Trouble in the Early Career of Plato Comicus: Another Look at P. Oxy. 2737

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Abstract
It has been nearly twenty years since the publication of P.Oxy. 2737, and the interpretation of lines 44-51 in particular still remains in dispute. These lines are especially vexing because they touch upon a wide range of issues, among them the early career of Plato Comicus and aspects of dramatic competition in fifth-century Athens. Four articles concerned with these lines have appeared in this journal alone over the past decade, and by now the central problems are familiar.¹

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TROUBLE IN THE EARLY CAREER OF PLATO COMICUS: ANOTHER LOOK AT P. OXY. 2737.44–51 (PCG III 2, 590)

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φησὶ δὲ καὶ Ἑρατοκθέ-

νης περὶ Πλάτωνος ὅτι

ἐὼς μὲν [ἄλ]λοις ἐδίδου τὰς

κομωδίας εὐδοκίμει δι’

αὐτοῦ δὲ πρῶτον διδάξας

τὸὺς Ῥαβδούχους καὶ γενό-

μενος τέταρτος ἀπεξώθη

πάλιν εἰς τοὺς Ληναῖκοὺς.

It has been nearly twenty years since the publication of P.Oxy. 2737, and the interpretation of lines 44-51 in particular still remains in dispute. These lines are especially vexing because they touch upon a wide range of issues, among them the early career of Plato Comicus and aspects of dramatic competition in fifth-century Athens. Four articles concerned with these lines have appeared in this journal alone over the past decade, and by now the central problems are familiar.¹ What really happened to Plato after his failed production of the (previously unattested) Rhabdoukhoi? Is the phrase ἀπεξώθη πάλιν εἰς τοὺς Ληναῖκοὺς evidence of a "qualification-rule", i.e. was Plato "officially" demoted to the Lenaian festival after his failure with Rhabdoukhoi?² Or, as Luppe has argued, does the expression refer, if somewhat infelicitously, to a voluntary decision by Plato, shamed at his defeat, to restrict himself to the Lenaian festival for an extended period.

I wish to offer here a slightly different explanation of the passage, one which, I believe, creates fewer logistical problems than the others, and also avoids arguments that, however ingenious, must remain completely hypothetical in the absence of further evidence. Before I do this, however, I would like to offer some observations on the current state of the contro-


² Many scholars assume that Plato produced Rhabdoukhoi at the Dionysia, though this is far from certain. See below, n. 4.
versy. In order to avoid repeating previously published arguments and counter-arguments, I shall limit myself here to several issues that I believe remain unresolved or improperly examined in the bibliography listed in note 1.

The theory that Plato was somehow "demoted" to the Lenaia, as a result of an institutionalized "rule" regulating the selection of poets from year to year, seems at first glance an appropriate and attractive reading of the passage; there is no doubt that ἀπεσκόθη πάλανε, mentioned as the consequence of failing with Rhabdoukhoi, has negative connotations. Unfortunately, however, we have no other evidence that even hints at the existence of such a rule, and as the studies of Gelzer, Mastromarco and Sutton have shown, the papyrus does not offer enough information for us to reconstruct securely even the general nature of such a rule. In 1982 Luppe set out to repudiate the qualification-rule hypothesis on logical and philological grounds. But while his criticisms of the competing theories were often sensible, his own explanation, namely that ἀπεσκόθη πάλανε must be understood as a voluntary decision to avoid the Dionysia out of shame for his failure with Rhabdoukhoi, is no better substantiated than the theory of a qualification-rule. He seeks support for his argument in the experience of Aristophanes with Nubes, as described in Hypoth. VI (Ἀριστοφάνης ἀπορριφθεὶς παραλόγως φήμης δέιν ἀναιδίδαξει τῶν Νεφέλων τάς δευτέρας), noting that in this passage the scholiast's language is as imprecise as that of our papyrus. Aristophanes, he argues, was not literally forced to produce Nubes a second time; the phrasing of the Hypothesis indicates only that he was upset at his loss, and felt compelled to produce it again for artistic and personal reasons. Similarly, according to Luppe, ἀπεσκόθη in the papyrus is used figuratively to describe Plato's personal decision to perform only at the Lenaia for a while. The Aristophanes-hypothesis, however, is not really apposite, since the key phrase

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3 Noted by Mastromarco1 23 and Sutton2 60 against Lobel (above, n. 1) 44 (on col. II 15f.). Sutton2 59-60, offers a brief summary of the five prevailing interpretations of the rule, [though note Luppe's correction (Luppe1 155 n. 20) of Sutton's # 3].

