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Comic Aischrology and the Urbanization of Agroikia

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Abstract

In the preceding chapter, Helen Cullyer has lucidly shown just how complex, even contradictory, the concept of agroikia was in ancient Greek culture. On the one hand, the harsh realities of a rural life in antiquity often gave rise to the notion that agroikoi were perennially dyspeptic and incapable of experiencing pleasure; on the other hand, lacking the kind of education and socialization of their urban counterparts, the agroikos was often conceptualized as lacking self-control and so prone to vices of an opposite kind, such as unrestrained indulgence in bodily pleasures or shameful speech. Cullyer is certainly correct, therefore, to see agroikia as a multivalent term that could connote quite different things depending on who was using it, and for what purpose. But one point is perfectly clear: whether the agroikos was conceptualized as a pleasure-seeking rustic boor, or a humorless misanthrope broken by the harshness of rural life, the term itself was rarely actively positive. The word belongs predominantly to the vocabulary of opprobrium and mockery, especially, as Cullyer has shown, among ancient ethicists such as Aristotle and Theophrastus, who found little philosophically or aesthetically appealing about a rustic life.

Comments

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CHAPTER TEN

COMIC AISCHROLOGY AND THE URBANIZATION OF *AGROIKIA*

RALPH M. ROSEN

1. *Introduction*

In the preceding chapter, Helen Cullyer has lucidly shown just how complex, even contradictory, the concept of *agroikia* was in ancient Greek culture.¹ On the one hand, the harsh realities of a rural life in antiquity often gave rise to the notion that *agroikoi* were perennially dyspeptic and incapable of experiencing pleasure; on the other hand, lacking the kind of education and socialization of their urban counterparts, the *agroikos* was often conceptualized as lacking self-control and so prone to vices of an opposite kind, such as unrestrained indulgence in bodily pleasures or shameful speech. Cullyer is certainly correct, therefore, to see *agroikia* as a multivalent term that could connote quite different things depending on who was using it, and for what purpose. But one point is perfectly clear: whether the *agroikos* was conceptualized as a pleasure-seeking rustic boor, or a humorless misanthrope broken by the harshness of rural life, the term itself was rarely actively positive.² The word belongs predominantly to the vocabulary of

¹ This chapter was directly inspired by Helen Cullyer's stimulating paper on Aristotelian *agroikia* at the 2004 Penn-Leiden Colloquium, which she has since reworked as Chapter 9 of this volume. I thank Helen not only for her original paper, but also for the rich conversations on the topic that we have shared since then, and her acute comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

² The noun/adjective *agroikos* was somewhat less pejorative than the abstraction *agroikia*, but both were typically laden with negative connotations. Aristophanes uses the noun on a number of occasions both

opprobrium and mockery, especially, as Cullyer has shown, among ancient ethicists such as Aristotle and Theophrastus, who found little philosophically or aesthetically appealing about a rustic life.

This attitude is particularly evident in Aristotle's remarks about humor, where, again as Cullyer has shown, the country life seems to offer only feast or famine, with little opportunity for a mean: either, on the one hand, the life of the *agroikos* is too hard, or his education too deficient, to allow him to appreciate a joke, or, on the other, his rusticity will offer him no models of decorum and so he will joke excessively and out of season. Cullyer's analysis is concerned primarily with Aristotle's general assessment of the *agroikos* as basically humorless. For Aristotle, rustic humor, when one can find it, is, predictably, a negative phenomenon, and stands in stark contrast to urban wit, or *eutrapelia* (Cullyer 000). Aristotle contrasts *eutrapelia* with *aiskhrologia* ('shameful, obscene speech'),³ the kind of speech he associates with low or unrefined forms of comedy. Aristotle, in fact, does not talk much, or very explicitly, about what 'rustic humor' might have entailed, but his remarks at *EN* 1128e23, may well imply, as Cullyer suggests, that he saw affinities between the comic buffoonery (*bômolokhia*) of Old

pejoratively (e.g., *Equ.* 41, 808) and more neutrally (e.g., *Pax* 595, 1185; spoken by a chorus of rustics), but even in the less overtly charged examples, it is likely that Athenian audiences would have viewed these *agroikoi* as quite distinct from themselves as urban sophisticates. See Ribbeck 1888 and Diggle 2004, 207, and Konstantakos 2005.

³ When applied to comedy, *aiskhrologia* tended to refer to sexual or scatological obscenity, although the term could be used somewhat more broadly as well. See Halliwell 2004, 115-17, esp. nn. 3 and 6.

Comedy and rustic boorishness (*agroikia*). Despite the fact that, as Cullyer notes, buffoonery seems to have been a vice associated with the urban market-place rather than the countryside (Cullyer 000), one hallmark of *bômolokhoi* which Aristotle strongly repudiates is their propensity for *aiskhrologia*. I shall argue in this chapter that Aristotle's consistent repudiation of *aiskhrologia*—as contrasted to *eutrapelia*—derives from assumptions about the inherent rusticity of such forms of comic speech. In other words, although *bômolokhia* may in general have been conceptualized in antiquity as a negative *urban* value, the infamous personality traits of the *bômolokhos* (boorish, obscene, loud, uneducated, and so forth), turn out to be urbanized variations of behaviors traditionally associated with rusticity. Aristotle, however, seems to have been so focused in the *EN* on the idea that *agroikoi* were fundamentally humorless that he ignored the fact that *aiskhrologia*, one of the hallmarks of *bômolokhia*, had a long association in antiquity with rustic culture, well attested, as we shall presently see, not only through literature, but also through various social and ritual practices.

