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PLATON AND THE EVOLUTION OF GREEK COMEDY

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In tracing the formal changes in comic drama from the fifth to the fourth centuries, it is common to point to such things as the waning role of the chorus and parabasis, an increasing subordination of lyric elements, and a tendency towards more coherent, unified plots.¹ But changes in subject matter, *topoi*, themes and tone are more difficult to ascertain, especially in light of the wholly fragmentary nature of the comedy that survives from the period between Aristophanes and Menander. Handbooks tell us that along with the decline of the Athenian polis at the end of the fifth century, such hallmarks of Old Comedy as personal invective, obscene language and political satire also disappeared. But such generalizations obviously stem from the careless assumption that fourth-century comedy must have been more like Menander than Aristophanes. In fact, when one looks at the comic fragments from the middle decades of the fourth century, it is striking just how many elements normally associated with Old Comedy appear.² Still, however artificial and imprecise the labels we assign to literary movements may be, most scholars would agree that they remain constructs useful for organizing the undifferentiated material history leaves us.

In the case of Greek comedy the general division between the “Old” and the “New” began at least as early as Aristotle, who could speak at *EN* 1128a22 of *palaiā* and *kainē* comedy. Exactly which poets Aristotle would include under these rubrics remains uncertain, especially since it is likely that he considered at least some of Aristophanes’ plays to be “new” and it was only at the end of Aristotle’s lifetime that the chief representative of our so-called “New Comedy,” Menander, began his rise to prominence.³ The tripartite distinction of comedy as we know it (Old: to the death of Aristophanes; Middle: early fourth century to Menander; New: Menander and beyond) probably originated in Hellenistic scholarship, but even so, as Heinz-Günther Nesselrath has meticulously discussed in his recent book on Middle Comedy, there was often considerable disagreement in antiquity about which poets belonged to what period.⁴

I would like to address here one of these disagreements, namely the question of whether the comic playwright Platon (often referred to as Plato Comicus) belonged, as a few ancient commentators have claimed, in any meaningful sense to Middle Comedy. The question, I believe, is more than just a trivial quibble about what category of literary history to assign Platon to. I am, in fact, less interested in what we choose to call Platon than in the nature of his poetic production, and its relationship to subsequent comic drama. Focusing on Platon in this way enriches our conception of comic trends in late fifth-century Athens, a conception which is too often skewed by inferences drawn solely from the extant plays of Aristophanes. Now that Nesselrath has so thoroughly examined the history and descriptive validity of Middle Comedy as a literary-critical construct, we are well positioned to reconsider the question of whether Platon fits squarely into the mainstream of Old Comedy, or whether he anticipated to a significant degree trends in comedy that we associate with fourth-century Middle comedy.

From a strictly chronological point of view, of course, there can be little doubt that Platon belonged to Old Comedy. His career began in the middle of the fifth century and continued until at least the 380's, roughly paralleling the career of Aristophanes. Yet Platon has frequently been regarded as a transitional figure in the development of Greek comedy from Old to New. Some nineteenth-century scholars such as Cobet and Wilamowitz,⁵ influenced by certain ancient testimonia, went so far as to proclaim Platon the inventor of "Middle" Comedy, Norwood even posited the notion of a distinct fifth-century "school" of comedy (with Crates as its putative leader) which had, he believed, affinities with Middle comedy.⁶

Nesselrath is aware, of course, as he shows so clearly in the first half of his book, that one can define "Middle" so as to include just about anyone, as some of the scholiasts seemed to do. He has demonstrated in fact how the meaning of "Old", "Middle" and "New" tended to vary according to whatever generic teleology a commentator had in mind for comedy. Thus, for example, when a scholiast on Dionysius Thrax held that Cratinus was a quintessential representative of Old Comedy, that Aristophanes and Eupolis belonged partly to the Old, partly to the Middle, Platon to the Middle, and Menander to the New Comedy, it is because his

definition of the terms turned on the amount of invective found in a play.⁷ So even though Platon had not abandoned personal abuse, we can understand how a commentator might have wished to distinguish him from his more acerbic contemporaries by placing him in a different category. Nesselrath, however, reminds us that this “Middle” comedy is not the same as the “real” Middle comedy, which he would have begin rather strictly around 380 B.C.⁸

Nesselrath’s mission of staking out the territory of the “real” Middle Comedy, however, does have the distinct disadvantage of obscuring any notions of Greek comedy as a developing organism. The nature of his task demands, of course, that he focus on what are specific, essential features of Middle Comedy, rather than on its similarities with earlier comic trends, but we must at the same time avoid conceiving too rigidly of the tripartite division of Greek comedy. It is inevitable that the stricter we are about delimiting boundaries between literary periods and genres, the more likely we are to emphasize the criteria by which we *exclude* works from a given category. Nesselrath’s study demonstrates well the virtues and the pitfalls of conceptualizing literary history in this way: we end up with perhaps as clear picture as the evidence allows of what fourth-century comedy looked like, and we are given good reasons for using the term “Middle Comedy” to describe it. But discussing *similarities* between literary works of different periods tends to make generic categorizations less tidy, and so Nesselrath, no doubt unconsciously, occasionally privileges differences between periods in trying to articulate clearly the rationale for his tripartite division of comedy. In the case of Platon, as I noted above, there was something about his comedy that could lead a commentator to consider aspects of his work qualitatively different from that of his contemporaries, and perhaps somewhat ahead of his time. Fragmentary as the evidence is, I believe that those commentators who claimed that Platon was a poet of Middle Comedy, however hyperbolically and however erroneously from a chronological point of view, correctly sensed that he played a pivotal role in the gradual evolution of Greek comedy from the Old to Middle to New.