4 It is even unclear at which festival Plato produced Rhabdoukhoi. The assertion that it was the Dionysia (Mastromarco1 22, Sutton2 60) is overconfident. There is no didascalic record of the play—indeed the title appears for the first time in our papyrus—and Plato could just as easily have "driven back to the Lenaia" as a result of having failed at the preceding year's Lenaia, (as Gelzer {above, n. 1} holds). Luppe1 too is aware of this fact (p. 153), though he believes that it was the Dionysia.

5 Luppe first expressed his disbelief in a qualification-rule in "Der 'Anagyros'-Kommentar Pap. Oxy. 2737", APF 21 (1971) 106, but there only on the grounds that the two festivals were independently administered. As we shall see below, the evidence for this is far from conclusive.

6 Mastromarco1 24 broached, but rejected, such an explanation even before Luppe.

7 The exact length of such an alleged absence is wholly uncertain, and any calculation is also complicated by the unknown date of Rhabdoukhoi, as well as by the dispute over the number of comic competitors during the Peloponnesian war. (The papyrus mentions that Plato placed fourth with Rhabdoukhoi, which implies that there were the normal five competitors instead of the reduced number of three traditionally proposed for the war years. Luppe, however, argues cogently that the number never was actually reduced, in "Die Zahl der Konkurrenten an dem komischen Agonen zur Zeit des peloponnesischen Krieges", Philologus 116 [1972] 53-75). See Luppe2's tentative chronological framework of Plato's early career (p. 16).
there is ὅπῃ δή δεῖν: "he thought it was necessary..." to produce the play again, not "he was forced" to do so. In the papyrus, there is no mention of Plato's thought-process, and there is nothing about the phrasing of the line that demands we import it there.

Luppe's uneasiness with a "qualification-rule", however, is understandable, when we attempt to envision how it might have operated on an annual basis. Let us posit, for the moment, with Mastromarco, a rule whereby if a poet failed to place at the Dionysia one year, he could not participate in the Dionysia of the next year. The premise behind this, of course, is that the Dionysia is the more "international" and, hence, prestigious of the two festivals. Let us suppose that a comic poet has just had a success at the Dionysia of 427. He applies for and is granted a chorus to compete in both the Lenaia and the Dionysia of 426. In 426, he comes in fifth place at the Lenaia. Would it not be strange to have a system that was supposed to ensure that only the best comic poets compete at the Dionysia, but allowed a poet to perform at the Dionysia who had just failed at the Lenaia?

The problems that arise when we hypothesize any qualification-rule for determining participation in the festivals vividly highlight our nearly complete ignorance of the actual procedure for acquiring a chorus. All we really know is that a poet "applied" ("χορὸν αἰτεῖν", cf. Aristophanes Equites 512) to one of the archons— the Eponymous for the Dionysia, the Basileus for the Lenaia— and that the archons made the decisions by "granting a chorus". We assume that this took place at the beginning of the Athenian new year (in July) at the change of magistracies, though Aristotle Ath. Pol 57.1, our earliest source, describes conditions of the fourth century. We have only a vague idea of what the poet presented to the archons, and no information about whether one could apply simultaneously to the two archons with the same play, whether the archons acted independently of one another or whether the festival programs were in any way coordinated. If we could answer any of these questions, we would be in a more secure position to speculate about how a supposed qualification-rule might have worked, and it is possible that some of the objections to such a

8 Cf. Luppe’s anxieties (pp. 150-51) about the logistical problems that arise when we try to imagine poets constantly being disqualified, then somehow requalifying.

9 Cf. Arist. Ach. 502-508 and scholion ad loc., also Luppe’s reconstruction of lines 35-42 (APF 21, 1971, 103-105; App. ad loc. in PCG III 2, 590; below, n. 16).

