

ΦΥΣΙΣ: A BAWDY JOKE IN ARISTOPHANES?

It is characteristic of Aristophanes that, in the fifth-century debate on the conflicting moral claims of φύσις and νόμος, he tended to adopt a conservative stance, and in general to support the claims of φύσις.¹ Most of his plots concern an imbalance in cosmic order (usually at first perceptible to the hero alone), and the hero's *δεωνὸν ἔργον καὶ μέγα* (*Ach.* 128) which is undertaken to correct it. Often the cosmic imbalance is caused by the pre-eminence of those who place their own νόμος above φύσις (whether they are generals, politicians, sophists, or tragedians), and the hero's self-imposed task is to reverse this state of affairs. The success of his *δεωνὸν ἔργον* restores the moral pre-eminence of φύσις—the *alazones* are the last, sterile proponents of a νόμος, and their defeat sums up, in particular and simple terms, the general theme of the whole play. The celebrations which end most of the plays deal in terms of food, drink, sex, and the worship of the old gods: φύσις, in short, reduced to essentials.

A moral bias of this kind conforms to the preferred stance of many comedians. Although the surface of an Aristophanic comedy crackles with radical ideas, the underlying thought is generally nostalgic or reactionary—a trend which can also be traced not only in what is known of the rest of Old Comedy, but also in the work of many later comedians who adopted a moral stance: Jonson, Gilbert, and Chaplin for example. In addition, it suits the dramatist's function in Old Comedy as priest of Dionysos, and particularly as guardian of the phallic and regenerative aspects of Dionysos-worship. In *Frogs*, the most Dionysian of Aristophanes' plays, the basic claim made for the poet's function by Aeschylus is that it teaches and reinforces φύσις; the inventions of the Aristophanic Euripides, in contrast, are clearly characteristic of those who wish to erect a system of νόμος of their own. (Cf. esp. the prayers made before the contest, *Ran.* 885 ff., and, in the discussion of the poet's role, 954–67, 1008–17, 1030–44, 1077 ff. The comments the Chorus make about Euripides, 826 ff. and 1099 ff., imply condemnation as well as admiration, and contrast with their significant description (1259) of Aeschylus as τὸν Βακχεῖον ἄνακτα.)

But what exactly did Aristophanes mean by φύσις? Clearly, in principle, the same as his contemporaries: that is, the promptings of 'natural law' as opposed to those made by man.² The plots of his plays, as well as many details within them, exhibit and discuss the φύσις-νόμος antinomy in a manner as clear cut and unequivocal as any late-fifth-century tragedy. But recently an additional meaning has been claimed for φύσις, which materially affects the understanding of the word *when spoken in a comedy in a theatre*, and is therefore highly relevant to Aristophanes. It is claimed that in late-fifth-century Athens φύσις, as well as having its more orthodox meanings, was also used as a euphemistic or slang word for the

¹ It is of interest that of the forty extant occurrences of φύσις in Aristophanes, no less than eleven are in *Clouds*. This 'sophist-play', on the other hand, only contains six examples of νόμος, as against no less than sixteen in *Birds* (whose theme is vitally concerned with the establishment of a new νόμος).

² It is clearly no part of this article to enter in any detail into the φύσις-νόμος controversy. The whole matter is best discussed in Heinimann, *Nomos und Physis* (Basel, 1945), and related to drama by many scholars after him, notably Dodds, Kitto, and Lloyd-Jones.

organs of generation, the genitals, themselves. The meaning is allowed by lexicographers (see LSJ⁹ s.v. VII 2), and has now been accepted without reservation, and in a position of some prominence, by Jeffrey Henderson in his recent study of Aristophanes' bawdy (*The Maculate Muse* (Yale, 1975), p. 5).

Clearly, if φύσις did have such a double meaning, well understood in everyday speech, it would in the theatre unite the two functions (of a comic poet entertaining a vast audience and a servant of Dionysos reasserting the phallic and regenerative sides of his worship) in a very neat way, characteristic of Aristophanes' verbal dexterity. But, *pace* Henderson, there is no real evidence that this double meaning was ever actually known (at least outside the theatre, where even the most innocent word can be given a bawdy gloss in performance) in the fifth century at all. Certainly it was in general existence by the time of the scholiasts, and conforms with the same double meaning in the Latin word *natura*.³ But what the scholiasts say about fifth-century Athens is not firm evidence, and the examples Henderson quotes from other poets of Old Comedy (op. cit., p. 5) are anything but conclusive proof, even for theatrical use. Bluntly, if the word φύσις did have a bawdy double meaning in everyday speech, we should expect the double meaning to be clearer than this, and certainly obvious in the majority of uses in Aristophanes himself, in view of the full—and clearly apparent—use he makes of every other kind of double entendre, from obvious ones like those on χοῖρος or μύρτον to esoteric ones like those on στεφάνη or λόχμη.⁴ It is proposed, in the rest of this article, to review the uses of φύσις in Aristophanes, to see if a bawdy double meaning can, in fact, be discovered. If it cannot, in a writer for the comic theatre, then it is most unlikely to have been present in everyday, non-comic language.