One type of comedy that has often been seen to link Old and Middle Comedy is the mythological parody, typically a play taking its plot from a well known myth and offering a

send-up version of the original. Such plays were common enough within the mainstream of Old Comedy, (Nesselrath calculates a fourth or fifth of Aristophanes' plays to be of this sort, and nearly a third of Cratinus'),⁹ though typically Old Comedy was characterized more as a genre of personal abuse and politically engaged satire. For whatever reasons, mythological parody became very popular in Middle Comedy, and, as Nesselrath has shown, seems to have taken on a character in this period somewhat different from that of the previous century. Nesselrath points in particular to the tendency to "rationalize" the myths more, to integrate them more seamlessly into scenes of everyday life, and to downplay explicit political satire.¹⁰ The poets of Old Comedy, by contrast, Nesselrath argues, tended to distort the original versions more, focusing on comically absurd aspects of the myths, and engaging in transparent political innuendo.

Platon's own apparent penchant for mythological parody (roughly a third of his known plays seem to fall into this category) certainly inspired a number of scholars over a century ago to credit the testimonia that claimed him as a poet of Middle Comedy.¹¹ Nesselrath has corrected this overstatement based on the chronological parameters that he posits, but he does not examine in great detail what it is about the nature of Platon's mythological plays that might have led ancient (and then modern) commentators to conceptualize him in this way. But let us ignore mere labels for the moment and consider a few examples from Platon's mythological plays that, I believe, ally him in spirit at least with comic poets of the next generation.

Two mythological subjects in particular seemed to attract Platon, as they did many poets of Middle and New Comedy: the amorous escapades of Zeus, and the life and character of Heracles. One play of his, in fact, Νάϊ Μακρά (*Long Night*), combined both subjects. This play is likely to have dealt with the conception and birth of Heracles, where "long night" referred to Zeus (disguised as Amphitryo) sleeping with Alcmene.¹² Only six meager fragments survive (fr. 89-94 KA), but several of the fragments seem to come from the prologue, and suggest that the play followed a traditional plot that stressed the domestic relations between Alcmene and Amphitryo, much as we find in the later Plautine version. Others have argued on the basis of Plautus' *Amphitryo* 142-45¹³ that Platon fr. 90 may be spoken by Hermes, as he tells the audience what to

look for in the actors' costumes in order to distinguish between the real Amphitryo and the disguised Zeus: "he will hold a two-wicked lamp here over the tops of / his temples" (§ntaËy' §p' êkrvn t«n krotãfvn ßjei lÊxnon / d mujon) Fr. 93, too, foreshadows Plautus' Mercury in 474-75: "Then, with just a few brief words, they will become reconciled." (*denique Alcumenam Iuppiter / rediget antiquam coniugi in concordiam*). Another fragment (fr. 89), unplaced in the play, most likely comes from a speech by Alcmena:¹⁴ "but again, it's absurd <to suppose that> my husband / didn't give me a thought" (éll' aÔ gelo»on êndra mou mØ frontËsai / mhd°n). This is not, of course, a great deal to go on, but the fragments draw us forward in time to later Greek comedy, and to Roman comedy, in their suggestion that the play highlighted the domestic ramifications of a divine intervention.

Nesselrath's observation that Middle Comedy often invested traditional myths with domestic coloration typical of the fourth century holds also for several other plays of Platon. The after-dinner game of kottabos, for example, in which contestants would try to dislodge little disks from a shaft by hurling wine drops at them (or in another version would try to sink saucers floating in a basin, as in Cratinus fr. 124 KA) was especially common in Middle Comedy. While allusions to the game can be found in Old Comedy (Cratinus and Ameipsias, among others),¹⁵ it is noteworthy that the references in Platon are set apart from these not so much in their details, as in their self-conscious, self-contained treatment, a feature that clearly foreshadows Middle Comedy.

In fr. 46 of ZeÁw KakoÊmenow (*Zeus Afflicted*) Platon has a scene in which Heracles is about to play the kottabos game. The fragment opens with an interlocutor addressing two characters, one of whom is Heracles: "...you two play at the kottabos game until I've / fixed some dinner for you inside" (prÚw kÒttabon paËzein, ßvw ín sf°n §g Δ / tÚ de»pnon ¶ndon skeuãsv, 1-2). These lines imply that the audience will actually witness a game on stage, introducing no doubt a rather trivial, whimsical scene that places the hero in a banal, domestic setting. A discussion follows about what the kottabos-prizes ought to be, in which Heracles suggests that they play for kisses—again reflecting a fourth-century interest in amorous themes:

(Her:) “Fine, bring the mortar, fetch some water, put out / the wine-cups! And let’s play for kisses!” (f°re tØn yue€an, a%or' İdvr, potÆria / parāyete. pa€zvmen d ç per< filhmätvn, 4-5). Evidently, there followed an exchange in which someone (perhaps Heracles and his partner) received instruction on how to play the game properly: fr. 47: “...it’s quite essential for you to bend back / your hand and throw the kottabos smoothly” (...égkuloËnta de> sfØdra / tØn xe>ra p°mpein eËrËymvw tÚn kØttabon).

