rump. [B.] You keep talking drivel. [A.] No, really; this it is, one and the same, that tongueless speaks; it has one name though, belonging to many; wounded it is unwounded; it is hairy and hairless. What would you? Guardian of many gales . . ." (Trans. Gulick)

These examples all propose paradoxical conundrums the resolution of which rests on linguistic play: puns, homonyms, metaphor, and other verbal tropes and devices all allow us at one time or another to explain X as "not-X." As Larensius makes clear, Old and Middle Comedy reflect the popularity of this sort of gamesmanship.

Athenaeus, in fact, no doubt drawing on his reading of Clearchus, is well aware that riddles depend fundamentally on games of logic, as he has Larensius make clear in the section (453b) immediately preceding the introduction of the *Letter Tragedy:*

> ἀρχαιότατος δ᾽ ἐστὶ λογικὸς γρῖφος καὶ τῆς τοῦ γριφεύειν φύσεως οἰκειότατος· "τί πάντες οὐκ ἐπιστάμενοι διδάσκομεν;" καί "τί ταὐτὸν οὐδαμοῦ καὶ πανταχοῦ;"

A very ancient kind of riddle, and one that is most closely related to the true nature of the riddle, has to do with logical concepts: "What is it that we all teach but do not know?" "What is it that is the same nowhere and everywhere?" (Trans. Gulick)

It is not made explicit precisely how this train of thought motivated Athenaeus to cite Callias' play several lines later, but in view of what we have discovered so far about the role of riddling in the play, it would not be difficult to conclude that he conceived of the entire work as a species of λογικὸς γρῖφος, a riddle that derived its power from confounding the logical expectations of an audience. As I mentioned earlier, conceiving of the play as a riddle helps us to explain some of the confusion about chronology and literary history that emerges from Athenaeus' account. It would also, I suggest, solve one of the most persistent problems of all, namely the fact that

the play is called a "tragedy" when it looks so little like one. But with the Clearchan-Athenaean concept of the λογικὸς γρῖφος in mind, one might imagine the following riddle: "When is a tragedy not a tragedy?" Answer: "When it is a comedy with 'tragedy' in its title!" The *Letter Tragedy* (the γραμματικὴ τραγῳδία) may have taken the form of a tragedy in order to make fun of the genre, but, of course, it was in reality performed as a comedy. If there is some truth to this explanation of Athenaeus' account of the *Letter Tragedy*, it offers us an unusual perspective on the interrelationship between the two dramatic genres during this period. Callias' *Letter Tragedy* may, in fact, suggest that the comic trope of inter-generic rivalry with tragedy was more prevalent in the fifth century than we might have supposed.[35]

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35. Our best evidence that poets thought theoretically about the differences between comedy and tragedy, and that these differences could be turned into comic material, is the well-known fragment from Antiphanes' *Poetry* (frag. 189 KA), where a speaker (perhaps Poetry herself) complains that composing a comedy is much more difficult than composing a tragedy because comedy had to invent everything, whereas tragedy relied on inherited plots and theatrical devices. Although this play is considerably later than Callias, its theme seems to have existed in Old Comedy; cf. Aristophanes' play of the same name (about which, however, next to nothing is known), frags. 466–67 KA. The closing scene of Plato's *Symposium,* with its dramatic date of 416 B.C., may also be relevant in this regard: the narrator Aristodemus recalls Socrates' forcing his interlocutors to agree that "the same man is capable of writing both a comedy and a tragedy—that the tragic poet could also be a comic poet" (222d3–6). The fact that Socrates felt a need to make this argument implies that at the time the two genres were felt to be quite separate activities, with little crossover by poets. Such a state of affairs would doubtless encourage a literary climate in which comic poets could easily make territorial boasts about comedy's generic superiority.

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