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LAUGHABLE ERRORS:
ANCIENT COMMENTATORS DEFENDING THE BEST OF THE COMEDIANS

Abstract

Although Aristophanic comedy was not an authoritative text like Homer and the Bible, it was highly regarded throughout antiquity as a prime representative of the genre, to be read for its literary qualities as much as for the normative character of its language and the insights it could give into the history and culture of classical Athens. Occasionally, however, its commentators might still perceive some shortcomings in any of these domains. While there are some isolated instances of unconditionally negative judgments in the scholia, by far the more common response in such cases was to look for explanations and justifications. Instead of resorting to textual intervention by athetesis or similar means, critics rather tended to suspect deliberate (comic) design behind what they read, even if that meant to concede that their own background knowledge was insufficient to substantiate this.

Keywords

Greek comedy – Aristophanes – Aristophanic scholia – ancient literary scholarship – linguistic purism – intertextuality

1. *Introduction: Aristophanes' authority*

In her input essay to this volume, Francesca Schironi has outlined how different kinds of authoritative texts may invite very different responses when their respective readers detect, or think they detect, problematic aspects in them which risk undermining the texts' authority – be it moral shortcomings, internal inconsistencies, or factual inaccuracies. At first sight, we might think that none of this can be of much relevance when we are looking at the exegetical history of a genre such as ancient (Athenian) comedy. Even the most eminent representative of that genre, the comic playwright Aristophanes, is not Homer, after all, nor are his plays the Bible or a classic of popular science like Aratus' *Phainomena*. However, Aristophanes' comedies did give rise to one of antiquity's largest and most wide-ranging exegetical corpora we can still access today, primarily thanks to its mediation through the ample scholiastic annotations in a number of medieval manuscripts of the comic text itself.¹ In fact, the very existence of such a scholiastic corpus harking back to an ancient

¹ The Aristophanic scholia are now best consulted in the comprehensive edition of Koster *et al.* 1960-2007. All the passages given below follow the text and numbering printed by the editors of the individual volumes, without however including the indication of which parts of any given scholion are included in which manuscript; although this can be informative, it would have made the quotations unnecessarily cumbersome to read. The translations are my own. Note that all the scholia quoted below belong to the 'old', i.e. pre-Triclinian, scholia, but where no specific ancient

tradition of commentaries (*hypomnemata*), which may even be marginally older than the commentary tradition on the Homeric poems,² would prove that Aristophanic comedy enjoyed some form of authoritative or ‘canonical’ status in its own right, even if we did not have any other evidence for this in the form of judgments by critics such as Aristotle (*Poet.* 1448a25-27), Cicero (*leg.* 2.37), or Horace (*sat.* 1.4.1), to name but a few. Detractors like Plutarch (*Mor.* 56, 853a-854d) also existed, it is true, but then the same could be said even about Homer (cf. e.g. Xenophanes fr. 11 D.-K., Stesichorus fr. 90 Davies-Finglass, *Pl. Rep.* 3.386a-392c, 10.598d-601b, etc.).

Both the scholia and further ancillary texts like the *hypotheseis* (plot summaries) transmitted with the plays suggest that ancient readers of Aristophanes firmly (and of course most reasonably) believed in Attic Old Comedy having pursued ‘didactic’ aims: it encouraged its primary audience to reflect on, and improve, their own ways by, for example, making peace, refraining from excessive litigation, or abandoning evil demagogues.³ However, because such *διδασκαλία* is almost always framed as determined by, and rooted in, comedy’s specific socio-historical context, it is very different from the ‘universal’ *διδασκαλία* one might derive from Homer (let alone the Bible). Thus, an insipid moralizing comment like that of *Scholl. in Ar. Ach.* 366a Wilson, according to which, «by what is said, the comic poet teaches *us* that one should judge those who speak not by the size of their bodies, but in accordance to what they were going to say» (διὰ δὲ τῶν λελεγμένων ὁ κωμικὸς ἡμᾶς παιδεύει ὡς χρὴ τοὺς λέγοντας οὐκ ἀπὸ τοῦ μεγέθους τῶν σωματίων σκοπεῖν, ἀλλ’ ἐπ’ ἐκεῖνα ἴαφ’ ὧν λέγειν ἔμελλον) is truly exceptional and most likely nothing but the wisdom of some late antique schoolteacher.

Aristophanes’ real authority is of a fundamentally different nature, and it manifests itself in three distinct domains. *Firstly*, as already indicated, Aristophanes quickly became a *literary* classic, many of whose plays continued to be read throughout the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods.⁴ In part, this may have been due to aspects unrelated to their intrinsic literary qualities, but the annotation tradition contains enough material to show that his readers never ‘forgot’ that

commentator is named, it is usually impossible to determine who is the ultimate source for the content of any given annotation. Beyond the scholia, traces of ancient scholarship on comedy are also preserved on papyri (see Trojahn 2002; Esposito-Montana 2012), but the much more fragmentary state of these means that the issues to be explored in the present paper are not illuminated by them.

² A *hypomnema* on Aristophanes’ *Plutus* by Euphronius is referred to by the late-antique grammarian Orus in the so-called *Lexicon Messanense* (p. 411 Rabe). Euphronius seems to have been a contemporary of Aristarchus’ teacher Aristophanes of Byzantium (c. 257-180 BCE), if not even of Eratosthenes (c. 275-195 BCE) (cf. Novembri 2020). On the history of ancient Aristophanic scholarship see e.g. White 1914, pp. ix-lxxxv; Boudreaux 1919; Trojahn 2002, pp. 117-142; Willi 2024a.