In another play, *Spartans, or Poets*, we find a fragment (71KA) that distinctly foreshadows the detailed interplay between two slaves in later Greco-Roman comedy as they comment on the domestic activities of their superiors, and which also features the kottabos. In the first part of the fragment, in which the slaves are discussing their duties in managing the banquet underway within the house, Slave (A) mentions that he will bring out the kottabos after the libations have been poured. In the second part, one of the slaves has evidently returned from within and describes the progress of the activities: “The libation has now been made, and they’re far along in their drinking / the drinking-song has been sung, and the kottabos has been brought outside...”¹⁶ (spondØ mēn ≥dh g°gone ka< pēnont°w efisi pØrrv / ka< skØlion Σstai, kØttabow dÉ §jo€xetai yËraze, 10-11). After three more lines, the citation breaks off, and Athenaeus says: “After these lines, I think, there was a discussion of the kottabos and its players [épokottab€zontew].” If we can trust Athenaeus’ memory on this point, the slaves must have continued at length about the details of the game.

Both scenes in Platon are reminiscent of a similar one in the middle comic Antiphanes’ ÉAfrodēthw Gona€. Fr. 57KA of this play offers in 20 verses an elaborate set of instructions on the kottabos to an apparent novice: “I will teach you step by step...” declares one character to the other; at line 15 the instructor says, “you have to curve the fingers crab-like as if to play the aulos, pour out some wine—not too much—and then hurl” (aËlhtik«w de> karkinoËn toÁw daktËlouw / o%onØn te mikrÚn §gx°ai ka< mØ polËn: / ¶peitÉ éfÆseiw). Eubulus, one of the best known poets of Middle Comedy, has a flying character in his *Bellerophon* (probably Bellerophon himself) compare himself to a tall kottabos shaft (fr. 15KA),¹⁷ and, as I have argued

elsewhere, it even seems likely that his play entitled *Ankylion* featured a character whose name reflected the bend in the wrist necessary for a successful kottabos toss.¹⁸ Nesselrath himself has noted that the peculiar interest in the kottabos game in Middle Comedy reflected the trend toward incorporating local *Realien* into plots in general, and, more specifically, into the treatment of traditionally elevated mythological figures.¹⁹ Platon's own references to the kottabos, I would add, herald this trend.

The strongly demarcated lines between the mythological parody of Old and Middle Comedy that Nesselrath argues for, as we have seen, begin to blur somewhat in the case of Platon. But Platon is not the only fifth-century comic poet whose particular brand of mythological comedy prompted ancient commentators to reconsider how to categorize his oeuvre, despite the pressures of chronology. Cratinus too, whose reputation was fading as Aristophanes' was cresting,²⁰ composed a number of mythological comedies, one of which, *Odyseis*, Platonius (*Diff. com.* I.29f Koster = KA p.192), classified as a "Middle" comedy (τῆσιν τῶν μὲν κωμῶν), like Aristophanes' *Aiolosikon*.²¹ Nesselrath in particular gives little credence to Platonius' testimony, and it is not difficult to see why. Platonius seems confused about the chronology of Cratinus, implying that *Odyseis* was composed near the end of the fifth century;²² and his remark that *Odyseis* had no choral lyrics is evidently contradicted by some of the fragments.²³ Still, it does not seem to follow from Platonius' inaccuracies, as Nesselrath argues, that he had no knowledge of any comedies or playwrights between Aristophanes and Menander which could serve in his own mind as representatives of Middle Comedy.²⁴ Nor is it entirely clear to me, even if Nesselrath were correct on this point, why he would then conclude that Platonius' ignorance of comedy between Aristophanes and Menander would necessarily lead him to date Cratinus' *Odyseis* (along with Aristophanes' *Aiolosikon*) to the end of Old Comedy.²⁵ Indeed, Perusino had cautioned earlier that simply because Platonius' chronology is misguided need not lead us to reject his entire testimony.²⁶ Perusino herself attempts to explain Platonius' remarks about the lack of choral parts in *Odyseis* as follows: "dal momento che gli *Odissei* sono inseriti tra *Eolosicone* di Aristofane, che sopra è stato definito

‘privo di canto corali’, e ‘moltissime commedie antiche che non hanno né canti corali né parabasi’, le stesse caratteristiche debbono essere attribuite anche al dramma di Cratino.” Perusino suggests, therefore, a diminished role of the chorus in *Odysseis*, not a total absence, and finds it likely that the chorus’ main impact occurred during the parodos.²⁷