10 Gelzer’s hypothesis that a poet must have had a victory at the Lenaia before being granted a chorus for the Dionysia is perhaps more intuitively satisfying—it makes sense to think that a new poet must prove his mettle at the Lenaia before being allowed to compete at the Dionysia. Such a regulation, one presumes, would specify that one Lenaian victory would establish a poet’s claim to a Dionysian chorus for the rest of his career. Mastromarco1 21-22, and Sutton2 60 have objected to this on the grounds that Rhabdoukhoi was performed at the Dionysia, meaning that Plato would have already made it beyond any supposed Lenaian qualification. But, as I have noted above, (n. 4), the venue of Rhabdoukhoi is still uncertain, and, as such, Gelzer’s suggestion remains as possible (and speculative) as the others.


12 Pickard-Cambridge (above n. 11) 84, cites Plato Laws 817d, which suggests that the poet read samples of his work to the archons.
rule discussed above could be overturned. But until we have such answers, it seems to me
that we are better off trying to base any explanation of the Eratosthenes-anecdote on what we
already know of the methods of poet-selection in the fifth-century.

To this end, I suggest simply that ἀπεισοθη πόλιν εἰς τοῦς Δηναῖκοὺς re elects the deci-
sion made by one of the archons as a consequence of Plato's failure with Rhabdoukhoi. Mastromarco and Luppe themselves stress how crucial an archon's decision was, and how
unpredictable it could be. Luppe even cites the power of the archon's decision as an argu-
ment against a qualification-rule, but he evidently did not find this sufficient to explain the
Eratosthenes-anecdote. I suggest, however, that behind the anecdote lies the following sce-
nario: Plato applied to the Eponymous archon for a chorus for the Dionysia. The archon re-
fused him, allegedly citing the miserable showing of Rhabdoukhoi. Plato then applied for
and was granted a chorus for the Lenaia (or perhaps he had applied simultaneously to both
archs for a chorus). According to this explanation, what happened to Plato would have been
nothing especially unusual; it would have happened to many comic poets each year, as they
subjected themselves to the caprice of the archon in charge of poet-selection. But, in any
event, it would not have been an automatic result of an institutionalized qualification rule.

The context in which the Eratosthenes-anecdote is introduced seems to support this ap-
proach. Lines 27-28 seem to form a lemma that almost certainly involves the selection pro-
cess for the Lenaia: ἀλλὰ ἔχρην χορόν (v) | [δι]δόντας τὸν ἑπὶ Δηναῖον] εκοπε[τ]αν ---
What immediately follows these lines seems to be a description of the two festivals (lines
35-37: [μὲ]λεύ ἐναὶ τὰ θέα[τρα (ορ θε[α][ματα] --- | ]κα, τὸ δὲ Δηναῖ[κ]--- | . . . . ]ρί-
ως ἐνδοζε[ο]---):. The subsequent lines continue most probably with a description of the
Dionysia. At 43-44 there is either a new lemma, or, as Luppe believes, a repetition of a
citation from the lost top portion of the column. In any event, even if it is a question of a

13 Probably the Eponymous, since he controlled access to the Dionysia, from which appar-
ently Plato was being debarred; though our knowledge of the interaction between the two archons over the
festivals is uncertain (see below).
14 Mastromarco 33, Luppe 152-53. cf. Cratinus fr. 17KA, which complains that Sophocles
had been denied a chorus in favor of the inferior Gnesippos. Aristotle at Ath. Pol. 56.3 says
that the Eponymous archon appoints (καθίστης) three choregoi for the tragic poets, and he
mentions that "in earlier times" (πρότερον) this archon also appointed five choregoi for comic
poets. While he does not offer us any specific information about the entire process, the passage
does imply that the archon had complete control over the dramatic competition. At 57.1 Aristo-
tle states that, although the Basileus arranges the procession of the Lenaia in collaboration with
a board of ἐπιμελεταῖ, he administers the ἀγῶν proper by himself: τὸν δὲ ἀγῶνα διατίθησιν ὁ
βασιλεὺς.
15 The archon in fact may not have had to give any reasons for his decisions; but Plato may have claimed in
a play that the archon denied him a chorus because of Rhabdoukhoi. See below, n. 21 on the problem of using
comic texts for historical evidence.
16 Luppe's supplements throughout are too bold, though his l. 37¢: τὸ δὲ Δηναῖ[κ]--- | ὄχὶ ἐνδοζε[ο]--- | δοξε[ί] εἰνε[η] seems quite likely.
17 Luppe 149 n. 9 Luppe's supplements are ingenious if tendentious: τῶι δὲ τὴν ἐνδοζε[ο]--- | πόλιν' ὀμοίωνεται δῆ τὸ Διονύσιον. Austin in CGFP printed ὄστε [ through Διονύσιον as a
new lemma at 42-44, it is apparent that its subject matter remains the same as that of 27-29, namely aspects of Athenian theater production. Eratosthenes' anecdote about Plato, therefore, even if it is introduced ostensibly to explain the quotation at 42-44, seems also to be relevant to 27-29, which, as noted above, have to do with selection of poets for the Lenaia. Insofar as the papyrus seems to be a commentary on the parabasis of a lost play by Aristophanes, it is likely that 27-29 were spoken by the coryphaeus, who was complaining on behalf of the poet of ill-treatment by one of the archons—the Basileus, no doubt, since the Lenaia is at issue here—and offered advice on what sort of criteria ought to be used for selecting competitors (ἀλλὰ ἔχρην --- κοπεῖ[τ]ν)\(^{19}\).