³ See e.g. *Scholl. in Ar. Ach.* 52, 376a Wilson; *Scholl. in Ar. Eq.* 2b, 161a Jones; *Scholl. in Ar. Pac.* 107a, 108, 406-408, 619 Holwerda, etc.

⁴ The range of transmitted (and hence studied) plays decreased over time, but in the later first century BCE Didymus of Alexandria may still have commented on more or less all of them. The direct transmission of plays other than the eleven that are still extant today stops in the third century CE (cf. Esposito-Montana 2012, p. 5).

comic entertainment was *the* central component of these texts, even when they exploited them for other purposes such as rhetorical instruction; and so it is safe to assume that many *also* read the plays just because of that. *Secondly*, however, there is no denying that Aristophanes at the same time came to enjoy considerable success as a *linguistic* model, especially among the so-called Atticists who sought to retain or revive the language of classical Athens in later periods when Koine Greek had long superseded it in daily life, but not – or not to the same extent – in the choicest parts of Greek *belles-lettres*. Whilst the fiercest purists were perfectly happy to criticize even classical authors such as Xenophon or Menander,⁵ Aristophanes' position in the innermost circle of linguistically approved authors was unchallenged. And just as the later grammarians could thus look at Aristophanes in order to master the language of the classical period, so could later scholars with historical and antiquarian interests *thirdly* read his play in order to understand more about its history and culture – not, of course, because there was a prospect of resuscitating classical Athens, but because *knowing* about it was the next best thing to actively participating in it. Accordingly, Aristophanic comedy, with all its topical references to everyday life and politics, further turned into something of an authoritative *historical* source for those who knew how to decipher its comic code.

And yet, if no-one's authority is perfect, neither was Aristophanes'. In each of the three domains just identified, exegetes could potentially face a dilemma if what the playwright offered fell short (or at least seemed to them to fall short) of what they would have expected of him – i.e., if on occasion his literary skill seemed imperfect, his language impure, or his historical accuracy questionable. In the following three sections we shall explore one by one how they responded in situations like this and, in particular, how they would nevertheless attempt to save Aristophanes' face – and thus, arguably, also their own as his aficionados.

2. *Aristophanes the literary classic*

2.1 *Aesthetic inadequacy*

Quality judgments do not take much space in the scholiastic corpus, and when they do occur, they tend to be positive, as one may expect. Sometimes, for example, an annotator will highlight the poet's verbal skill in punning, using a metaphor, or choosing the right words for a given speaker,⁶

⁵ Cf. Huitink-Rood 2024, pp. 152-153, on Xenophon and Tribulato 2014 on Menander; on the grammarians' much more generous attitude towards Aristophanes see below, fn. 22.

⁶ See e.g. *Schol. in Ar. Eq.* 1189 Jones on the choice of the epithet Τριτογενής for Athena to enable a pun on τρία and ἐνετριτώνισεν (εὐκαίρως); *Schol. in Ar. Vesp.* 1124 Koster on the metaphorical application of the verb

but it is rare that we are told who exactly gave such a stamp of approval. Vice versa, when we learn from *Schol. in Ar. Nub.* 962 Holwerda that «Aristophanes [of Byzantium] particularly approved this [line? or passage?] as well composed» (ταῦτα ἄγαν Ἀριστοφάνης ἀπεδέχετο ὡς εὖ πεποιημένα), no further indication is given as to what exactly this Alexandrian grammarian (and editor of the plays) appreciated.

There are, however, a few exceptions to this generally positive attitude. *Schol. in Ar. Plut.* 566a objects to a quip by Blesidemus that stealing must be decent since thieves have to hide (and hiding away is a sign of modesty) by remarking that «the enthymeme [= syllogism which leaves one premise unexpressed] is lame» (ψυχρὸν τὸ ἐνθύμημα); and one of the most influential ancient commentators of Aristophanes, Didymus of Alexandria in the first century BCE, thought something similar about *Ar. Vesp.* 772 where the verbal form ἠλιάσει «you'll be a Heliast» is comically etymologized by connecting it to the nouns εἴλη «heat of the sun» and ἥλιος «sun». Since the latter pun is hardly weaker than many others we encounter in Aristophanes, it is unclear why Didymus singled it out for criticism (*Schol. in Ar. Vesp.* 772b Koster, ψυχρῶς δὲ πέπαιχε, φησιν ὁ Δίδυμος, πρὸς τοῦνομα).⁷

More intriguingly, meanwhile, a scholion on *Ar. Pax* 854 (where a remark about «licking ambrosia among the gods» feeds a crude joke about fellatio) informs us that «some take exception to this and the following line due to their obscenity, because the expression is ambiguous, referring to both the literal thing and the sexual activity» (*Schol. in Ar. Pac.* 854 Holwerda, τοῦτο καὶ τὸ ἐξῆς διὰ τὸ κακέμφατόν τινες παραιτοῦνται, ὅτι ἐπαμφοτερίζον λέλεκται, καὶ πρὸς τὸ πρᾶγμα καὶ πρὸς τὸ ἀσελγές). Although the note is not explicit enough to guarantee this, it is at least conceivable that the critic(s) in question not only decried Aristophanes' humour at this point, but meant to intervene on the text and actually remove the two offending lines. In this connection, it should however be stressed that squeamishness about obscenity is not normally a feature in the scholia. On the contrary, *Schol. in Ar. Pac.* 902 Holwerda, for example, expresses admiration for the poet's «witty» (ἀστεῖον) handling of sexual innuendo.