Nesselrath is understandably uncomfortable with what can only remain speculation on Perusino’s part, given the lack of further evidence, but Perusino’s willingness to give Platonius’ testimony some credence, I believe, is appropriate. As I have stressed in the case of the problematic testimony about Platon’s status as a potential forerunner of Middle Comedy, we can only assume that the ancient commentators who sensed features of Middle Comedy in obviously fifth-century poets must have been responding to some literary idiosyncrasies or anachronisms in the texts that they had at hand. Nesselrath would conclude from the various demonstrable errors in the testimonia that *all* their remarks must be tainted. But it seems just as likely that such inaccuracies may originate, as Perusino implies, in the commentators’ zeal to account for very real elements in Old Comedy that seemed somewhat alien to their own conception of what Old Comedy was supposed to be.²⁸ This does not mean that any fifth-century play “was” in any technical sense an example of Middle Comedy, but it may very well reveal distinct steps in a continuous development of Greek comic drama.

Nesselrath is, however, willing to give Platonius a hypothetical benefit of the doubt, when he carefully discusses the fragments of *Odysseis* to see whether the commentator, in spite of himself, might have been right to identify anachronistic elements in the play. Nesselrath’s treatment of this subject follows his important, painstaking analysis of mythological burlesque in the fragments of Middle Comedy, about which he concludes that such plays

...neigen dazu, die märchenhaften Züge zu rationalisieren und so das ehemals Wundersame weitgehend zu eliminieren, und sie durchsetzen den Mythos stark mit Elementen aus dem zeitgenössischen attischen Leben; dabei entstehen Situationen und Konstellationen, sie denen späterer Nea-Komödien weitgehend gleichen, nur dass die Figuren nicht die Namen athenischer Bürger, sondern die mythischer Götter und Helden tragen.²⁹

When he examines the fragments of Cratinus’ *Odysseis*, however, he observes that the treatment

of the myth offers no “vestiges of rationalizing or the downplaying of Odysseus’ adventure with the Cyclops, or any attempt at all to give the scene an Attic ambience in any form,” and he concludes that “in the treatment of myth [in *Odysseis*] so many clear differences appear that Middle Comedy—at least on this issue—cannot be considered a real continuation of Old Comedy.”³⁰

While Nesselrath has been able to isolate superbly many salient features of the mythological plots of Middle Comedy, it seems to me that he is too hasty and categorical in reaching his conclusions about their relationship with earlier comedy. For one thing, in the case of *Odysseis* we are dealing with a deplorably small amount of evidence. Kassel-Austin collects some fifteen fragments, which offer barely twenty-five disconnected verses. Nesselrath is probably right to conclude from the fragments that Cratinus maintained the same basic portrait of Polyphemus in the play and the same general setting that we find in the Homeric version of the story,³¹ and on these points there can be little doubt that the play was very much in the tradition of Old Comedy. But the handful of scattered lines in the play hardly allow us to make any real judgments about its details or generic character. It may be true that the treatment of the Cyclops in the play was essentially Homeric in its plot, and that the play’s humor depended heavily on a point-by-point distortion of the Homeric narrative, but any number of individual episodes within this structure—all now lost to us—could have afforded opportunities for the poet to craft a mythological comedy that anticipated in any number of ways the sort of rationalizing and domesticization that Nesselrath regards as a defining features of mythological comedy in the Middle period.³² Nesselrath, therefore, ultimately seems to repudiate Platonius’ testimony on the basis of *argumentum ex silentio*: nothing in the fragments of *Odysseis* looks like Middle Comedy; therefore Platonius, in addition to his chronological errors, must also have been wrong to characterize the play as representing a τῆς πομπῆς τῶν μῶν κωμῶν.

In attempting to soften the rigid division Nesselrath posits between Old and Middle comedy, I am not suggesting that we conceptualize Old comedy in an especially different way than we are used to. Changes in cultural norms, political climate, and theatrical conditions

certainly conspire to effect literary evolution, and such changes no doubt account for the fact that a comedy from the middle of the fourth century looked quite different from one of Aristophanes' fifth-century plays. I am not convinced, however, that there is enough evidence to conclude, along with Nesselrath, that the mythological comedy we know of from Old Comedy must have had such a completely different $\phi\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$ from that of its fourth-century incarnations that we must regard them as virtually unrelated literary phenomena. Platon, at any rate, as I have argued, has given us some cause to imagine a real transition from the mythological comedy of the fifth century to that of the fourth, and I strongly suspect that if we had a better sampling of other mythological comedies of Old Comedy, including Cratinus, we would find even more affinities between the two periods that would make the task of assigning even approximate dates to the transition between them even more problematic.