The word φύσις occurs, in one case or another, forty times in extant Aristophanes. A simple test for bawdy is to replace it, each time it appears, with the appropriate word of explicit bawdy (e.g. πέος, κύσθος κ.τ.λ.), and see how this affects the meaning of the passage. If explicit bawdy makes nonsense, or even if it obscures the primary meaning of φύσις (normally in Aristophanes 'nature', 'character', or 'natural self'), then we may take it as extremely unlikely that a double entendre was made, even by gesture or emphasis, in the Athenian performance. For the success of any double entendre depends on both meanings having equal prominence and relevance to the situation in hand, however incongruous their links with one another: this is especially the case with words like φύσις, where the primary meaning is abstract, the proposed bawdy meanings concrete.

φύσις appears in Aristophanes as follows: *Eq.* 518; *Nub.* 276, 352, 486, 503, 515, 537, 877, 960, 1075, 1078, 1187; *Vesp.* 1071, 1282, 1459; *Pax.* 607, 1164; *Av.* 37, 117, 371, 685, 691, 1569; *Lys.* 545, 1037; *Thes.* 11, 167, 531, 752, 1129; *Ran.* 541, 700, 810, 1115, 1183, 1451; *Plut.* 118, 273, 279; frag. 5.

We can begin by eliminating from this list all those examples where φύσις clearly means nothing else but 'by nature', and a double meaning such as 'by penis' would obstruct rather than enhance the meaning. The uses in *Eq.* 518, *Nub.* 515 and 877, *Pax.* 1164, *Av.* 37 and 685, *Lys.* 1037, and *Ran.* 700 fall into

³ See Varro, *R.R.* 3.12.4; 2.7.8; Cicero, *N.D.* 3.22.55; id. *Div.* 2.70.145. For φύσις meaning the sexual organs, see Weinreich in *Rb. Mus.* 77 (1928), 112.

⁴ χοῖρος *passim* and esp. *Ach.* 729 ff. (Henderson, op. cit., pp. 131 f.) μύρτον

Av. 1100, *Lys.* 1004 (Henderson, op. cit., pp. 134 f.). στεφάνη cf. *Thes.* 448 (and Ruck, 'Euripides' Mother', in *Arion* N.S. 2/1, p. 17). λόχμη *Lys.* 800 (Henderson, op. cit., p. 136).

this category. We can add to them similar passages, where however the meaning 'by penis' makes some sort of (not very funny) joke *παρὰ προσδοκίαν*. The uses in *Nub.* 537 and 1187, *Av.* 371, *Thes.* 752, *Ran.* 1183, and the three in *Wealth* belong to this category. Of these, *Nub.* 537 and 1187, and *Plut.* 279 seem more possible than the others; *Thes.* 752 (Mnes: φιλότεκνός τις εἶ φύσει) would make an excellent, and typically Aristophanic, joke in the mouth of Mnesilochos; and *Ran.* 1183–5 (Aesch: μὰ τὸν Δῖ οὐ δῆτ' ἀλλὰ κακοδαίμων φύσει, ὄντων γὰρ πρὶν φῦναι μὲν Ἀπόλλων ἔφη/ἀποκτενεῖν τὸν πατέρα, πρὶν καὶ γεγονέναι) is of interest, as if Aeschylus were adding 1184–5 as a careful gloss to prevent misunderstanding of κακοδαίμων φύσει in 1183—a typical comic routine, pretending that bawdy is in the audience's minds only, and was not at all intended by the comedian. Such a routine, in the mouth of the dignified Aeschylus, would be particularly effective—and it is reinforced rather than weakened by the repetition of the double entendre, on φῦναι (1184). A third category links the word φύσις with a proper name: *Nub.* 503, *Av.* 1569, and *Ran.* 541. If there was a double entendre here, it is impossible now to discover its point; of the three examples, a double entendre in the passage from *Birds* makes better sense, perhaps, than in the others.

The largest and most promising group involves a double entendre of exactly the ironic kind described above: that is, where an abstract meaning (usually 'nature' or 'character') would be understood together with a concrete bawdy one (usually 'penis' or 'cunt'). This deliberate confusion of the abstract and the concrete is very like Aristophanes' general treatment of sophistic tenets (cf. Strepsiades' confusion about what the students are seeking under the ground (*Nub.* 188 f.), or the analogy between the cause of thunder and the state of his digestion (*Nub.* 382 ff.), or indeed the concretization of many of the abstract ideas presented by both Right and Wrong in the agon of the same play). Sometimes the joke is simple and *παρὰ προσδοκίαν*: as in *Nub.* 352 and 960, *Vesp.* 1282 and 1459, *Av.* 691 (very unlikely), *Lys.* 545, *Thes.* 11 and 531, *Thes.* 1129 (an excellent joke), *Ran.* 810 and 1451. In four cases the joke would refer either to stage costume (*Nub.* 276, *Vesp.* 1071) or to the penis in real life (*Pax* 607, unlikely because the association is with Pericles, not Peace; and frag. 5, where the shapes of the vegetables chosen suggest penis and scrotum respectively).