This association between *agroikia* and *aiskhrologia* may not, in the end, have held much of Aristotle's interest, but it is well worth exploring here insofar as it throws considerable light on ancient comic practices, and in particular, on how poets throughout Greco-Roman antiquity conceptualized and deployed comic obscenity for audiences highly sensitive to the linguistic registers that differentiated the various types of comic speech. I will be fundamentally concerned with a paradox only hinted at in Aristotle, but quite glaring once one acknowledges the extent to which in antiquity *aiskhrologia* was routinely associated with 'rustic humor.' That is, if *aiskhrologia* was, at root, felt to be

rustic and boorish, why did it so often appear in poetry that had pretensions to being witty (*eutrapelos*) or urbane (*asteios*)? Was a poet with a predilection for aischrology somehow marked as more *agroikos* than poets working in other genres, or did this aischrology begin to lose its rusticity once turned into poetry? What we will find is that ancient poets of comedy and satire were, at once, self-conscious about the rustic provenance of aischrologic discourse, as well as about their desire to ironize this rusticity and so to assimilate it into their own decidedly urban poetic enterprise. This process of ‘urbanizing’ *agroikia*, as I shall argue in what follows, results in a specific sort of comic trope which derives its humor from the deliberate blurring of high and low discursive modes and a playful flirtation with scandal and indecorousness.

2. On the Rustic ‘Origins’ of Aischrology

Whatever the actual origins of Greco-Roman aischrology might have been, in antiquity it was consistently felt to have derived from rustic ritual and festive occasions. Ancient writers evidently saw enough evidence from such contemporary practices to conclude that the obscene and indecent diction that found its way into their comic genres must have originally been associated with the countryside. Aristotle’s famous claim that Attic comedy arose from ‘phallic songs’ (*ta phallika*, *Po.* 1449a12) established early on a city-country polarity for aischrology that became standard for virtually all subsequent treatments of comedy, Greek and Roman alike. For these are songs that arose ultimately from the rural celebrations of Dionysus and Demeter, and which featured performances involving not only aischrology, but also indecent display, most notably of the fetishized

phallus.⁴ These rituals have been well documented and often discussed, so we need not rehearse the evidence for them, but a few points are worth making here. First, while many of these rituals became associated with the city by the time we have historical documentation, all of them had original connections with agricultural concerns. Iambe's comically aischrologic insulting of Demeter, for example, as recounted in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, relieves the agricultural barrenness and infertility that had afflicted Greece as a result of her sadness—an event commemorated, as the hymn notes, in the rituals for Demeter at her cult site in Eleusis. Among these rituals was the infamous *gephurismos*, where initiates on their way from Athens to Eleusis (note the movement *away* from the city) would be ritually abused and insulted by a designated person as they crossed the Cephisus river.⁵

Similar practices could be found in the Anthesteria, another festival associated with the city of Athens, but with clear roots in the countryside. This festival, with its strong connections with Dionysus, evidently featured plenty of outrageous behavior, temporarily sanctioned by festival protocols, including the practice known as 'abuse from the wagons.'⁶ This seems to have occurred when festive revelers, possibly masked, traveled around the city in wagons, hurling insults at passersby. The ritual seems to have

⁴ See Pickard-Cambridge 1962, 144-62 and Reckford 1987, 443-67. See Polinskaya in this volume (000) on the subtle, sometimes conflicting, ideologies inherent in these agrarian deities, especially when they were celebrated in urban contexts.

⁵ See Richardson 1974, 214, Reckford 1987, 463-65, O'Higgins 2003, 57.

⁶ Fluck 1931, 34-51, collects the ancient evidence for this phenomena; see also Richardson 1974, 214-15.

been fully urbanized (requiring as it does not only streets, but a population to abuse) by the fifth century, but its roots are in the celebration of viticulture and its patron god Dionysus. There were other Athenian rituals involving aischrology as well, which, as Reckford has noted (1987, 465), tended to belong ‘to women’s ceremonies involving strong fertility magic, mostly located within the sowing season of early October.’ Aristotle’s *phallika*, therefore, were clearly of a piece with such religious rituals, i.e., coarse, aischrologic, and licensed by the pretence of divine celebration. Although the phallic songs he had in mind here are explicitly productions of the polis (ὅ ἦτι καὰ νῶν ἔν πολλὰς τ]ν πῶλεων διαμῆνει νομιζῶμενα), his wording indicates that he is himself a bit at a loss as to how to account for them and regards them as vestigial survivals (διαμῆνει) from a pre-urban, that is to say, agricultural, era.

Dicaeopolis’ private celebration of a rural Dionysia at Aristophanes *Acharnians* 247-79 (ὕγαγεῖν...τῖ κατ’ ὑγροῆς Διονῶσια) is commonly associated with Aristotle’s *phallika* insofar as it includes a song in honor of the god Phales, which Dicaeopolis calls a *phallikon* (261). The song featured a huge phallus as a prop and plenty of mildly obscene discourse, leaving a clear impression that aischrology was felt to be a phenomenon of the simple, relaxed country life.⁷

And, Xanthias, you two must hold the phallus upright
behind the basket-bearer;
and I’ll follow and sing the phallic hymn ...

⁷ See Jones 2004, 196-201, for a nuanced discussion of the town-country polarities in *Acharnians*. See also Compton-Engle 1998-99.

Phales, companion of Bacchus,
fellow-reveller, night-rover, adulterer and pederast,
after six years I address you,
returning gladly to my deme,
having made a peace for myself,
released from broils and battles
and Lamachus.

For it's far more pleasant, Phales, Phales,
to find a blooming young girl carrying stolen wood,
Strymodorus' Thratta from the Rocklands,
and take her by the waist, and lift her up,
and throw her down, and stone her fruit!
Phales, Phales.

