

THE COMIC COSTUME CONTROVERSY

As to the wearing of a leather phallus by fifth-century comic actors, Pickard-Cambridge¹ wrote: 'Aristophanes' resolution (*Nu.* 537 ff.) to avoid such indecencies does not seem to have lasted long.' One year would not have been long; and Beare,² who resumed Thiele's position,³ and Webster,⁴ who supported that of Körte,⁵ carried on a controversy on the matter without reference to what I believe is a relevant, if misunderstood, text.

At *Vesp.* 56 ff. (I shall be speaking later about the important 1342 ff.):

μηδὲν παρ' ἡμῶν προσδοκᾶν λίαν μέγα,
μηδ' αὖ γέλωτα Μεγαρόθεν κεκλεμμένον

commentators and translators have taken *μηδὲν λίαν μέγα* to refer to the quality of the play or the importance of its subject-matter: 'Nichts allzu wichtiges wolle von uns man sich versehn' (Droysen); 'neque nimis magna a nobis sunt expectanda, neque vero nugae aniles' (Van Leeuwen); 'qu'on n'attende de nous rien de trop relevé' (Willems and the Budé translation); 'non si aspettino da noi una cosa troppo importante' (Cantarella); 'zu Grosses dürft ihr nicht von uns erwarten' (Seeger-Weinreich); 'you must not expect something too grand from us' (Starkie).

The modesty which such renderings assume on Aristophanes' part would be very surprising in one who was marked by what Croiset⁶ called 'l'assurance imperturbable d'une haute supériorité de nature', and the 'orgueil naïf et juvénile dans ses parabases' (which contain self-praise in all the first five plays; cf. fr. 314 K). Graves's note, 'not great and grand like tragedy', besides assuming an unlikely confusion on the audience's part, misses the point that A. at *Pax* 749 f. clearly indicates his conception of himself as the counterpart in Comedy of Aeschylus in Tragedy—for Aristotle⁷ he was the counterpart of Sophocles; and Quadlbauer's idea,⁸ based on the above lines from the *Wasps*, that Aristophanes was claiming for himself a 'mittlere Linie', sorts ill with those lines from the *Pax* (cf. also *Eg.* 516 and the passages cited by McN. G. Little in *HSCPh* (1938), 213 n. 1). The Romantic disparagement of the play by A. W. von Schlegel⁹ may have had some influence in determining the above interpretations. But the piece was admired by Racine and W. von Christ, among others, and in modern times Paul Mazon¹⁰ declared it of all Aristophanes' plays 'la plus riche et la plus réfléchie'. We may be sure that A. himself would have been as indisposed as Shaw 'to hawk a masterpiece with the cry of "stinking fish"'. Indeed it would have been most strange for any Greek writer of Comedy to speak in self-disparaging tones in view of 'typisch

¹ *Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, 1st ed., p. 237 n. 2.

² *CQ* (1954), pp. 64-75; (1955), pp. 94-5; (1957), pp. 185-5; (1959), pp. 126-7.

³ *Neue Jahrb. f. d. klass. Alt.*, 1902, 420 ff.

⁴ See n. 2.

⁵ *Jahrb. Arch.*, 1893, pp. 69 ff.

⁶ *Hist. de la litt. gr.* iii. 556 ff.

⁷ *Po.* 1448^a27.

⁸ *Wien. Stud.* 1960, p. 41.

⁹ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band V, 205 f.: 'Die Wespen sind nach meinem Urtheil das schwächste Stück des Aristophanes.' With reference to the lines under discussion he wrote (*ibid.*, p. 206): 'Der Dichter spricht diesmal selbst bescheiden von seinen Mitteln der Unterhaltung', which shows that he must have felt it out of character for A.