So far our discussion has focused on Platon's mythological comedy, and whether it might help us chart the evolution of comedy from the Old to the Middle periods. This question is easily framed (if less easily answered) mainly because, as Nesselrath has shown, this comic sub-genre was extremely popular in Old and Middle comedy alike. But this is not the only area in which Platon appears as the transitional figure for which some of his commentators have argued. Two of our longest fragments of Platon, both from his *Phaon*, also suggest other connections with later comedy, and deserve our attention. This play treated the myth of Phaon, the ferryman of Lesbos, who was rewarded by Aphrodite with a magical ointment for carrying her—disguised as an old woman—free of charge to the mainland. The ointment, of course, once applied daily, caused all the women to fall in love with Phaon. The fragments, I believe, clearly point to a transitional play, and not surprisingly we can even assign a rather late date to it (391 BC), based on a scholium on Aristophanes' *Plutus* 179.³³

In fr. 188KA of this play Aphrodite seems to address a throng of women who passionately desire Phaon. She begins on a note familiar from Old Comedy, making jokes about women's universal bibulousness (1-4), and proceeds over the next seventeen lines to list all the things the women must do in order to get to Phaon. This minor *tour de force* is, in form at least, not alien to

Old Comedy, where we often find humorously protracted lists of items. What makes this particular list somewhat more in keeping with Middle Comedy, however, is its sustained interest in esoteric aspects of religion, specifically the worship of minor erotic deities:

pr«ta mçn §moç gâr KourotrÔff proyÊetai
plakoËw §nÔrxhw, êmulow §gkÊmvn, k€xlai
•kka€dexÉ ı̀Ôklhroi m°liti memigm°nai,
lag“a d≈dekÉ §pis°lhna. tı̀lla dç 10
≥dh ~taËtÉ eËtel°stata:~ êkoue dÆ.
bolb«n mçn ÉOryänn` trÉÉ ≤mi°ktea,
Konisãlf dç kaç parastâtain duoçn
mÊrtvn³⁴ pinak€skow xeirç paratetilm°nvn:
lÊxnvñ gâr Ûsmãw oÈ filoËsi da€monew. 15
~purghw tetãrthw~ Kus€ te kaç Kunhg°taiw,
LÔrdvni draxmÆ, Kubdãsf tri≈bolon,
Yrf K°lhti d°rma kaç yulÆmata.
taËtÉ §sti ténal≈matÉ . efi mçn oÔn tâde
proso€detÉ , efi°lyoitÉ ên: efi dç mÆ, mãthn 20
¶jestin Ímçn diã ken∞w binhtiçn

first you must offer to me, the Goddess who nurtures children
a well-hung bit of cake, a tart made with the best flour,
sixteen birds intact and soaked in honey,
twelve crescent-shaped dainties. And there are also 10
these additional items which are the cheapest. Listen:
Three sacks of bulbs for Orthannes,
and for Konisalos and his two attendants,
a platter of myrtle berries plucked by hand
(since divinities don't like the smell of burning off hair); 15
a quarter pound of wheat for the Dogs and the Hunters,
a drachma for Lordon, three obols for Kybdasos,
a leather hide and sacrificial cakes for the hero Keles.
This is what it will cost you. So if you bring them all out,
then you can go in <and see Phaon>. Otherwise you're wasting 20
your time -- you'll be hot for a fuck for no purpose.

All the names for these obscure figures are of course obscene: Orthannes and Konisalos are otherwise attested names for the deified Phallos worshipped in Athens,³⁵ while Lordon, Kybdasos and Keles seem to refer to various positions of copulation.³⁶ More than a passing interest in such deities or quasi-deities is clearly evident from the fragments of Middle Comedy. Eubulus composed an entire play called ÉOryãnnhw and, although the few fragments do not allow us to

speculate about its plot, one fragment (75KA), written in the dithyrambic style that Nesselrath has shown to be so common in Middle Comedy, describes elaborate culinary preparations that may indicate preliminaries to a celebration of the phallic god.³⁷ Xenarchus composed a play entitled *Prεapow* and Timocles a *Konεsalow*, the same god mentioned by Platon in the *Phaon* fragment.

That such humorous themes of ithyphallism were at least recurrent in, if not central to, Platon's *Phaon*, can be seen in fr. 189KA, in which one character reads to another from what he claims to be a new cookbook by Philoxenus (Φιλοξηνου καινω τις ψαρτωσια, 4):

εγ- δω ενθιδω εν τᾳ ερημᾳ
τουτα διελθεᾶν βοωλομαι τᾳ βιβλον
πρωξ εμαυτων. (B.) ηστι δω , υντιβολ] σε, τοωτο τ';
(A.) Φιλοξηνου καινω τις ψαρτυσα.
(B.) επδειξον αωτων ετις ηστω , (A.) υκουε δω. 5
υρξομαιν εκ βολβοφο, τελευτωσω δω επα θωννον.
(B.) επα θωννον; οωκοων ττ ς τελευττ πολη
κριτιστον ενταυθα τετιχθαι τιξεωσ.
(A.) βολβοησ μεν σποδιω δαμισασ καταχωσματοι δεωσασ
ς πλεστους διιτρωγε τᾳ γιρ δημασ υνηροσ φορθοα. 10
καα τιδε μεν δω ταωτα θαλισσησ δω εσ τηκνω υνειμι