(tr. Sommerstein)

ἂ Ζανθ'α, σφᾶν δ' ἔσταν ῥορθῶς ἄκτῆος
ἴ φαλλῶς ἐξῶπισθε τῆς κانهφῶρου· 260
ἔγῃ δ' ὑκολουθῆν ὅσομαι τῶ φαλλικῶν· ...

Φαλλῆς, ἄταῖρε Βακχ'ου,
ξῶγκωμε, νυκτοπεριπλῖνη-
τε,μοιχῆ, παιδεραστῆ, 265

ἴκτ' σ' ἦται προσεῖπον εἶς
τῶν δῆμον ἔλθῃν ὑσμενος,
σπονδῆς ποησῖμενος ἔμαν-
τᾶ, πραγαμίτων τε καά μαχῆν
καά Λαμίχων ὑπαλλαγές. 270

πολλὰ γῆρ ἔσθ' ἔδιον, ἂ Φαλλῆς Φαλλῆς,
κλήπτουσαν εἰρῶνθ' ῥικῶν ὠληφῶρον,
τῶν Στρυμοδῆρου Θρότταν ἔκ τοῶ φελλῆως,
μῆσην λαβῶντ', ὑραντα, κατα-
βαλῶντα καταγιγαρτ' σ' ἂ
Φαλλῆς, Φαλλῆς. 275

Even the word κωμ'δ'α itself encouraged ancient commentators to maintain an original association with rusticity. Indeed, Aristotle may have been himself agnostic about the etymology of the word, but he notes (*Poet.* 1448a35-39) that the Dorians

derived it from their word for village, κῆμη, and applied the term κωμῶδοί to people who wandered from village to village, engaged in what resembled comic performances. Most revealing is the Dorians' explanation for why these people were consigned to the villages in the first place: because, Aristotle notes, they were 'dishonored [and so debarred] from the city' (...ὑπιμαζομήνους ἔκ τοῦ ὕστεως). In other words, early comedy could only find an audience outside the cities, where moral standards were presumably looser and a crude, rustic sense of humor prevailed. Scholars have, of course, long repudiated an actual linguistic relationship between κῆμος and κῆμη,⁸ but it nevertheless remained an enormously popular etymology throughout antiquity, and so reinforced a persistent, if somewhat diffuse, sense that comedy was, at some fundamental level, a rustic phenomenon.

In Rome, as well, where the influence of Aristotle's pre-history of comedy in the *Poetics* was very strong, virtually all accounts situate its origins in the countryside amid festive revelry and free-spirited, aischrologic banter. A famous passage from Horace, *Epistles* 2.139-55, offers a particularly vivid etiology of comedy that highlights its rustic associations:

The farmers of old, strong and content with little, after the harvest was stored away, at holiday-time used to relieve body as well as soul, which endured hardship in anticipation of its end. With co-workers and children and trusty wife, they offered a pig to Tellus, milk to Silvanus, and flowers and wine to each man's Genius, always mindful of how short life is. Through this custom, Fescinnine freedom evolved and poured out its rustic mockery in poetic exchanges; and as the year went on, freedom was sanctioned and made for cheerful play, until it happened that the wicked jesting

⁸ See Pickard-Cambridge 1962, 132, Else 1967, 118 n. 92.

began to turn into open madness, which went around the houses of innocent people threatening. They were upset by its bloody bite; those who were unscathed were also concerned for the common good; they even passed a law and a penalty, which forbade anyone from being attacked with a hurtful song. So they changed the form, and in fear of violence, were compelled to say only nice and delightful things.

Agricolae prisci, fortes parvoque beati,
 condita post frumenta levantes tempore festo 140
 corpus et ipsum animum spe finis dura ferentem,
 cum sociis operum et pueris et coniuge fida,
 Tellurem porco, Silvanum lacte piabant,
 floribus et vino Genium memorem brevis aevi.
Fescinnina per hunc inventa licentia morem 145
 versibus alternis opprobria rustica fudit,
libertasque recurrentis accepta per annos
lusit amabiliter, donec iam saevus apertam
 in rabiem coepit verti iocus et per honestas
 ire domos impune minax. doluere cruento 150
 dente lacessiti; fuit intactis quoque cura
 condicione super communi; quin etiam lex
 poenae lata, malo quae nollet carmine quemquam
 describi; vertere modum, formidine fustis
 ad bene dicendum delectandumque redacti. 155

Like Aristotle, Horace finds it plausible that comedy evolved from rustic religious celebrations—here the ‘Fescennine’ verses that became proverbial for crude, bawdy performances—presumably because so many of the elements he could see in the comedy of his own day seemed harder to explain as products of the city. The nexus of associations that Horace has in mind here is highly revealing, if also predictable: these farmers are hardy and frugal, carefree and playful, but his admiration for such qualities is ultimately rather patronizing. He finds them quaintly innocent and unsophisticated, but not without an edginess that eventually shows a dark side; that is, when what was once mere joking somehow became so cruel and threatening that people had to make laws

against abusive verses (148-50). Horace never actually speculates about what might have caused such a transformation, but it seems likely that he would ascribe it to an unregenerate rusticity, with all the lack of sophistication and literary naïveté that this would imply. These were people, in other words, who did not seem able to understand the difference between literal, *ad hominem* verbal attack on the one hand, and, on the other, comic abuse, mitigated by occasion, context and aesthetic form. Horace, of course, would have known that his account of early comedy was itself a playful invention, especially since it was hardly the case that everyone in ancient Italy came to avoid abusive song and only said nice things to one another (155). And the irony of the passage is further enhanced by the fact that Horace's own *Satires* and *Epodes* were masterful forays into genres themselves suffused with comic mockery and coarse humor.