¹⁰ See O. Weinreich, *Einführung zu Ar.*, vol. ii, pp. li ff.

griechische agonale Gedanken, dieses Betonen der Überlegenheit über die Vorgänger', as Quadlbauer¹ put it, whose article shows that A.'s high opinion of himself, and claim to have elevated Comedy to a new dignity, were in general accepted by posterity.²

Mitchell,³ indeed, was aware of the strangeness of the words as normally understood. 'Did Mr. Schlegel', he wrote, 'really see nothing in the verses before us but the outward meaning which the words convey? If ever a cloud came over the gay mind of Aristophanes, it must have been when he made the mortifying admission in the text; and with reason. Of all the subjects which he had yet handled in his dramatic career, the present he must have felt to be by far the most important . . .'. Aristophanes drew back, according to Mitchell, from an inviting but perilous subject through prudence; and *μηδὲν προσδοκᾶν λίαν μέγα* was the bitter remark of a man who felt his hands tied. But this is to read a great deal between the lines, and involves a very abrupt transition in line 57.

I suggest, rather, that here, where the slaves speak for the poet, as Blaydes said, line 56 is the congener of line 57 and following lines, and means that none of the figures on the stage is dressed so as to seem *membrosior aequo* (*Priap.* 1. 5), a claim identical with that made at *Nu.* 537 ff. *μηδὲν* as a euphemism is closely comparable with what is known to be the commonest kind of euphemism in Latin,⁴ and similar to that at *Nu.* 974 *μηδὲν ἀπηνές*; cf. also *Ach.* 1149 *τὸ δεῖνα*, *Lys.* 938 *τοῦτο*, *Ec.* 1143 *πάντα* (with Van L.'s note); *Anth. Graec.* 1. 104. 6; 208. 6; 12. 232, 1; *Alciph.* 4. 13. 4. That Aristophanes could count on his audience to give *μέγα* the obscene reference here suggested is indicated by *Pax* 1349, *Lys.* 23, *Ec.* 1048. The particle *αὖ* in line 57, which is usually taken here as equivalent to *contra*, can also mean *item*,⁵ as at *Eq.* 207 (cf. *Nu.* 975), and here, I suggest, marks 57 as continuative, rather than contrastive, with 56.

The commonly accepted interpretation of our passage, although so out of accord with Aristophanes' high opinion of himself, seems to derive support from line 65: *ὑμῶν μὲν αὐτῶν οὐχὶ δεξιώτερον*, which Starkie translated: 'not too refined and exquisite for you', which contrasts with the poet's usual flattery of his audience's good taste, as at *Nu.* 521, 1115-30, *Av.* 1102-17, *Ra.* 677, 1115, 1119, *Ec.* 1155-62. We should do better to take it with Bekker: 'sunt autem δεξιοί, εὐπαίδευτοι. Et hic valet οὐ δεξιώτερον, οὐχ ἥσσον τῆς ὑμῶν σοφίας.'

The explanation of *Nu.* 537 ff. given by Körte,⁶ namely that A. may have meant that the phallus was *ἀναδεδμεμένος* rather than *καθειμένος*, and that the relative decency of A.'s plays consisted in this, seems unnatural. As Gould and Lewis, in the rewritten chapter IV of Pickard-Cambridge's *Dramatic Festivals of Athens* (p. 221) say: 'The attempt made by Körte and supported by Webster to throw the emphasis on *καθειμένον* with an implied contrast with a tucked-up phallus, comparing the two positions of the phallus in fig. 78 (i.e. the Leningrad Chous), is not noticeably successful. There is no evidence to show that one position was regarded as more decent than the other.' When Professor Dover in his commentary on *Nu.* 538 ff. writes: '. . . on a classical herm as on Horace's *Priapus* (sc. *S.* 1. 8. 5) the penis is erect, and Ar. is

¹ Loc. cit., p. 78.

² Loc. cit. 47, 49 (forerunner of New Comedy), 50, 52, 61, 73, 77.

³ *Ed.* 1835.

⁴ *Arch. f. lat. Lex.* xi. 516, 532.

⁵ Bekker's Index s.v.

⁶ *RE*, s. v. 'Komödie', xi. i. 1219 f.

speaking of a leather penis ‘hanging down’’, he seems to overlook the practical difficulty that would have faced a stage costumer (as compared with a statuary or painter) of representing a phallus in any other way on an actor’s costume—short, that is, of resorting to the very *Aufbindung des Gliedes* that Körte irrationally looked on as constituting the *relative Dezenz* Aristophanes was claiming.