οωδε λοπις κακων εστιν υτιρ τᾳ τιγηνον υμεινον,
ομαι
φορφ-ν α γολαν συνωδοντι τε καρχαραν τε
μᾳ τημνειν, μω σοι νημεσις θεωθεν καταπνεωσ],
15
υλλω ᾶλον φωπτωσασ παριθεσ πολλων γιρ υμεινον.
πουλωποδοσ τπλεκτω δω υν επιλωψ]τ κατι καιρωσ,
αφθᾳ τ ς φωπτ ς, ην] μεζων, πολη κρεττων
ην φωπταα δε δωω ασω , αφθα καλειν υγορεωω.
τργλη δω οωκ εθηλει νεωρων επιωρανοσ ε ναι 20
παρθηνου ωαρτημιδοσ γιρ ηφυ καα στωματα μισεα.
σκωρπιωσ αω (B.) πασειη γε σου τᾳν πρωκτων ωπελθην

(A:) I'd like to read this book to myself as I sit here alone.
(B:) And what book is that, I ask you?
(A:) It's the "nouvelle cuisine" of Philoxenus.
(B:) How 'bout a sample (A:) OK, then, listen: 5
I'll start with "b" for bulbous vegetables, and I'll take it up to "t" for tuna fish.
(B:) To tuna fish?! Then surely it's by far the

best thing to be stationed in the last position.

(A:) (*reading aloud*) “Tame the bulbs with ashes, douse them in sauce
and then consume as many as you can: this ’ll straighten up a man’s cock.” 10
That’s it for that recipe; now I’ll move on to the “children of the sea...”

* * *

...and the frying-pan isn’t bad either, though the sauce-pan is better,
I think...

(*reading on*) “Don’t cut up the perch, the trout, the bream
the saw-tooth, unless you want heaven’s wrath to breathe down on you, 15
but cook it up, and serve it up whole; that’s much better.

If you tenderize the tentacle of the octopus at just the right moment
it is far better boiled than baked, at least if it’s a large one.

But if two are baked, then to hell with the boiled one.

The red mullet doesn’t usually help tense up the “nerve”, 20
since that fish really comes from the virgin goddess Artemis and hates hard-ons.

And now the scorpion ...” (B:) “...will sneak up and sting you right in the asshole!”

This alleged excerpt from a cookbook may be a parody of the poem known as the *Deipnon* by the dithyrambist Philoxenos of Leucas (remarkably well preserved by Athenaeus; and cf. *PMG* 836), although even Athenaeus had trouble distinguishing this Philoxenos from a roughly contemporary dithyrambist of the same name from Cythera. As Nesselrath has carefully argued, allusions to dithyrambic poetry, though common enough in Old Comedy, became less explicitly parodic in the period of Middle Comedy, and more integrated into the diction of the plays (a development he even traces through the career of Aristophanes).³⁸ “Parody” of course can be an elusive term, but I would argue that the focus of the scene in Platon’s fr. 189KA is not so much on parodying Philoxenos as on the humorous lucubrations about achieving an erect phallus, as indeed the statement regarding bulbs (“this’ll straighten out a man’s cock”) at line 10 above, and the low opinion of the red mullet at line 20, suggest.

Indeed it even seems likely that the recurrent detail of the aphrodisiac bulb (mentioned at fr. 188.6: “bulbs for Orthannes” and 189.9: “tame the bulbs, douse them in sauce”) foreshadows another obsession typical of Middle Comedy. It is in fact striking that in his disquisition on bulbs at 63d-64f, Athenaeus draws the bulk of his poetic examples from fourth-century comedy, citing Eubulus, Alexis, Xenarchus and Philemon. Of all the various authorities he quotes in this

passage, both scientific and literary, it is curious that only in the comic excerpts are the aphrodisiac properties of the bulb revealed. In Eubulus' *Amaltheia*, another of the many popular "Heracles" plays of the period, Heracles includes bulbs as one of the foods he studiously avoids in favor of beef and pork (fr. 6KA), no doubt because of their unheroic associations. Alexis, according to Athenaeus, "stressed the aphrodisiac power of bulbs" in an unknown play, at fr. 281KA: "if anyone in love with a hetaira should find other drugs more useful than these..." (τοἴτιν ἐν τιῷ εἴρ' φάρμακα / ἄρ' ἢ ταῖς βέρα χρῆσιμ' ἄρα, 3-4), and the single extant citation from Xenarchus' Βουταλῶν (fr. 1K) describes paratragically how even the bulb cannot save the master of the house from his terminal impotence:

ύστυτος οἴκος κοῶδὲ βυσσάωχην θεῦς
Δηοῶς σῶνοικος, γηγενῶς βῶλβος, φ'λοις
ἄφθῶς βοηθῆν δυνατῶς ἔστῶ ἔπαρκῆσαι (4-6)

The house can't get it up, and the stubby-necked
companion of Demeter, earth-born bulb—a real help to
friends when boiled up—cannot even now do any good

In itself, forging a link between Platon and later comic poets by means of bulbs may perhaps seem a tenuous exercise, but we should remember that these passages in Platon reflect other trends emblematic of the transition from Old to Middle Comedy, including an interest in dithyrambic language, religious esoterica, sustained erotic scenes, and possibly even in the fourth-century parody of philosophical schools.³⁹

In discussing elements in Platon that suggest his affinities with later Greek comedy, I have, of course, downplayed those fragments which serve to secure his "rightful" status as a poet of Old Comedy. His interest in political satire and personal abuse, at all events, certainly affirm that his comedy can be classified as belonging to the "Old" period.⁴⁰ Still, even if we exclude Platon from the traditions of Middle and New Comedy for the sake of chronological consistency, I hope to have shown that we may at least sympathize with those ancient scholars who were confounded by some of the anachronistic and possibly even avant-garde tendencies of Platon's comedies, and applaud their basic intuitions about Platon's importance in the transition from Old to Middle

Comedy.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Norwood 1931, 58-60, Schmid-Stählin 1946, 450-52.