The remaining five examples (*Nub.* 486, 1075, and 1078; *Thes.* 167 and *Ran.* 1115) are perhaps both the best and most likely jokes, and deserve individual attention. *Nub.* 486 (Soc: ἐνεσσι δῆτα μανθάνειν ἐν τῇ φύσει;), delivered in a suitable way (one thinks of Frankie Howerd) would bring the house down by bawdy *παρὰ προσδοκίαν* alone; it is also an exact imitation of the Socratic question as preserved in Plato and Xenophon. *Nub.* 1075 (Ad. Log.: πάρεμι' ἐντεῦθεν ἐς τὰς τῆς φύσεως ἀνάγκας) and *Nub.* 1078 (Ad. Log.: χρώ τῇ φύσει, σκίρτα, γέλα κ.τ.λ.) are used by Henderson as proof of the everyday bawdy meaning of φύσις in the fifth-century (op. cit., pp. 5, 77). The phrase τὰς τῆς φύσεως ἀνάγκας (*Nub.* 1075) is paralleled elsewhere by τὴν ἀναγκαίαν φύσιν (Philem. 4.6); and χρώ τῇ φύσει (*Nub.* 1078), if φύσις = πέος, is, in context, an acceptable and indeed appropriate image. The trouble is that both passages make perfect sense—and not very different sense—without the double entendre. Dover in his edition⁵ not only offers acceptable translations for both examples, but also finds convincing parallels for his meanings in other writings of the period. It is possible to

⁵ Dover, *The Clouds* (Oxford, 1968), p. 227.

understand τὰς τῆς φύσεως ἀνάγκας as 'nature's imperatives', and χρῶ τῇ φύσει as 'do what you will'—and to place a suitably bawdy gloss on both phrases (perhaps by emphasis or gesture in performance)—without there being any kind of accepted double meaning for φύσις in either everyday or theatrical Greek. The same is true of *Ran.* 1115 f. (Cho: αἱ φύσεις τᾷλλως κρᾷσται, / νῦν δὲ καὶ παρακόνηται): its meaning is perfectly clear if φύσεις is taken to mean 'wits', and very funny if it also means 'pricks'—but there is no absolute need whatever for the bawdy interpretation. It is of interest that παρακονᾶν came to mean 'to rub up against' in later Greek;⁶ it is used metaphorically once in Xenophon (*Cyr.* 6.2.33, with ψυχῇν), but in a context which allows of no bawdy interpretation.⁷ The most one can say here is that, as in *Nub.* 1075 and 1078, it would be agreeable if the double meaning did exist, but there is no real proof whatsoever.

The final passage, *Thes.* 167 (Ag: ὁμοία γὰρ ποιεῖν ἀνάγκη τῇ φύσει) is perhaps the most interesting of all. It comes from the scene in *Thes.* where Agathon is defending his theory that a dramatist must identify with his material, even down to dressing in the same way. Mnesilochos interprets the line as bawdy, commenting μὰ τὸν Δι' οὐ ζήλω σε τῆς παιδεύσεως (175); and the whole episode is full of bawdy references to Agathon's effeminacy (130 ff., 153, 157 f., 174 f., 200 f., 206). The double entendre joke on φύσει, if allowed, would certainly work better here than in any of the other examples—and there is even ἀνάγκη in the line to reinforce it (cf. τὰς τῆς φύσεως ἀνάγκας, *Nub.* 1075). But the same objection arises as before: the primary meaning of φύσις makes perfect sense, and there is therefore no justification for assuming a bawdy one, in or out of the theatre.

In summary, then, the idea that φύσις could be bawdy is a highly attractive one, and leads (in the extant examples quoted) to several excellent and entirely Aristophanic jokes. But in view of the facts that (1) in every case the primary meaning is good enough (and in several cases essential and exclusive), and (2) there is no other contemporary evidence of any weight, we must, perhaps with reluctance, decline to share Henderson's enthusiasm, and instead declare that the double entendre, if any, was made in performance by emphasis or gesture, and was not implicit in the meaning of the word itself.

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⁶ See LSJ⁹ s.v.

⁷ It is however possible to read a bawdy double meaning into ἀκονᾶν in Ar. frag. 684, and both τρέβειν (Henderson, op. cit.,

p. 176) and θλίβειν (ibid., p. 175) have bawdy associations. The case is doubtful: but some evidence does exist.