The only *certain* example of a passage where athetesis was contemplated in order to 'improve' the quality of Aristophanes' text thus involves *Ar. Ran.* 1437-1441.⁸ In these five lines, Euripides

ἐπεστρατεύσατο to the north wind (καλῶς); *Schol. in Ar. Ach.* 211 Wilson on the depiction of the character and words of the chorus (πάνυ ἐμμελῶς καὶ μετὰ πάσης ἀρετῆς).

⁷ On Didymus' work on comedy, see e.g. Boudreaux 1919, pp. 91-137, and now especially Benuzzi 2020; 2023. A further negative remark is found in *P.Flor.* II 112 (= Aristophanes 28 *CLGP*), fr. C col. II 19-21, which certainly contains *some* Didymean material (cf. Esposito-Montana 2012, pp. 188-190); the annotator here finds that with the expression ἐλαφρὸν οἷά τις μόλυβδος «nimble like lead» the poet «does not make an elegant joke» (οὐ καλῶς παίζει), but adds that it may still be appropriate «since the chorus is one of old men» (ἐπεὶ γερόντων ὁ χορός).

⁸ The situation with *Ar. Ran.* 152 is different again. According to *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 152 Chantry, «some do not write the verse (beginning with) “By the gods...”, but take it out; and they write the following line like this, “or someone

responds to Dionysus' question of how Athens might be saved by suggesting that one could equip Cleocritus with the dithyrambic poet Cinesias as wings, so that the winds would lift up both of them and let them squirt vinegar into the eyes of the enemy during a seafight. There are real problems surrounding these lines, in terms of meaning, syntax, and placement in the scene. But what initially prompted the idea of an athetesis appears to have been something different: «Aristarchus athetizes the sequence of five lines until “they might squirt into the eyes of the enemy”»: because they are too coarse and cheap, that is why they are suspect» (*Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1437-1441a Chantry, ἀθετεῖ τοὺς πέντε ἐφεξῆς στίχους ἕως τοῦ “ῥαίνοιεν εἰς τὰ βλέφαρα τῶν ἐναντίων” Ἀρίσταρχος· ὅτι φορτικότεροί εἰσι καὶ εὐτελεῖς, διὰ τοῦτο ὑποπτεύονται). Without the continuation of the scholion, one might perhaps think that even Aristarchus could not have justified such a serious intervention by such an aesthetic judgment alone.⁹ Yet, the note then goes on to specify that «Apollonius¹⁰ (athetizes) [these verses] not because of that, but because they do not fit into the plot; if they are removed, both (speakers) give just one piece of advice» (*Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1437-1441b/c Chantry, <ἀθετεῖ> δὲ Ἀπολλώνιος οὐ διὰ τοῦτο, ἀλλ' ὅτι οὐ πρὸς τὴν ὑπόθεσιν ἔχουσί τι. αἰρομένων δὲ αὐτῶν, ἑκάτερος μίαν γνώμην λέγει). In other words, although Aristarchus' opinion clearly had some weight among his successors, they may still have felt that a little more substance was needed before one could confidently abjudicate an entire stretch of lines and conclude that it must have found its way into the text through some later reworking (διασκευή) of the play (cf. *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1437-1441d Chantry, where the same basic observations are made and the term ἐνδιασκευάσθαι is used). Also, it is hardly a coincidence if such a unique case of athetesis in Aristophanes originated precisely with Aristarchus. As Schironi (this volume) observes, even in Homer «athetesis is not a very common solution», but «limited to the Hellenistic period» where «the Alexandrians, and especially Aristarchus, adopted it». Moreover, in our specific case it is worth highlighting that outside Aristarchus' school not everyone will have been equally impressed by his solution. Since an unmistakable cross-reference in *Ar. Ran.* 1453 to the vinegar-flasks of *Ar. Ran.* 1440 means that athetizing *Ar. Ran.* 1437-1441 would have entailed athetizing also *Ar. Ran.* 1453, it is significant if *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1453 Chantry tells us that

learned Cinesias' armour-dance". This is why Aristophanes [of Byzantium] adds the *antisigma* and the *sigma*» (τινὲς οὐ γράφουσι τὸν “νῆ τοὺς θεοὺς” στίχον, ἀλλ' ἀφαιροῦσιν αὐτόν, καὶ οὕτω τὸν ἐξῆς γράφουσιν· “ἢ πυρρίχην τις ἔμαθε τὴν Κινησίου”. διὸ καὶ Ἀριστοφάνης παρατίθησι τὸ ἀντίσιγμα καὶ τὸ σίγμα). Whatever Aristophanes' point in using the two critical signs may have been – perhaps not, as in Homeric criticism (cf. *Schol. in Hom. Od.* 5.247a Pontani, and for further discussion Schironi 2017), to indicate *alternative* (tautological) verses, but to optionally 'bracket' *Ar. Ran.* 152 (?) –, the omission of *Ar. Ran.* 152 by «some» was probably the result of a diverging transmission of the text, not of scholarly athetesis.

⁹ On Aristarchus' work on Aristophanes, as reflected by the scholia, see further Boudreaux 1919, pp. 52-74; Muzzolon 2005.

¹⁰ Apollonius was another important commentator of Aristophanes, who probably belonged to the school of Aristarchus since his father Chaeris was one of Aristarchus' pupils (cf. Boudreaux 1919, pp. 77-78; Montana 2002).

Timachidas, a rough contemporary of Apollonius, who was active in Rhodes rather than Alexandria,¹¹ detected here an allusion to the fact that Euripides' mother was (allegedly) a green-grocer; hence, at least Timachidas most likely continued to regard the athetized lines as genuine.

