

WAS THERE A DECREE OF SYRAKOSIOS?

A much-discussed fragment of Phrynichos' comedy *Monotropos*, together with the comments of the scholiast on Aristophanes who preserves it, have often been taken to indicate that at some point before the production of the play, in spring 414 B.C., the Athenian politician Syrakosios moved a decree that restricted the right of comic playwrights to satirize individual Athenians.¹ The relevant passage (*schol. ad Arist. Aves* 1297 = Phrynichos F 27 K-A) reads as follows (I reproduce the text of Kassel and Austin):

δοκεῖ δὲ καὶ ψήφισμα τεθεικέναι (Συρακόσιος) μὴ κωμωιδεῖσθαι ὀνομασί τινα (τινας Bergk), ὡς Φρύνιχος ἐν Μονοτρόπῳ φησί· ψῶρ' (ψᾶρ' Usener, ψῶζ' White) ἔχει (ἔχε E, ἔχεν V, ἔχοι Dindorf) Συρακόσιον (-ούσιον Γ). ἐπιφανὲς γὰρ (-ῆς γὰρ E) αὐτῷ (om. V) καὶ μέγα τύχοι (ἐπ. γάρ, <φησιν> αὐτῷ κ. μ. τ. <κακόν> ut scholiastae verba Kaibel)· ἀφείλετο (-ατο V) γὰρ κωμωδεῖν οὓς ἐπεθύμουν. διὸ πικρότερον αὐτῷ προσφέρονται (προφ- V).

I offer first a translation of the text (for the punctuation see below):

[Syrakosios] also seems to have carried a decree forbidding the satirizing of named individuals, as Phrynichos says in *Monotropos*: 'may Syrakosios get the itch. May it be in full view and big (reading ἔχοι). For he has prevented me satirizing the men I wanted to.' For this reason they [sc. the comic poets] attack him [sc. Syrakosios] more bitterly.

Before discussing the content of this passage, something needs to be said about the text and punctuation. The crucial question is how far the quotation extends.² Sommerstein, following Cobet and Bergk, believes that it extends as far as ἐπεθύμουν, which he reads as first-person singular (as in the translation offered above). This interpretation, however, is not universally accepted. Kaibel and Kock both held that ἐπεθύμουν is third-person plural, and that ἀφείλετο . . . ἐπεθύμουν is the comment of the scholiast: 'For he prevented them [comic poets] satirizing the men they wanted to.'³

Metrical analysis fails to resolve the issue. For whereas ἀφείλετο . . . ἐπεθύμουν is anapaestic, the preceding two sentences, which certainly form part of the quotation, are not in any identifiable metre. Indeed, since the first two sentences must be authentic, the lack of metrical correspondence between them and the last could be used as an argument against attributing the last to Phrynichos.⁴

There is, however, a good reason to accept it as authentic. If ἀφείλετο . . . ἐπεθύμουν does not form part of the quotation, that is if Phrynichos offered no reason for hoping that Syrakosios becomes diseased, the scholiast would have had no reason to infer the existence of a decree restricting comic freedom of speech.⁵ All that he could legitimately have concluded is that Phrynichos disliked, or affected to dislike, Syrakosios. Hence we can be reasonably confident that the sentence ἀφείλετο . . .

¹ For full discussion and bibliography of previous scholarship, see A. H. Sommerstein, 'The Decree of Syrakosios', *CQ* 36 (1986), 101–8; more generally, S. Halliwell, 'Comic satire and freedom of speech', *JHS* 111 (1991), 48–70, esp. 59–63. Both these works are cited hereafter by author's name alone.

² See Halliwell, 59–60.

³ Halliwell, 59, n. 48 is sympathetic to this view.

⁴ So Kock. Halliwell (p. 60 n. 49) canvasses the possibility that we are dealing with quotations from two different parts of the parabasis of the play.

⁵ It seems clear from the wording that the scholiast inferred the existence of a decree of Syrakosios from the fragment.

ἐπεθύμουν was written by Phrynichos, while suspecting that the preceding sentences, which are unmetrical, are either corrupt or garbled.⁶

It is clear from his use of δοκεῖ that the scholiast possessed no evidence that there had been a decree of Syrakosios, and simply inferred its existence from the fragment of Phrynichos. Consequently, we are at liberty to ignore his inference and draw our own conclusions from the text. It is also clear that there can have been no decree in the exact terms that the scholiast suggests, since numerous Athenians are satirized in Aristophanes' *Birds*, a play that was staged at the very same festival as *Monotropos*.⁷ Nevertheless, Sommerstein is right to insist that the passage should not simply be dismissed, and that Phrynichos (perhaps speaking through the chorus) apparently does refer to a restriction of some kind. Sommerstein himself revives the thesis of Droysen⁸ that Syrakosios carried a decree forbidding the satirizing of a particular category of people, specifically those who had been implicated in the profanation of the Mysteries and the mutilation of the Herms in 415. A variation on this explanation has subsequently been advanced by Atkinson, who suggests that the decree was intended to protect those who had been exonerated of involvement in these two scandals, by forbidding allegations to the contrary.⁹

It is not the purpose of this note to produce arguments against either of these hypotheses, which in our current state of knowledge hardly allow of disproof.¹⁰ Rather, I wish to suggest that Phrynichos' words are capable of being interpreted in a quite different sense.