Some uncertainty remains, of course, even when we understand ἄπειροκθή πάλεν εἰς τοὺς Αἱναικοὺς as I have suggested. In particular we are hindered by the imprecise phraseology: is ἄπειροκθή to be taken literally, with <ὑπὸ ἔρχοντος> understood or omitted? Or—more likely—is the verb used simply to indicate that Plato applied for a chorus for the Dionysia, was rejected by the archon for that festival on the grounds that he had failed at the previous year's Dionysia, and was therefore compelled (if he wanted to perform at all) to apply for the Lenaia? In either case, however, the wording can be easily taken, in my view, to refer to a unique event in Plato's career, when he felt that an archon held against him his failure with Rhabdoukhoi. Eratosthenes doubtless got his information from an actual passage in Plato (probably a parabasis), which conceivably contained in it a boast about his past successes (hence the reference in the papyrus to his productions under others' names), perhaps an invective against the audience and judges for the verdict of Rhabdoukhoi (as we find in Aristophanes Nubes 525-26), and a complaint about the archon's decision regarding a play he wanted to produce soon after Rhabdoukhoi.\(^{21}\)

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\(^{18}\) The play has been identified with the Anagyros (accepted by Austin in CGFP56), but Kassel and Austin print it in PCG among Incertarum fabularum fragmenta. For bibliography on the identification cf. Mastromarco\(^{1}\) 19 n. 1 and Luppe\(^{1}\) 147 n. 1.

\(^{19}\) Mastromarco\(^{2}\) 34-35 believes that the commentator brought in the Eratosthenes-anecdote because Plato and Aristophanes had similar early careers, i.e. each had successes with plays produced under others' names, and each failed with their first Dionysian performance, Aristophanes with Clouds, Plato with Rhabdoukhoi. This much seems probable, but there is no evidence that Aristophanes was, as a result of his failure, subjected to a "norma dell' allontanamento". Cf. Sutton\(^{2}\) 60-61.

\(^{20}\) These questions raise others: was there a protocol in applying for choruses such that a poet had to approach one archon before the other? For example, did a poet start with the Eponymous archon in hopes of performing at the Dionysia, then, if rejected there, apply to the Basileus for the Lenaia? How would a poet secure a chorus for both festivals in a given year (as Aristophanes did in 411)?

\(^{21}\) No matter what the wording of the anecdote really means, we must not forget how dangerous it is to rely on comic texts for historical information. Especially in a parabasis, a comic poet was prone to exaggerate, and there is never any guarantee that what he says anywhere in a play reflects the full "truth". Even if we found in Plato a passage in which he complained of be-
The obscurity of lines 44-51 makes it impossible for us to feel comfortable with any of the theories proposed so far to explain them. While my own explanation does not provide the incontrovertible ὀνόματι we are searching for, at least it has the advantage, as I have tried to show, of relying on a mechanism of theatrical administration securely attested for the fifth century. This makes it unnecessary to posit a qualification-rule, which, as we have seen, is plagued by both practical problems and a lack of corroborating evidence.

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