2.2 *Internal inconsistency*

In all the cases discussed so far, the 'problematic' issues triggering criticism and/or the wish to amend things were of a broadly aesthetic nature. However, just as in Homer, a perception of literary inadequacy may also arise from text-internal inconsistency. It goes without saying that in a comic play of limited length and authored by a single playwright there is less scope for such 'faults' to occur than in an epic poem comprising thousands of lines and composed within a tradition of oral poetry. Moreover, a certain degree of internal inconsistency was part and parcel of comic texture: Old Comedy is a genre where sudden changes of linguistic register are common and characters often cap an utterance with a *para prosdokian* phrase that would be completely out of place in any real (non-comic) conversation.

But even leaving aside such generically conditioned phenomena, of which ancient critics were perfectly aware,¹² there were one or two further instances of at least *potentially* inconsistent passages in Aristophanes which baffled them a bit more. In the parabasis of *Clouds*, the chorus maintains, on behalf of the poet, that Aristophanic comedy is different from its rivals because it relies more on verbal art than on silly jokes and drastic stage action: «it didn't dart in with torches in the hands, nor does it shout *iou iou*» (Ar. *Nub.* 543, οὐδ' εἰσηῖξε δᾶδας ἔχουσ' οὐδ' "ἰοῦ ἰοῦ" βοᾷ). The problem here is that, as commentators noticed, not only does Aristophanes fail to give concrete names, but what he says effectively looks like auto-criticism: «for at the end of this very play [Ar. *Nub.* 1490ff.] he has staged how Socrates' school is burned down and some of the philosophers say *iou iou*» (*Schol. in Ar. Nub.* 543a Holwerda, οὐκ ἔστι δῆλος ἐνταῦθα, τίνι παρονειδίξει· ἀλλ' ἴσως ἑαυτῷ, ἐπεὶ πεποίηκεν ἐν τῷ τέλει τούτου τοῦ δράματος καιομένην τὴν διατριβὴν Σωκράτους καὶ τινὰ τῶν φιλοσόφων λέγοντας "ἰοῦ ἰοῦ"). Now, one may certainly argue that «Ar[istophanes] is simply making, in somewhat rhetorical form, the claim that his play does not rely on noise or violence for its comic effect»;¹³ but the way in which the same scholion then goes

¹¹ On Timachidas see Boudreaux 1919, pp. 88-89; Montana 2006; Matijašić 2014; 2020.

¹² For a full discussion of the commentators' take on *para prosdokian* (or, in their parlance, *παρ' ὑπόνοιαν*) humour, see Willi 2024b. Attention is drawn there also to a few cases where the label *παρ' ὑπόνοιαν* is applied rather too generously. Of these, *Schol. in Ar. An.* 15a and 16a Holwerda are of particular interest in the present context because «some» interpreters (οἱ μὲν) apparently sought to rescue a line which is widely athetized or emended by modern editors (cf. Dunbar 1995, pp. 141-142) by arguing for an instance of *para prosdokian* (despite the fact that the resulting joke would be extremely poor).

¹³ Dover 1968, p. 169.

on to construe the defence wants to be more elegant than that. For one thing, it adds, «in the first *Clouds*, he has not done this» (ἐν δὲ ταῖς πρώταις “Νεφέλαις” τοῦτο οὐ πεποίηκεν); and more importantly still, «he does it for a good reason, whereas they [i.e., the other comedians] do it when it is out of place» (ποιεῖ δὲ αὐτὸ μετὰ λόγου, οὔτοι δὲ ἀκαίρως). In other words, the lack of success of the first version of *Clouds*, which is described as undeserved in the parabasis of the transmitted second version (Ar. *Nub.* 524-525), more or less *forced* the author to adjust things as he did – but even then, he, unlike others, was able to resort to such ‘special effects’ coherently, not randomly.

It should be stressed that the explanation of the internal ‘inconsistency’ here remains confined entirely to the artistic level. The argument is *not* that it results from a careless or incomplete revision process that would have led to a conflation of the older and the younger versions of *Clouds*. As such, it is unlike the curious case of a number of scholia on Aristophanes’ *Plutus*, which show beyond any doubt that at least one commentator, who must have been reasonably influential, erroneously thought that the extant play, which dates from 388 BCE, was in reality an earlier first *Plutus* staged in 408 BCE. For our current purposes it does not matter how this error arose, or who is responsible for it.¹⁴ What is of interest is rather how the – for us, anonymous – commentator then dealt with textual data *within the same play* that was incompatible with the early date. These were (i) a reference to the presence of an Athenian mercenary force in Corinth, which seemed to point to the period of the Corinthian War in the first decade of the fourth century, but not before (Ar. *Plut.* 173); (ii) a reference to a famous hetaera called Laïs, who would have been only about 14 years old in 408 BCE (Ar. *Plut.* 179); and (iii) a reference to the seizure of Phyle and the fall of the oligarchic Thirty in Athens in 404 BCE (Ar. *Plut.* 1146). Whereas *Schol. in Ar. Plut.* 179 Chantry only highlights the problem with (ii), *Schol. in Ar. Plut.* 173b Chantry on (i) and *Schol. in Ar. Plut.* 1146a/d Chantry on (iii) both come up with a solution: the respective lines, they suggest, must have been transferred from the *second Plutus* of 388 BCE, whether by some interpolator or in fact by the poet himself (cf. *Schol. in Ar. Plut.* 1146d Chantry, τοῦτο οὖν ἔοικέ τις ἐκ τοῦ δευτέρου “Πλούτου” μετενεγκὼν ἐνθάδε ὀλιγορῆσαι τῆς ἀλογίας ταύτης, ἢ καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ ποιητῆς ὕστερον ἐνθεῖναι). Although the latter variant would of course still leave some responsibility with Aristophanes, the well-known fact that comic plays could be revised, reworked, and restaged thus provided an elegant, since *relatively* unintrusive, way of dealing with a perceived internal inconsistency which could otherwise have been resolved only through complete athetesis (as long as the faulty premise that the overall text dated to 408 BCE was not revisited).