Other Roman writers also mentioned Fescennine verses in connection with early forms of indigenous comedy,⁹ and in each case a similar story is told: in its earliest forms comedy consisted largely of coarse and indecent mockery, performed with considerable *libertas* as part of a rural religious celebration. Indeed, while such comedy had elements that could be found in other types of comedy not especially associated with the country, it was the indecencies, Horace's *opprobria rustica*, that were deemed 'rustic' because they seemed untouched by any form of urban 'sophistication.' So what happened, then, when explicitly urban poets of Greece and Rome would incorporate precisely such diction into

⁹ See, e.g., Livy 7.2.7. Further references and discussion of the ancient sources in Brink, 1962, esp. 183-91, and Rudd 1989, 97-99.

their own comedy? Was aischrology thought, at some fundamental level, to be evidence of rustic boorishness every time a poet engaged in it? And how self-conscious were these poets that aischrology (and other forms of indecency) was a marker of a city-country polarity?

3. Priapus and the Blurring of High and Low/City and Country

To attempt to answer these questions, we may look to a body of poems, scattered throughout Greek and Latin literature, known collectively as *Priapea*. These were poems about, involving, or dedicated to, the phallus-god, Priapus. As the son of Dionysus/Bacchus, Priapus was a god naturally associated with the countryside and agricultural fertility. In such contexts, he seems to have been taken seriously enough,¹⁰ but it takes little imagination for anyone to realize the comic potential of a god who embodied, quite literally, the male sexual organ. Dikaiopolis' hymn to Phales, mentioned above, shows early hints of what would become a veritable genre unto itself, especially popular, as it seems, in Latin literature. Indeed, the tradition is remarkably stable and continuous across Greco-Roman antiquity, and affords us a number of synchronic insights into a ubiquitous form of obscene humor.

¹⁰ See Herter 1932, esp. 201-39.

By the Imperial period, a distinct collection of some eighty Priapic poems emerged, which has come to be known as the *Carmina Priapea* or *Carmina Priapeorum* (= *CP*).¹¹ These poems most often written in the voice of the god himself or directly addressed to him as if he were in front of the reader. The Priapus of the *CP*, in effect, was a veritable emblem of the connection between aischrology and rusticity: he often functions to promote and protect agricultural interests, he takes the form of an object commonly considered to be indecent and shameful (*aiskhro-*), and he speaks (*-logia*). The poems certainly bear this out, since they are replete with predictably obscene jokes and puns capitalizing on the fact that their speaker is figured as a huge penis. The crudity and coarseness of Priapus' humor, therefore, are readily sanctioned by his status as a god far removed from contexts of urban sophistication and refinement.

At the same time, however, the Priapic poems imply a fundamental paradox: if they are in reality as crude and rustic as their content urges us to think they are, how do we

¹¹ A perennial question about the *CP* is whether it was the work of one hand, or a collection of poems by different hands from different historical periods. The issue has been well treated elsewhere, (see esp. Buchheit 1962, esp. 14-28 [arguing for a single author writing soon after Martial], with summaries of subsequent scholarship in Parker 1988, 32-37, and Richlin 1992, 141-43), the more recent consensus favoring the view that the poems were probably not written by a single author. Although the poems of the *CP* collectively share a number of idiosyncratically Roman predilections, especially a near-obsession with *irrumatio* as a punitive act, they are in other respects intimately affiliated with priapic poetry extending well back into Greek literary history (on which, see Buchheit 1962, 55-107, and O'Connor 1989, 26-29). Certainly the connection between Priapus and the countryside remains constant across the entire Greco-Roman tradition of priapic poetry.

account for their highly stylized poetic form? In addition to the anonymous practitioners of the genre, well known poets of Greek epigram and Roman poetry played with the tradition, and in doing so clearly adopted an ironic pose of rusticity in the service of a distinctly *non-rustic* form of wit.¹² One especially revealing example of this irony can be seen in *CP* 68,

If I seem to say anything ignorantly like a rustic, forgive me: It's fruit I pick over, not books. But, though rough myself, I'm forced to listen to my master reading here time and again, and so I've learned my Homeric letters. What we call 'prick', that one calls 'smoking thunderbolt', and what we call 'arse', he calls a 'scabbard'. To be sure, if 'shitty' [*merdaleon* punning on Homeric *smerdaleon* = 'terrifying'] is the term to use if something is not clean, then the butt-fucker's cock is also 'shitty'. What's it amount to? If Trojan cock had not been pleasing to Spartan cunt, he'd never have had the work to sing...

rusticus indocte si quid dixisse videbor,
 da veniam: libros non lego, poma lego.
 sed rudis hic dominum totiens audire legentem
 cogor Homereas edidicique notas.
 ille vocat, quod nos psolen, '*psoloenta keraunon*' 5
 et quod nos culum, 'culeon' ille vocat.
 merdaleon certe si res non munda vocatur,
 et pediconum mentula merdalea est.
 quid? Nisi Taenario placuisset Troica cunno
 mentula, quod caneret, non habuisset opus...10

¹² Examples of both Greek and Latin priapic poetry ascribed to known authors (but outside of the *CP*) are collected and discussed in Buchheit 1962, 55-107; well known examples include Theocritus Epigr. 4, Horace *Sat.* 1.8, Tibullus 1.4, and some dozen epigrams of Martial (see Buchheit 1962, 67-68 and 117-20, and O'Connor 1989, 36-37).