In his discussion of the doubtful punctuation of ἐρυθρόν ἐξ ἄκρου παχύ, Professor Dover gives the choices of Σ^E: ‘(i) “red at the end <and> thick <at the end>”; (ii) “red at the end <and> thick <sc. throughout>”, (iii) “red <sc. throughout> <and> thick <at the end>”’; and opts for the third choice. I should have thought number 2 was to be preferred, the red colour being intended to represent a ψαλλή (= *membrum virile praeputio retracto*). Professor Dover’s objection that (i) or (ii) would mean that the comic poets sometimes represented a circumcised penis, and that this is the only assumption that makes sense of both ‘hanging down’ and ‘red at the end’, can only follow from an assumption that the σκύτινον καθειμένον indicated incomplete τέτανος. But I believe, for the reasons given, that this conception is mistaken. A σκύτινον that was both παχύ and ἐρυθρόν ἐξ ἄκρου was a sufficient concession to realism. The *Aufbindung* was just the last short step to complete realistic indecency.

On *Vesp.* 1342 ff.:

ἀνάβαινε δεῦρο χρυσομηλόλόνθιον,
τῇ χειρὶ τουδὶ λαβομένη τοῦ σχοινίου,

Professor Dover¹ wrote: ‘One passage attests the phallus καθειμένος for certain . . . Beare makes nothing of it.’ Gould and Lewis (op. cit.) include this passage among those they consider ‘at least indecisive’ for the presence of a visible phallus. I should like to make a suggestion about these lines.

The now transformed Philocleon, drunk and delighted by the prospect of the new life he is to live *inter pocula cum venustis puellis* (Van L.), is like the ὀψιμαθής in Theophrastus,² who likes ὅταν ὦσι πλησίον γυναικες μελετᾶν ὀρχεῖσθαι. We are told (1476 ff.) that since he started drinking he has gone dancing-mad. To dance when drunk was very natural.³ Now we read in Ter. *Ad.* 752 of the *senex delirans* who, in the company of girls, is going to dance *restim ductans*. This sort of dance was similar, according to Warnecke,⁴ to the ὀρμός-dance of which we hear in Ar. *Th.* 954 ff. That it was this *restis* Philocleon is referring to in the word σχοινίου is a preferable interpretation on more than one ground. Of course A. makes Philocleon indulge in much double-meaning talk with reference to it, as is common in comedy; but the word is not cited from any other text as simply meaning πέος; and the fact that, despite the general αἰσχρολογία of Old Comedy, A. was noted for his ὑπονοία⁵ makes it likely that σχοινίου was double-meaning.

I am not concerned to argue about later plays than the *Wasps* with regard to the presence or absence of the σκύτινον, but may perhaps point out that at *Lys.* 989, in the words ἀλλ’ ἔστukas, ὦ μαρώτατε, the disgust and sudden surprise of discovery expressed are inconsistent with an Aristophanic stage on which figures such as those seen in Bieber’s *History of the Greek and Roman Theater*, illustrations 90 and 94, were regular. Lines 987, 1073, and 1083 f. of the same

¹ *Lustrum*, 1957, pt. 2, p. 57.

² *Char.* xxvii. 23.

³ Alexis, fr. 222 K; G. Williams, *Hermes*,

1958, p. 91 n. 1.

⁴ *RE*, s.v. ‘Tanzkunst’, p. 2242–end.

⁵ Quadlbauer, loc. cit., p. 50.

play suggest that A. chose, when his plot called for phallicism, to indicate it more discreetly, perhaps somewhat as in the case of the statue of Priapus with the Cupids seen in Baumeister, fig. 1563. Webster¹ refers to the possibility that the phallus may have been concealed by clothing; and Gould and Lewis (*op. cit.*, p. 221), in reference to ll. 980-1013, remark: 'the cloak is an effective disguise, and may fall aside at line 989.'

To use vase-paintings that indicate the appearance of phallic costume on the fifth-century stage as evidence for its use by Aristophanes who, in proud terms, claimed at least once, and as I should say twice, that he, personally, had got rid of it, reminds one of Housman's remark when refusing to have his poems included in a selection of verses of the Nineties: that it would be as technically correct and as essentially inappropriate as to include Lot in a book of Sodomites.

University College, Cambridge

J. F. KILLEEN

¹ In Pickard-Cambridge, *D.T.C.*², p. 144 n. 1.