¹⁴ For a full discussion with references to earlier literature, see Willi 2023.

2.3 External inaccuracy

The last category of slips made by Aristophanes as a literary authority is similar in kind to what will be discussed below in Section 4 on historical ‘errors’. However, it deserves separate consideration because it relates to the large field of Aristophanic intertextuality and thus to the domain of literature alone.

Ever since its very beginnings in the early Alexandrian period, ancient scholarship on comedy spent much effort on the detection of intertextual allusions and the identification of their sources.¹⁵ In principle, this task should have been simplest whenever explicit or implicit pointers to the source in question were to be found in the comic text itself. Occasionally, however, this could lead to discrepancies between these pointers and the actual intertexts identified by commentators. Thus, in the agon of *Birds*, Peisetaerus at one point maintains that «Homer said Iris was similar to a timid pigeon» (Ar. *Av.* 575, Ἴριν δέ γ’ Ὀμηρος ἔφασκ’ ἰκέλην εἶναι τρήρωνι πελειῆ). In reality, though, there is no such statement in the Homeric epics, as the commentators were quick to point out; but they immediately came up with two possible excuses for the apparent mistake: «(note) that he is lying as a joke, for (this is said) not about Iris, but about Athena and Hera: “they went similar in their steps to timid pigeons” [*Il.* 5.778]. Others, however, say that this is transmitted in other poems of Homer; for there are also hymns by him» (*Schol. in Ar. Av.* 575a Holwerda, ὅτι ψεύδεται παίζων. οὐ γὰρ ἐπὶ Ἴριδος, ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ Ἀθηνᾶς καὶ Ἥρας: “αἱ δὲ βᾶτην τρήρωσι πελειάσιν ἴθμαθ’ ὁμοῖαι”. οἱ δὲ ἐν ἑτέροις ποιήμασιν Ὀμήρου φασὶ τοῦτο φέρεσθαι. εἰσὶ γὰρ αὐτοῦ καὶ ὕμνοι). What the second group of interpreters had in mind was presumably *b.Ap.* 114 where the comparison with timid pigeons is indeed applied to Iris (and Eileithyia). But the explanation of the first group is more interesting. They took into account that Aristophanes is first and foremost a comedian, and therefore they looked for a comic motivation for the apparent ‘lie’; in their opinion, Aristophanes had introduced a *deliberate* mistake and expected his audience to notice this and find it somehow funny – perhaps because it revealed the sophistic dishonesty behind Peisetaerus’ attempts to win over the birds.¹⁶ A similar reasoning informs *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 661 Chantry, where Dionysus’ ascription to Hipponax of a verse taken to be by the iambographer

¹⁵ For a recent discussion of the relevant material and the evolution of this strand of research, see Willi 2024c; cf. previously Roemer 1908.

¹⁶ The same group of interpreters will also be responsible for the take on the imprecise reference in Ar. *Av.* 609 to Hes. fr. 304 Merkelbach-West on the length of a crow’s life (five instead of nine human generations); see *Schol. in Ar. Av.* 609 Holwerda (κακῶς καὶ τοῦτο παρὰ τὸ ἠσιόδειον παίζει «this, too, is a wrong joke on the Hesiodic model»; cf. Dunbar 1995, p. 404, «If – as we cannot be sure – the Hesiodic ἐννέα...γενεάς was familiar to many of Ar[istophanes]’s audience, Peis[etaerus] settling for a mere πέντε, announced in the same impressive tone as his earlier claims, may have caused some amusement»).

Ananius is thought to convey the speaker's distress and confusion (ὡς ἀλγήσας καὶ συγκεχυμένος οὐκ οἶδε τί λέγει, ἐπεὶ οὐχ Ἰππώνακτος ἀλλ' Ἀνανίου); and also *Schol. in Ar. Thesm.* 21a Regtuit on a line in the initial conversation between Euripides and his Inlaw in *Thesmophoriazusae* where the Inlaw 'admiringly' (and paratragically) exclaims «What a wonderful thing wise interactions are!» (*Thesm.* 21, οἷόν γε πού 'στιν αἰ σοφαὶ ξυνουσίαι) and thereby seemingly alludes to a verse «tyrants are wise through interaction with the wise» (σοφοὶ τύραννοι τῶν σοφῶν ξυνουσίαι): yet, despite the comic context suggesting a Euripidean model, «the line is by Sophocles, from the *Locrian Ajax* [Soph. fr. 14 Radt]. So either this is done on purpose, in order to mislead also the others, or there was a chance overlap between Sophocles and Euripides» (ἔστι δὲ Σοφοκλέους ἐξ Αἴαντος Λοκροῦ. ἢ οὖν ἐπίτηδες, ἵνα καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ἐξαπατήσῃ, ἢ συνέμπτωσις Σοφοκλεῖ καὶ Εὐριπίδῃ ἐγένετο). So, once again, the rather contorted comic interpretation is admittedly not the only possibility considered, but it is given some prominence; by contrast, the arguably most obvious alternative, whereby the suspected intertext was simply not the intended intertext, is not even mentioned. As for the second option which *is* envisaged, the coincidence of a Sophoclean and a Euripidean line, a parallel scholion at the same time points out an important corollary: if that were the case, «the drama in which Euripides said this is not preserved» (*Schol. in Ar. Thesm.* 21b Regtuit, τὸ μέντοι δράμα ἐν ᾧ Εὐριπίδης ταῦτα εἶπεν, οὐ σώζεται).¹⁷