Priapus opens by apologizing that his rusticity may lead him to say something that would reveal his boorishness,¹³ and it quickly becomes apparent that this is a pre-emptive *apologia* for the thoroughly obscene verses soon to follow. Priapus is *rusticus* (1) and *rudis* (3) and speaks *indocte* (1), so, as the poem implies, it would be natural to expect the kind of aischrology he then offers us.¹⁴ The second line, punning on the verb *lego* (to ‘read’ or ‘pick’), establishes an implicit polarity between the city and the country: the god merely picks fruit (*poma lego*), as any lowly rustic might, he does not read books (*libros non lego*), which would be a largely urban, elite pursuit, emblematic of leisure and resources. The narrative, however, cleverly blends and blurs the polarities—city/country, high-brow/low-brow, learned/ uneducated—by having Priapus claim to be relating what he has heard from his educated ‘master’ (presumably the person who set him up in his garden), who often recites Homer in his presence. What pretends to be a lesson in comparative Greek (i.e., Homeric) and Latin etymology quickly emerges as a raunchycomic travesty of the entire *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Lines 5-6, in fact, play out the high—low polarities at the level of diction, pairing two obscenities with innocuous Homeric words, *psolen* = ‘prick’ / *psoloenta* = ‘smoky’; *culum* = ‘arse’/ *kouleon* = ‘scabbard,’¹⁵ and set up the conceit of the rest of the poem, namely that what really

¹³ For ‘rustic boorishness’ as a character trait that arises from a basic lack of education (*amathia*), see above Cullyer (000) and Diggle 2004, 207-8, Konstantakos 2005, 5-7.

¹⁴ See discussion in Richlin 1992, 125.

¹⁵ Richlin 1992, 125: ‘The puns work both in sound and sense: phallus =thunderbolt, buttocks = sheath.’

drove the Homeric narratives was the size of heroes' members and the lust of Helen, Circe, Calypso and Penelope. Priapus has a double function here, for on the one hand, he maintains his boorish, rustic persona by offering an irreverent reading of the very emblem of Greco-Roman high literary culture; on the other, even a silly parodic reading of Homer implies some measure of urban, literate cultivation and refinement. Priapus' coarse jokes at the expense of Homer, in other words, may have begun as rustic boorishness, but when mediated by literate culture were transformed into urbanized wit. The fact, moreover, that Priapus maintains throughout the poem his status as an unpretentious rustic, who merely offers his own ingenuous perspective on what he hears from his master, assures that we are meant to associate his aischrology with rusticity, even as we witness this rusticity becoming urbanized in the course of the poem.

This is a process played out time and again in various ways in the *CP*, as well as among the Roman poets who tried their hand at the genre.¹⁶ Priapus turns out to be, in fact, overdetermined as a god of aischrology: if his very shape as scandalously unclothed body part were not enough to ensure that he would say obscene things, then his rustic habitation and provincial world-view, according to the conceit, certainly would. Poets could playfully deploy Priapus, in short, as a kind of 'licensing' figure for language that ordinarily would be considered indecorous, if not taboo, and, I might even suggest, as an aetiological figure of aischrologic discourse itself. In literature that had pretensions to urbanity, in other words, aischrologic language can be excused because its origins were

¹⁶ See above, n. 11.

innocent and naïve, even somehow vaguely religious.¹⁷ Once integrated and aestheticized into urban genres and performance contexts, the aischrology becomes ironized (as if these poets were to say, 'we know real rustics are just plain boorish and crude; but because we know that we ourselves are nothing like such bumpkins, we can *act* like them and come off as witty') and so turned into a kind of comedy better suited, in fact, to the city than the country, especially since so much of this irony depends on an implicit stance of urban superiority.

The corpus of Priapic poems offers explicit and consistent evidence that comic aischrology was conceptualized as rustic, and indeed, that these putatively rustic origins could be invoked as *apologiae* for verbal indecency.¹⁸ Sexual and scatological obscenity can be forgiven because Priapus is an agricultural god, and as such, he must talk like the people who set up his statue and honor him with their quaint rituals. Such people would be regarded as uneducated, as the Priapus of poem 68 claims to be (*indoctus*), and so their speech would be particularly prone to indecency.

4. Aristotle on Aiskhrologia and Agroikia in Comedy

¹⁷ This is more or less Martial's strategy in his prose preface to his epigrams, where he claimed that "epigrams are written for people who are used to watching the Floralia..." (*epigrammata illis scribuntur qui solent spectare Florales*). The spring festival that honored the Italian goddess of flowers, Flora, evidently included some scandalous theatrical performances. See Howell 1980, 100, Richlin 1992, 6-7.

¹⁸ Cf., e.g., CP 1, 2, 3, and 8; Priapus' rusticity is alluded to in one way or another in the majority of the poems.

Aischrologic humor, however, was hardly limited in ancient literature to poems explicitly about Priapus, and it is worth considering whether we may generalize from the *CP* to other literary genres. This is, of course, a huge question and our space is limited, but we may perhaps make a small foray into it, by asking whether the rampant aischrology of Aristophanes was similarly conceptualized as fundamentally ‘rustic’? Aristophanes’ comedies are infamously full of sexual and scatological indecency, but despite a general tolerance for such speech within the context of comic drama in fifth-century Athens such diction was not entirely unproblematic even in its own day.¹⁹ Aristophanes himself never addresses the issue of his aischrology directly, but in his occasional, ironic, attempts to distance himself from charges of *bômolokhia*, or ‘buffoonery,’ it seems reasonably clear that he is imagining some resistance to his aischrologic tendencies. In the parabasis of *Clouds* 537-544, for example, he has the chorus-leader claim that the play itself is superior to other comedies because it does not resort to the usual ‘low-brow’ devices, which include, among other things, exaggerated costume-phalloi designed for quick laughs (‘she [= the play] hasn’t come out dangling a piece of sewn leather, red at the tip and fat, so as to make the children laugh’). Once again, we see that phallic humor is construed as low-brow and unrefined, certainly far removed from the *sophrosyne* that Aristophanes wants to claim for his play (536), and it