My argument is based on two considerations. First, the word Συρακόσιος is not only a personal name, but also, indeed primarily, the adjectival form of the Sicilian city of Syracuse. Second, the dominant concern at Athens in the spring of 414 was not the religious scandals of the previous year, but the fortunes of the Athenian expeditionary force which was currently fighting the Syracusans in Sicily. Syrakosios the man may have been in the news at the time (see Arist. *Birds* 1297), but Syracuse preoccupied every member of the audience. What I tentatively suggest is that Phrynichos is here alluding not to Syrakosios but to the Syracusans. For while, as we have seen, there is no reliable evidence that the former sought to limit comic freedom, the latter could certainly have been accused by Phrynichos of preventing him satirizing whom he wished, in the sense that they had indirectly caused numerous prominent Athenians to be absent from Attica for the whole of the previous year.¹¹ So long as these men were away on campaign, they could provide little or no material for topical satire back at Athens.¹² Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that a writer of comedies should complain, in effect, that he has nothing with which to work.¹³

⁶ So Halliwell, 59: 'The fragment as a whole is manifestly corrupt or garbled.'

⁷ See e.g. Sommerstein, 101–2.

⁸ J. G. Droysen, *RhM* 3 (1835), 161–208, at 161.

⁹ J. E. Atkinson, 'Curbing the comedians: Cleon versus Aristophanes and Syrakosios' decree', *CQ* 42 (1992), 56–64.

¹⁰ But Halliwell, 61–3 produces strong arguments against the view that there ever was a decree of Syrakosios.

¹¹ The Athenian contingent included 1,500 hoplites, 700 marines, 400 archers, 30 cavalry (reinforced during winter 415/14), together with the trierarchs and crews of 100 triremes, and a number of ancillary personnel (Thuc. 6.43–44, 93.4).

¹² Cf. the possibility entertained by Sommerstein (106–7) that Syrakosios was responsible for prosecuting and securing the death or exile of some of those involved in the scandals of the previous years. 'Such a connexion would be quite sufficient pretext for Phrynichos to damn Syrakosios for depriving him of the opportunity (rather than the right) to satirize the victims of his choice.'

¹³ One might usefully compare the lack of overt political comedy in *Birds*. It is possible that

It remains to consider whether the words of Phrynichos, garbled as they are, admit of such an interpretation. There is a Greek idiom whereby a singular ethnic adjective preceded by the article is used to denote a people as a whole. The instances cited by Kühner and Gerth¹⁴ are all from prose texts, but this usage is also attested in Old Comedy (Arist. *Ach.* 338–9). It would support my hypothesis if it could be maintained that *Συρακόσιον* stands for the Syracusans as a whole. It must, however, be admitted that in every case of the idiom cited by Kühner and Gerth the adjective is preceded by an article, whereas there is no article in the passage of Phrynichos.¹⁵ Since this part of the fragment is probably corrupt, it is conceivable that *τὸν* has dropped out of the text. On methodological grounds, however, such an emendation should be resisted.¹⁶ If we accept the text as it is transmitted, it appears that *Συρακόσιον* should be translated ‘Syrakosios’ rather than ‘(the) Syracusan’.

Must we then concede that there was after all a decree of Syrakosios? I believe not, and suggest two ways in which the fragment might be interpreted to conform with my hypothesis. I should emphasize, however, that these are no more than conjectures.

First, it is a matter of some interest that an Athenian citizen should bear the very rare name Syrakosios. As Herman has shown, names derived from *polis*-ethnics were often given in order to commemorate a family link with that *polis*.¹⁷ Thus it is likely that Syrakosios’ father named his son as he did because he had some connection with Syracuse. Of course, the attitude of Syrakosios towards the city after which he was named is a different matter, about which we can only guess. Perhaps, given his father’s apparent views, he was an apologist for Syracuse, and was accused of being a Syracusan sympathizer. Or maybe his name alone, which must have been a source of embarrassment when Athens and Syracuse went to war, led him to be associated in the popular imagination with Syracuse, or with the expedition against it, so that it could be asserted, in jest at any rate, that the man called ‘Syracusan’ was responsible for the war with Syracuse.¹⁸

A second possibility is that Phrynichos is using the two different meanings of the word *Συρακόσιος* to create a joke, of a kind (*παρὰ προσδοκίαν*) which is common in Old Comedy. In the build-up (*ψῶρ* . . . *τύχοι*) the audience is led to believe that Syrakosios the Athenian politician is the butt, but in the punchline (*ἀφείλετο* . . . *ἐπεθύμουν*) this expectation is confounded, and it is revealed that it is in fact the Syracusans who are meant.

When so much is obscure, and with a text that is apparently corrupt, it would be rash to claim to have produced a definitive interpretation of this passage. Yet I suggest that an explanation along these lines is plausible, and that Phrynichos was referring to the difficulty caused by the absence from Athens of many of his favourite targets, rather than to an otherwise unattested piece of legislation.¹⁹

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political activity in 414 was in general somewhat restrained, as the Athenians waited nervously for news from Sicily.

¹⁴ Kühner and Gerth II.1³ p. 14 (§348[a]2).

¹⁵ In comedy, as in other literary genres, personal names are found both with and without an article: see Kühner and Gerth II.1³ pp. 598–602 (§462[a]).

¹⁶ In addition, this emendation would not remedy the metrical problems of the fragment.

¹⁷ G. Herman, *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City* (Cambridge, 1987), 21. An obvious example is the pro-Spartan Kimon, who named one of his sons Lakedaimonios (Plut. *Cim.* 16.1).

¹⁸ It is in any case striking that Syrakosios should feature in comedy at precisely the time of the war against Syracuse.

¹⁹ I should like to thank Arnd Kerkhecker and the journal’s referee for their helpful comments and criticisms.