A healthy awareness that the commentator's knowledge base is limited and that this must be factored in before Aristophanes is found wrong is occasionally encountered elsewhere, too. A statement by the slave Xanthias in *Ar. Ran.* 13-15 implies that the comic poets Phrynichus, Lycis, and Ameipsias regularly staged people carrying heavy equipment and complaining about it. Some conscientious scholar must have attempted to check whether that was actually true and discovered that «the comedian Phrynichus did no such thing in his extant plays»; and yet, this does not undermine Aristophanes' credibility because «it is likely that something of the sort stood in the plays that are lost» (*Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 13a Chantry, Φρύνιχος ὁ κωμικὸς οὐδὲν τούτων ἐποίησεν ἐν τοῖς σωζομένοις αὐτοῦ. εἰκὸς δὲ ἐν τοῖς ἀπολωλόσιν εἶναι αὐτοῦ τοιοῦτό τι). Similarly, even Aristarchus, who could have rather firm opinions, did criticize as wrong an earlier claim whereby *Ar. Ran.* 1206-1208 quote the beginning of Euripides' *Archelaus* (in agreement with the fact that the quotation of *some* Euripidean incipit is indeed contextually expected), but then conceded that this might nevertheless have been true on the assumption that the beginning of the *Archelaus* he

¹⁷ *Schol. in Ar. Thesm.* 21b Regtuit also discusses both options, but does not think the first would point to a *purposeful* error rather than to an honest mistake (ἔοικε δὲ ἦτοι πεπλανημένος συνεξαπατήσαι τοὺς ἄλλους); it adds the important observation that the ascription to Euripides is not of course made explicit, but still intended since the same line *is* explicitly referred to as Euripidean in Aristophanes' *Heroes* (*Ar.* fr. 323 K.-A.) as well as by Plato (*Rep.* 568a, *Theag.* 125b) and Antisthenes (fr. 59 Decleva Caizzi).

knew was the result of some later revision (*Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1206a/b/c Chantry, “Ἀρχελάου” αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἀρχή, ὡς τινες ψευδῶς φασιν. οὐ γὰρ φέρεται νῦν Εὐριπίδου λόγος οὐδεὶς τοιοῦτος. οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶ, φησὶν Ἀρίσταρχος, τοῦ “Ἀρχελάου”, εἰ μὴ αὐτὸς μετέθηκεν ὕστερον, ὁ δὲ Ἀριστοφάνης τὸ ἐξ ἀρχῆς κείμενον εἶπεν). The obvious advantage of this theory would be that Aristophanes did not simply fake a Euripidean passage. In fact, Aristarchus may have sought to avoid the same imputation by very similar means also when discussing *Ar. Ran.* 1400, suspecting that this line, too, was unattributable since taken from a first version of Euripides’ *Telephus*, featuring a dice-playing scene, which would have been reworked subsequently; only that in this instance a subsequent commentator (Didymus?) found that «Aristophanes more likely improvised it, as he does not put (the line) into the mouth of Euripides, but into that of Dionysus who is pulling his leg» (*Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1400a/bα Chantry, Ἀρίσταρχός φησιν ἀδεσπότης τοῦτο προφέρεσθαι, ὡς Εὐριπίδου πεπονηκότος κυβεύοντας ἐν τῷ “Τηλέφῳ”, οὐς καὶ περιεῖλε. μήποτ’ οὖν ἐκεῖθεν ἦν, μᾶλλον δὲ ἐσχεδιακῶς ἂν εἶη Ἀριστοφάνης· οὐδὲ γὰρ τὸν Εὐριπίδην τοῦτο προφερόμενον <ποιεῖ>, ἀλλὰ τὸν Διόνυσον χλευάζοντα).

But perhaps the most conspicuous illustration of the ancient critics’ collective willingness to defend as accurate what Aristophanes wrote or implied with reference to other literary works is to be seen in their dealings with yet another passage from *Frogs*. In *Ar. Ran.* 1027-1028, after Aeschylus has expressed his pride in teaching the Athenians the taste for victory with his *Persians*, Dionysus exclaims «Yes, I really enjoyed myself when I heard about dead Darius, and when the chorus then immediately clapped their hands like this and said “Oh no!”» (ἐχάρην γοῦν, ἠνίκ’ ἤκουσα περὶ Δαρείου τεθνεῶτος, || ὁ χορὸς δ’ εὐθὺς τὴν χεῖρ’ ὠδὶ συγκρούσας εἶπεν “ἰαυοῖ”). As the commentators instantly noticed, «in the transmitted *Persians* of Aeschylus there is neither a report of Darius’ death, nor does the chorus clap their hands and say “Oh no!”» (*Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1028αα, ἐν τοῖς φερομένοις Αἰσχύλου “Πέρσαις”, οὔτε Δαρείου θάνατος ἀπαγγέλλεται, οὔτε χορὸς τὰς χεῖρας συγκρούσας λέγει “ἰαυοῖ”). Modern interpreters have variously tried to come to terms with this issue by proposing more or less bold emendations, designed also to heal the unmetricality of the transmission.¹⁸ However, the default reaction of the ancient critics seems to have been rather different. The scholia do not tell us what they meant to do about the metre, but for the central problem one influential hypothesis invoked poetic license and proposed the following:¹⁹ «Chaeris says: “Darius” stands for “Xerxes”, for it is usual practice for the poets to

¹⁸ Cf. the discussion by Dover 1993, pp. 320-321, who contents himself with *crucēs*.