¹⁹ See Halliwell 2004, 138 on the notion of what he refers to as ‘institutionalized shamelessness.’ Halliwell quotes, aptly, Heraclitus fr. 15 D-K, who seems to begrudge the sanction that Dionysian religious ritual gave to obscene language.

is easy enough to extend this talk of visual indecency to the realm of diction. Other Aristophanic scenes featuring overtly visual phallic humor, certainly, are seldom unaccompanied by off-color verbal humor to match them.²⁰

There are, of course, other moments in Aristophanes where the poet claims to eschew what would amount to *bômolokhia* in his plays in favor of a more refined, sophisticated form of comedy. These are largely ironically disingenuous gestures, as Cullyer notes in the preceding chapter (Cullyer 000), since Aristophanes routinely violates such claims in practically every one of his plays. But the pose is nevertheless illuminating in that it constructs a dichotomy between ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms of comedy which presumably reflects to some degree popular ways of thinking about such genres. Aristophanes wants to imagine, in other words, that some members of his audience might find the ‘lower’ comic forms—the *κακῆ κατὰ φῶρτον κατὰ βωμολοχεῶματ’ ὑγενν* he mentions at *Peace* 748, for example— objectionable, so he preemptively repudiates them and aligns himself with an audience of higher-brow sophisticates, whose tastes would demand more refined humor. Our earlier discussion suggests, in fact, that this high-low dichotomy also implies a polarity between city (high) and country (low), where rustic humor becomes particularly associated with *aischrologia*. But where does all this leave *bômolokhia*? If *bômolokhia* can entail some measure of *aiskhrologia*, and if *aiskhrologia* had, as we have seen, very consistent rustic associations across Greco-Roman antiquity, then we might

²⁰ One glaring example: the extended scene in *Lysistrata* between Cinesias and Myrrhine (835-1012), which features one prolonged sight-gag involving Cinesias’ erect and unrelieved phallus, and many jokes about it.

expect that *bômolokhia* would also have at least some perceived connection with *agroikia*. Cullyer, however, has described *bômolokhia* as a distinctly *urban* vice, associated with low figures of the market-place, such as the Sausage-seller and Cleon in *Knights*, in contrast to Demos, to whom they refer at the opening of the play as an *agroikos* precisely because of his cluelessness and, as Cullyer's discussion makes clear, because of his inability to appreciate humor of any sort (Cullyer 000). The question before us, then, is whether there was any meaningful connection between conceptions of the *bômolokhos* and the *agroikos* in ancient comic genres (and in the minds of their audiences), or whether they are more accurately considered antithetical figures, distinguished from each other by the degree to which they displayed a sense of humor (the *bômolokhos*, excessive; the *agroikos*, none whatsoever).

To approach this question, we may revisit Aristotle's well known discussion of joking and humor at *NE* 1128a-b, which Cullyer has analyzed so clearly in the preceding chapter. As she has shown, Aristotle here definitely regards the *bômolokhos* and the *agroikos* as opposites:

So those who engage in laughter excessively are considered *bomolochoi* ['buffoons'] and vulgar, striving as much as they can for a laugh, and aiming for a laugh more than to say anything decorous or to avoid offending the target of their jokes. On the other hand, those who themselves never say anything funny and who get annoyed when others do, are regarded as *agroikoi* ['rustic boors'] and harsh.

οἱ μὲν οὖν τὰ γελοῖα ὡπερβίλλοντες βωμολῶχοι δοκοῦσιν εἶναι κατὰ φορτικόν, γλιχῶμενοι πῖντως τοῦ γελοίου, κατὰ μῦλλον στοχαζῶμενοι τοῦ γήλωτα ποιῆσαι ἢ τοῦ λῆγειν ἐσχωμόνα κατὰ μῶ λυπεῖν τῶν σκωπτῶμενον· οἱ δὲ μὴ τ' αὐτοῖα ἔπιπῶντες μηδὲν γελοῖον τοῖς τε λῆγουσι δυσχερὰ ἔχοντες ὑγροῖκοι κατὰ σκληροῖα δοκοῦσιν εἶναι. (*NE* 1128a4-9)

Neither the *bômolokhos* nor the *agroikos*, according to Aristotle, is an appealing person insofar as they each represent extremes. Somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, at a point even Aristotle concedes is difficult to pinpoint (ἢ καὶ τῷ γε τοιοῦτον ὑᾤριστον;

1128a27; ‘or is [proper joking] something undefinable?’), lies the person he would call ‘witty’ and ‘clever’ (*eutrapelos*, *epidexios*) (Cullyer 000), who will only make jokes befitting a moral and ‘free’ man (τοῦ δ’ ἐπιδεξίου ἔσται τοιαῦτα λήγειν καὶ ὑκοῶειν οἷα τὰ ἐπιεικεῖ καὶ ἔλευθερῷ ὑρμῶται, 1128a17-19). Aristotle then elaborates with further distinctions, noting that the witty man is free and educated, while the *bômolokhos* is slavish and uneducated:²¹

The joking of a free man differs from that of a slavish person, as does that of an educated and uneducated man.