² Hunter 1983, 20-30, in his concise survey of the characteristics of Middle Comedy, makes it clear that some of the crucial features of Old Comedy, political satire, tragic parody, mythological burlesque (on which see below pp. 000) did not suddenly disappear in the fourth century.

³ Cf. Janko 1984, 244-49, who argues that a tripartite division of comedy existed before Menander, but that with Menander's rising fame the earlier system was reformulated to make him the representative of "new" comedy. Cf. also Nesselrath 1990, 44-45, 145-49. Nesselrath argues against Janko's position that the tenth-century *Tractatus Coislinianus* (which speaks clearly of a tripartite division of comedy) ultimately descends from Aristotle's *Poetics*.

⁴ Nesselrath 1990, 45 n.39 and, in general, 1-187. For a superb survey of the history of modern scholarship on the concept of a "middle" comedy, cf. pp. 1-29.

⁵ Cobet 1840. Wilamowitz 1877, 326-67 = [1969, 31]. Cf. also Oppé 1897, 42. On the development of Wilamowitz's views about Greek comedy and on his evaluation of Platon in particular, cf. Nesselrath 1990, 12-17, 34-35.

⁶ Norwood 1931, 145-77. The idea that Crates represented some sort of "alternative" or "transitional" form of Old Comedy derives, of course, from Aristotle's laconic remarks about him in *Poetics* 1449b7-9, in which he claims that Crates was the first one among the Athenians to "abandon the iambic form" (ἐφ' ἑμῶν τῶν ἰαμβικῶν μέτρων) and to "construct generalized plots" (καὶ ὁλοῦ ποιεῖν ἰὸν καὶ μέτρον). As reliable literary history, Aristotle's statements about Crates are problematic and hardly authorize us to posit a distinct Cratetan "school" (cf. Rosen 1988, 4, n.17, Hubbard 1991, 24, n. 42; Hubbard's view that "iambic form" actually refers to a loose type of plot structure is close to that of Heath 1990, 143-44); on the other hand, there may very well have been differences between Crates and poets such as Aristophanes and

Cratinus that anticipated literary norms more commonly associated with the fourth century. Cf. also Bonanno 1972, 51-54.

⁷ Cf. especially Nesselrath 1990, 36-39. The scholiast on Dionysius Thrax (XVIIIa Koster = testimonia 16 KA) calls Platon a “distinguished” (ἑσθμῶν; we might say “remarkable”) example of Middle comedy.

⁸ Cf. in particular Nesselrath’s epilogue (1990, 331-45). A first-century BC statue base from Ostia evidently accompanied a bust of Platon, and refers to him as the “poet of Old comedy” Πλάτων ἰσοῶν ἐρχαῖων / κῶμῶν ποιητῶν (= testimonia 18 KA). This suggests at least that outside of scholarly circles, Platon’s status as a poet of Old comedy was reasonably secure in antiquity.

⁹ Nesselrath 1990, 204.

¹⁰ Nesselrath 1990, 204-41, esp. 239-41. See also Hunter 1983, 24.

¹¹ Cf. above, n. 5.

¹² The connection was first made by Casaubon 1621, 213.29 in reference to Athenaeus 110d (= Platon fr. 92 KA).

¹³ Cf. Frantz 1891, 40.

¹⁴ A suggestion of Kassel-Austin, based on fr. 93: ἄγε ἑποφλεγμῶν ἄντα ἔπι διαλλαγῶν.

¹⁵ On the game of kottabos cf. Sartori 1893 and Sparkes 1960, 202-6.

¹⁶ The meaning of ἄγε is uncertain; it may mean that the kottabos apparatus has been “put away” (as we might say, “it’s gone out of sight”) rather than “brought outside.”

¹⁷ On this fragment cf. Hunter 1983, 108-9.

¹⁸ Cf. Rosen 1989. For another explanation of ἐγκύλιον as it relates to the kottabos, cf. Borthwick 1964.

¹⁹ Nesselrath 1990, 234.

²⁰ Even allowing for comic exaggeration and conventions of rivalry among poets, Aristophanes implies as much in *Knights* 526-26 and *Peace* 700-3 (which would have us believe that Cratinus

was even dead by the time of the production of *Peace*, though this has often been suspected; cf. Platnauer 1964, 127-28.