¹⁹ To judge by *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1028d Chantry, Chaeris’ theory (cf. immediately below) *may* eventually have given rise to textual emendation by «some» (Δαρείου → τοῦ Ξέρξου), but much is unclear here and such was in any case not the initial response.

use the names of the fathers also for the sons» (*Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1028bα Chantry, Χαῖρίς φησι τὸ “Δαρείου” ἀντὶ τοῦ “Ξέρξου”. σύνηθες γὰρ τοῖς ποιηταῖς ἐπὶ τῶν υἱῶν τοῖς τῶν πατέρων ὀνόμασι χρῆσθαι). As the formulation of another scholion suggests, the (surprising) notion here really seems to have been that «[poets] use proper names instead of patronymics», so e.g. Δαρεῖος instead of ὁ Δαρείου (cf. *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1028bβ Chantry, ὅτι τοῖς κυρίοις ἀντὶ τῶν πατρωνυμικῶν κέχρηται). Of course, even if one were to grant such an oddity, it would not be of immediate help as there is also no mention of the death of Xerxes in *Persians*: Xerxes’ being alive is explicitly talked about in the play we have (see *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1028c Chantry, which pertinently references Aesch. *Pers.* 299). Accordingly, Chaeris’ rough contemporary Herodicus of Babylon, the author of a work on κωμωδοῦμενοι who belonged to the Pergamene school of philology, then developed the hypothesis further, following the general line of argument we have already come across: there must have been two divergent versions of *Persians*, he thought, the second of which would have included mention of the battle of Plataiai and – we should presumably infer – also of the (in reality much later) death of Xerxes (*Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1028eα Chantry, Ἡρόδικός φησι διττ<ὰς> γεγονέναι <καθέσεις>† † τοῦ θανάτου, καὶ τὴν τραγωδίαν ταύτην περιέχειν τὴν ἐν Πλαταιαῖς μάχην; cf. *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1028eβ Chantry and *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1028f Chantry, where it is suggested that this second version was the one said by Eratosthenes to have been staged in Syracuse). Much more tersely, meanwhile, other voices dismissed the whole debate; they found that one could explain Dionysus’ remark far better by simply acknowledging that in *Persians* «the ghost of Darius is speaking, Darius therefore obviously being dead» (*Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1028g Chantry, οἱ δὲ· ὅτι εἰδῶλον Δαρείου φθέγγεται, ἐκεῖ<νου> τεθνηκότος, δηλονότι).²⁰ Be that as it may, the essential take-away from all this is that believing in some special, indirect or poetic, way of expression was apparently deemed preferable to either meddling with the transmission or raising doubts about the fundamental trustworthiness of even the most awkward Aristophanic testimony.²¹

²⁰ Whether this could have been maintained with περί still in the text is doubtful; but we are given no further details.

²¹ It is in line with this general attitude if several scholia on *Frogs* stress that some attempts at identifying further internal or external inconsistencies (or at least oddities) are silly pedantry (οὐ συκοφαντητέον/ἐγκλητέον): see *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 53a Chantry (on why Euripides’ *Andromeda* is mentioned in the line, rather than any more recent play of Euripides’); *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1012a/b Chantry (on Dionysus’ suggestion that Euripides may deserve «to be dead» as a punishment for the immoral effects of his tragedies, although he has already died); *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1021 Chantry alongside *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1026a Chantry (on the hypothetical claim that the passage implies a wrong chronological order between Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes* and *Persians*). Similar quibbling led to ζητήματα like the ones informing *Schol. in Ar. Nub.* 3a Holwerda (why the night is called «endless» when *Clouds* is a play staged at the City Dionysia when the nights are already shorter); *Schol. in Ar. Nub.* 150 Holwerda (why the dual τῶ πόδε is used although fleas have six feet); or *Schol. in Ar. Av.* 1653b Holwerda (why Peisetaerus’ reference to Attic inheritance rules disregards well-established mythological family trees).

3. *Aristophanes the linguistic model*

When we turn to Aristophanes as a linguistic model, the discussion can be shorter. This is not because the scholia (and, by implication, the ancient commentators) would be less focused on Aristophanes' language: on the contrary, the linguistic elucidation of individual words and phrases takes much room. The reason is rather that Aristophanes' status as a linguistic authority is even firmer than his standing as a literary classic.²²

On the whole, the scholia adopt a distinctly Atticist stance less often than one might expect. Although many of the notes undoubtedly originate in imperial Greek classrooms or similar instructional contexts, they do not normally tell their users «Note that Aristophanes says X, and therefore you must do likewise», but rather «Note that Aristophanes says X, whereas *we* say Y».²³ Occasionally, however, more explicit signs that Aristophanes' Greek *is* especially authoritative do appear. A good example of this – and at the same time an indication that 'proto-Atticist' debates began as early as the 2nd cent. BCE,²⁴ when Crates of Mallos was head of the library of Pergamum – occurs in *Schol. in Ar. Pac.* 269 Holwerda, picking up on the words ἀλετριβανος «pestle» and βυρσοπώλης «leather-seller» in *Ar. Pax* 269-270: «Crates wants (this passage) to be noted in response to those who say that δοῖδυξ is an Attic word and ἀλετριβανος Asianic, and similarly that σκυτοδένης [“hide-dresser”] is Attic and βυρσοδένης [“leather-dresser”] Asianic» (Κράτης παρατηρεῖν ἀξιοῖ πρὸς τοὺς λέγοντας, ὅτι ὁ μὲν δοῖδυξ ἀττικός, ὁ δὲ <ἀλε>τριβανος ἀσιανός, καὶ σκυτοδένης μὲν ἀττικός, βυρσοδένης δὲ ἀσιανός). Because Aristophanes used ἀλετριβανος and a βυρσο- compound, so the reasoning goes, neither of these two lexical choices can reasonably be denied to Attic; or to put it differently, Attic is, as it were, 'defined' here by Aristophanic usage. Similarly, the early Aristophanic commentator Callistratus highlighted the equivalence of τῆ