δ τοῦ ἔλευθεροῦ παιδί διαφῆρει τῆς τοῦ ἄνδραποδῆδου, καὶ πεπαιδευμῆνου καὶ ὑπαιδεῶτου. (1128a21)

With this contrast the lines between the *bômolokhos* and the *agroikos* begin to blur somewhat, for the *agroikos* is also neither *eleutheros* nor educated, and, as such, conceptually aligned with the *bômolokhos* over against the *eleutherios*. Clearly, if Aristotle were to imagine in this passage that an *agroikos* could, in fact, have a sense of humor, it would be colored by the *agroikos*’ lack of education and slavishness, and prone

²¹ While Aristotle doesn’t here specify a *bômolokhos* here, it is clear he has him in mind, since the passage as a whole is concerned to contrast wittiness and buffoonery; cf. 1128a4-5.

to the same excesses that characterize the humor of the *bômolokhos*. The *agroikos* and the *bômolokhos*, in other words, intersect with one another, in some important respects, on the question of moral character, even as they diverge when the criterion is a sense of humor. This may, in fact, be on Aristotle's mind at 1128a33-b3, where his concluding description of the *bômolokhos* leads directly to a final comment on the *agroikos*:

The buffoon finds a joke irresistible, and spares neither himself nor others if he can make a joke, saying such things as no cultivated man would say, nor even want said about him. But the rustic boor is not useful for social gatherings of this sort. For he has nothing to add and is annoyed at everything.

ἰ δὲ βωμολῶχος ἔττων ἔσται τοῦ γελοίου, καὶ ὥστε ἄαυτοῦ ὥστε τῶν ὑλῶν ὑπεχῶμενος εἰ γῆλωτα ποιῶσει, καὶ τοιαῦτα λῆγων ἅν ὁῶδὲν ἔν εἰ ποι ἰ χάρεις, ἦνια δ' ὁῶδ' ἔν ὑκοῶσαι. ἰ δ' ὑγροικος εἰς τίς τοιαῦτας ἱμίλ' ας ὑχρεῶος· ὁῶθὲν γῆρ συμβαλλῶμενος πύσι δυσχεράνει. (NE 1128a33-b3)

Aristotle, in other words, seems to link *bomolochoi* and *agroikoi* here as people of deficient or unformed moral character, and so prone to say and do things that are indecorous or unbecoming a virtuous and refined man. The main difference between them is that the buffoon's mode is humor, the rustic's dyspepsia.

It is clear, of course, that Aristotle's main concern in this passage is not really *agroikia*, so we should perhaps not fault him for failing to clarify his use of the term as explicitly as we would like. Still, as I would like to argue here, this passage yields considerably more insight into Aristotle's conception of *agroikia* than he himself cared articulate at the time. His remarks about the development of comedy at 1128a22-25 are especially revealing, for here he maps the contrast between *bômolokhia* and *eutrapelia* on to what he refers to as 'old' and 'new' comedy:

Someone might see [the difference between buffoonery and wittiness] in the difference between old and new comedies. For in the old, its form of humor was *aischrologia*, whereas in the new, it was more subtly indirect. When it comes to decency, this difference is hardly small.

Ἦδοι δ' ὕν τις καά ἐκ τ]ν κωμ'δι]ν τ]ν παλαι]ν καά τ]ν καιν]ν· τοῖς μὲν γῆρ ἰ
ν γελοῖον δ ἀσχρολογ'α, τοῖς δὲ μύλλον δ ὠπῶνοια· διαφῆρει δ' ὡ μικρ
ζῶν ταῶτα πρῶς ἐῶσχημοσῶνην. (NE 1128a22-25)

Let us analyze the connections: *bômolokhia* is like ‘old’ comedy (by which, presumably, he means fifth-century Attic comedy such as Aristophanes); *eutrapelia* is like ‘new’ (or, more accurately, what we have come to call ‘middle’ comedy), i.e., the comedy of Aristotle’s day, and the old is less ‘decent’ than the new.²² This is fairly crude literary criticism, especially since Old Comedy offered plenty that was not *aischrologia*, but the point he wants to make is simply that Old Comedy was infamous for its *aischrologia*, and that this amounted to a form of *bômolokhia*. Whatever Aristophanes’ own claims about avoiding *bômolokhia*, at some fundamental level all his plays, in Aristotle’s eyes, were, on balance, more buffoonish than witty, and it was the verbal indecencies that made them so.

How does this square, however, with Aristotle’s remarks about the rustic origins of comedy in *Poetics*, where *aischrologia* is isolated as one of its most defining elements? If *bômolokhia* is equated in Aristotle’s mind to *aischrologia*, and *aischrologia* also implies rusticity to him, does *bômolokhia* imply some degree of rusticity after all? And, if so,

²² On Aristotle’s division of comedy, see Nesselrath 1990, 102-49, and, more generally, on the concept of ‘middle comedy’ in antiquity, 1-29; also Rosen 1995.

what would it really mean to say that the *bômolokhos* turns out to be an *agroikos*? Would Aristotle characterize Old Comedy as, in some sense, *agroikos* because of its predilection for obscenity and buffoonery? A collocation of *agroikia* and comedy might, after all, seem somewhat absurd, given that one of Aristotle's defining features of *agroikia* was, as we have learned from Cullyer in the preceding chapter, an inability to appreciate humor. This apparent contradiction can be explained, I think, if we realize that the term *agroikia* is not really synonymous with our word 'rusticity,' that is, when Aristotle was envisioning rustic celebrations that included festive aischrology, it seems unlikely that he would ever refer to them as *agroikoi* in that particular context. They would be 'rustics,' to be sure, but not 'rustic boors'—a more accurate translation of *agroikoi*. Here it will be useful to recall that *agroik-* words are nearly always pejorative and tend to refer not so much to country people in their own element, but to country people conceptualized from a supercilious, urban perspective. From that perspective, even the rustic self-sufficient and comfortable in his daily routines is easily imagined to be ignorant and humorless. This seems implicit in Aristotle, at any rate, when he mentions at *NE* 1128b2 that the *agroikos* is 'useless' (*akhreios*) at social gatherings; for he is here clearly imagining gatherings of a free, educated, urban élite, where an actual rustic would be utterly out of place to begin with. One suspects, however, that Aristotle would not have had much trouble imagining the same man participating in the raucous festive celebrations of Dionysus or Phales that he linked so closely to the countryside. If asked what kind of humor he might expect to find on such occasions, he would presumably predict that it would be full of *bômolokhia* because of its excesses and indecencies. Thus, retaining an Aristotelian framework, we

can conceive of a *rustic* with a sense of humor, even if we cannot conceive of an *agroikos* with one; and rusticity, then, remains aligned with comic aischrology, even if *agroikia* does not.