²¹ Scholars have quibbled over whether Platonius, in referring to Cratinus' *Odyseeis* as a τῆς ποῦς of Middle Comedy, implies that the play in fact was a representative of the genre, or merely "like" a comedy of the middle period. Cf. Bertan 1984, 171-78, Perusino 1987, 83; Nesselrath 1990, 33, n. 15.

²² Nesselrath 1990, 33, n.16.

²³ Cf. Körte, *RE* 22.1652, and Norwood 1931, 129 n. 3.

²⁴ Nesselrath 1990, 33.

²⁵ Nesselrath 1990, 33.

²⁶ Perusino 1987, 81.

²⁷ Perusino 1987, 83.

²⁸ Platonius also mentions, for example, that *Odyseeis* contained no personal abuse—a mark of Middle comedy, to his thinking—but rather travesty of the *Odyssey* (ὀφλοῦν ἐὸν Ἄδουσεω κρατῆνου ὁ ἔδεν ἄνω σπιτῆμῆσιν Ἰλίουσι, διασὺρμῆν δ' ἐπὶ τῶν Ἄδουσεῶν τῶν Ἄντων, *De diff. com.* I.51-2 Koster = Cratinus KA p. 192). This remark occurs right after he appears to misdate the play to the late fifth century. Do we repudiate his observation about the lack of personal abuse simply because his misdates the play? I should think, again, that a true observation that the play seemed surprisingly free of invective for a work of Old Comedy, could easily and (forgivably) account for a desire to date it as late as possible.

²⁹ Nesselrath 1990, 236.

³⁰ Nesselrath 1990, 239. Nesselrath notes as well that another type of mythological comedy can be seen in Cratinus' *Dionysalexandros*, though this too, with its political allegory and focus on the parody of a myth, is similarly unlike anything he has detected for Middle Comedy. But see my reservations about how useful such observations can be for assessing the essential nature of comedies that are known to us only in a few fragments, p. 000, below.

³¹ Nesselrath 1990, 239.

³² Fr. 150 KA may provide an example of a theme that underwent further development in later Greek comedy. Here the Cyclops threatens to cook up Odysseus' companions and eat them (vv. 2-5):

frĒjaw xécÆsaw képanyrakĒsaw k»ptÆsaw,
efiw ělmhn te kaĀ Újālmhn kĳitÉ Őw skorodālmhn
xliarÚn Őmbāptvn, ŵw ín ÚptŌtatŌw moi ěpāntvn
Ím«n faĒnhtai, katatrĳjomai, ĄE strati«tai

Obviously the notion that the Cyclops would actually take the trouble of cooking the men before devouring them is a comic emendation of the Odyssean version (in which he ate them raw), and the culinary details he offers—he mentions roasting, baking, grilling and several forms of pickling—are very much in keeping with similar jokes elsewhere in Old Comedy. But cooks and cooking became quite popular and highly developed motifs in Middle Comedy, especially in connection with dithyrambic “parody” (see below p. 000), as Nesselrath shows in his lucid treatment of the subject (1990, 297-309). Agreeing with the conclusion of Giannini (1960) and Dohm (1964), that in earlier comedy we cannot really speak of the māgeirow as a distinct comic “type”, Nesselrath does not pursue the matter. But a scene in Cratinus' *Odysseis* featuring Polyphemus calling attention to his cooking skills might easily have been developed in a direction that anticipated the cook's “role” in Middle Comedy. My point is not that we must assume that Polyphemus as cook was an important and well articulated theme of *Odysseis*, but simply that our evidence from the fragments of Old Comedy is truly too insubstantial to allow us to draw major conclusions about the genre based on what is *not* to be found in them. And when such a line of argument leads scholars to condemn ancient testimonia that offer something *positive* for a change, such as Platonius, I think we need to rethink our reasoning anew on that particular point.

³³ Cf. Geissler 1925, 72-73.

³⁴ For “myrtle” as a euphemism for the female genitalia, cf. Kassel-Austin ad loc., Henderson 1975, 134-35, and Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 838 and 1004.

³⁵ Cf. Herter 1926, and Hunter 1983, 165-66.

³⁶ For references cf. Kassel-Austin ad loc.

³⁷ Hunter 1983, 166-67.

³⁸ Nesselrath 1990, 241-66.

³⁹ On which, cf. Nesselrath 1990, 228; Hunter 1983, 228-29.

⁴⁰ For a balanced survey of Platon’s literary characteristics, cf. Schmid-Stählin 1946, 145-54. The authors are keenly aware that the fragments of Platon leave us with a somewhat ambivalent impression of the poet. Though some of his titles would appear to indicate plays in the politically vituperative tradition of Old Comedy, e.g. *Hyperbolus*, *Cleophon*, and *Peisandros* (he may even have been the first to signal his strong commitment to *kvmfde;n Ûnomast€* in the very title of his plays, though this remains speculation in the absence of better evidence), politics and obscenity do not seem to pervade the fragments that do survive. It is, of course, impossible to gauge accurately from the fragments what role such features played in Platon’s comedies, but Schmid-Stählin are quick to note the impression that, as I have discussed in this paper, Platon seemed to anticipate later comedy as much as he reflected the conventions of his own time.

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