Things fall more clearly into place, I believe, if we think of Aristotle's *bômolokhos* as essentially an *agroikos* transferred to the city. As Cullyer has clearly shown, the main reason *agroikia* has such negative connotations to begin with is because the hard rustic life affords little time for leisure, and this translates into lack of education, sociability, and aesthetic refinement. From an urban vantage point such as Aristotle's, it is easy to see how this might seem like a particularly joyless kind of life. But worse still, all the disadvantages of the rural life indicate, in his mind, moral deficiency. In the context of the country, an urban onlooker might find this innocuous enough, since it will have no particular effect on the 'serious' activities that take place in a city. Rustic practices such as religious aischrology, therefore, while morally suspect, may be quaint enough in their own context; but as soon as one takes the rustic jokester out of the country and places him in the city, one also transfers to the city his unrestrained sense of humor, his unrefined personality, and his compromised moral sensibility. All these deficiencies conspire to turn what was once a man of the country into a man of the city, and the result is what Aristotle would call *bômolokhia*. Whereas the term *agroikos* can be applied to the rustic transplanted to the city but still holding on—inappropriately and cluelessly—to aspects of his country life, the *bômolokhos*, by contrast, is essentially the erstwhile *agroikos* who has now embraced the city, demonstrating that what might have been quaint in the country is now boorish in the city. As Cullyer has put it (Cullyer, 000),

‘*agroikoi*, who are unable to make or appreciate any kind of joke, are like buffoons, deficient in the intellectual aspect of joking, but they are much more socially deficient.’ The *bômolokhos* may no longer be humorless, as urbanized authors imagined *agroikoi* to be, but he retains their deficient rustic moral character, and this, in turn, is reflected in his style of humor: intemperate, unrefined, and often obscene.

5. Conclusion: On ‘Rustic Buffoons’

We are now in a better position to explain how Aristotle might hold, on the one hand, that *agroikoi* were humorless, and yet, on the other, that comedy itself had distinct origins in rustic celebrations. Rather than assuming that Aristotle was contradicting himself or using terminology carelessly, I would suggest that he simply understood the term *agroikia* in a very specific sense that had little to say about how country people actually did laugh and play when left to their own devices. As an ideologically fraught term, as we learned from the preceding chapter,²³ *agroikia* highlighted moral and socio-political issues from an urban point of view, and as such, would imply little about how rustics would interact with each other in their own context, on their own terms. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine that Aristotle ever thought, even in the passages in *NE* where he mentions dyspeptic *agroikoi*, that country people were entirely devoid of a sense of humor, no matter how hard the rustic life could be. But it does seem clear enough that he

²³ See also, most recently, Jones 2004, esp. 000-000, with a useful overview of the scholarship on ancient Greek ideologies of city and country at pp. 000.

would not himself find ‘country humor’ very appealing, since (at least as he imagined it) it would bear all the negative hallmarks of *bômolokhia* and would remind him of the earliest phases of Greek comedy that he found so crude and devoid of true *eutrapelia*.

Old Comedy, in fact, provides models for a type of *bômolokhia* associated with the country that would have been readily available to Aristotle. Cullyer has alluded to such figures as Dikaiopolis in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* and Trygaios in *Peace*, both of whom are depicted essentially as rustics operating within an urban context; to these we may add Strepsades in *Clouds*, who describes the ‘sweetest rustic life’ (*agroikos hedistos bios*, 43)²⁴ he had before his marriage to his high-society wife led to his current troubles. What would Aristotle have done with such characters? If they were *agroikoi* in his mind, he obviously could not maintain that they were like the humorless, practically catatonic, *agroikoi* he describes in *NE* 1128a-b. This conundrum is best explained, as I have argued above, by supposing that, although *bômolokhia* was for Aristotle a specifically urban vice, it had a rustic counterpart with which it shared a number of elements. Aristotle would trace all of these elements (many of them subsumable under the term *aiskhrologia*) to the deficiencies that Cullyer has well described, notably a lack of education and social refinement, but his particular terminology was really only meaningful when he was talking about the city. If *all* rustics, after all, were uneducated and unrefined, then when it

²⁴ Discussed by Konstantakos 2005, 6-7. It is certainly true that the play mocks Strepsades for his *agroikia*, as Konstantakos notes, but the humor he would have generated with his buffoonery was presumably not only directed *against* himself. That is, at least in part, Strepsades functioned as a ‘rustic buffoon’ along the lines of a Trygaios, whose buffoonery would have had the audience laughing along ‘with’ him as much as ‘against’ him.

came to making jokes, they would all naturally be buffoons; hence there would be no need within that context to come up with a term that distinguished between rustic buffoons and non-buffoons. Within an urban context, however, where the buffoon would be contrasted to a sophisticated jester, more precise terminology is called for; hence the *bômolokhos* contrasted to the *eutrapelos*. The *bômolokhos* and the *agroikos* may be two sides of the same coin when it comes to the nature of their humor, but when imagined within the context of specifically urban humor, Aristotle's *agroikos* is out-classed socially and out-done in wit and repartée. The urban *bômolokhos* might attempt to be funny and come up short when measured by the calculus of *eutrapelia*, but the *agroikos*, even more alien to this setting than the *bômolokhos*, comes off worse still, incapable of either generating humor himself or appreciating it in others.

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