²² On the Atticist lexicographers' predilection for material from Aristophanes as well as Eupolis and Cratinus, rather than other authors of Old (let alone Middle and New) Comedy, see now especially Tribulato 2024; she stresses that different lexicographers may cast their net more or less widely depending on the purpose of individual works, but Aristophanes is always to be found at the top of the preference hierarchy. For what is presented above, Tribulato's observations on Phrynichus are particularly instructive: «[Aristophanes] is usually considered an undisputed model of linguistic correctness for lexical, prosodic, or morphological issues. Even when Aristophanes' use deviates from the rule, as articulated by Phrynichus himself, the lexicographer seems to find ways to excuse the comic poet» – notably by diagnosing some comic purpose or some metrical constraint (Tribulato 2024, p. 78)

²³ See e.g. *Scholl. in Ar. Ach.* 625, 849e Wilson; *Scholl. in Ar. Nub.* 145b Holwerda; *Scholl. in Ar. Pac.* 536d, 1150b Holwerda; *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 388 Chantry, etc.

²⁴ If not earlier: see also *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 1263c Chantry, according to which Eratosthenes denounced the linguistic ignorance of certain «fake-Attic» writers (or critics?) who tried to justify later solecisms in «made-up plays» by wrongly construing an Aristophanic precedent (although it remains obscure what exactly these ψευδαττικοί wanted to read in *Ar. Ran.* 1263; cf. Chantry 1999, p. 142): Ἐρατοσθένης τῶν ψευδαττικῶν τινὰς γράφειν φησὶ †“τῶ ψήφῳ λαβῶν”, ἵνα καὶ τὰ πεπλασμένα δράματα ἐν οἷς τὸ παράπαν τοῦτο ἠγνόηται δοκῆ μὴ σεσολοικίσθαι.† Were these πεπλασμένα δράματα New Comedy plays written in Attic for an Alexandrian audience, like those of Eratosthenes' contemporary Machon (cf. Athen. XIV 664a = Macho test. 1 K.-A.)?

λαμπάδι and τῆ δαδί «with the torch» in Aristophanes, «so that it is obvious that they [i.e., the Athenians in Aristophanes' times] said it both ways» (*Schol. in Ar. Thesm.* 917 Regtuit, καί φησι Καλλίστρατος οὕτω· “τῆ λαμπάδι” εἶπεν, ἀλλαχῆ “τῆ δαδί”, ὡς δῆλον εἶναι ὅτι ἑκατέρως ἔλεγον). Such a remark would again make little sense if others had not *doubted* the acceptability in ‘real’ Attic of one or the other word (presumably that of δάς: cf. Philyllius fr. 29 K.-A.).²⁵

Against this background, it is not surprising if Aristophanes could even get away with things which would have raised an eyebrow if they occurred in other authors. Thus, when Aristophanes employs the highly unusual noun μάκρος n. «size» alongside the regular μῆκος n., this is flagged up, yes, but not rejected (*Schol. in Ar. Av.* 1131b Holwerda).²⁶ Here or there, though, such departures from the perceived standard do generate some brief explanatory comment. For one thing, there was of course comic license. Although the comic dimension of Aristophanes' verbal creativity remains somewhat underexplored, there was enough awareness of it to make his annotators²⁷ realise that, for example, the middle form ῥέγκεται «snores» in *Ar. Eq.* 115 was created for the sake of a comic rhyme with normal πέρδεται «farts» in the same line, although «it is not approved practice to use this form» (*Schol. in Ar. Eq.* 115a Jones, ὁμοιοκατάληκτον εἶπε τὸ “ῥέγκεται”· οὐ γάρ ἐστι δόκιμον οὕτω λέγειν; cf. *Schol. in Ar. Pac.* 289a Holwerda on the barbarism χαιρομαι); that the one-off verbal diminutive πλανύττομεν for πλανῶμεν «we are wandering around» must be «comically extended» (*Schol. in Ar. Av.* 3α Holwerda, κωμικῶς δὲ ἐκτέταται; contrast *Schol. in Ar. Av.* 3β Holwerda, ἀττικῶς δὲ παρήκται); or that βάδος m. «walk» in *Ar. Av.* 42 is built after models such as Homeric πάτος «path» because «the comedians commonly make such jokes» (*Schol. Ar. Av.* 42αβ Holwerda, οἱ κωμικοὶ παίζειν εἰώθασι τὰ τοιαῦτα. ... ἐσχημάτισεν οὖν καὶ οὗτος ἀπὸ τοῦ βαδίζειν τὸν “βάδον”, ὡς Ὅμηρος ἀπὸ τοῦ πατεῖν τὸν “πάτον”).²⁸ Of particular interest in this connection is *Schol. in Ar. Nub.* 1206b

²⁵ Cf. further *Schol. in Ar. Ran.* 35a Chantry, noting that the line has been marked with an X «because he [Aristophanes] says κατάβα [“dismount!”], in response to those who claim that only κατάβηθι can be said» (τὸ χ ὅτι “κατάβα” φησί, πρὸς τοὺς ἀξιοῦντας ὅτι “κατάβηθι” λέγεται μόνως; cf. *Ar. Byz.* fr. 28 Slater). On Callistratus, see e.g. Boudreaux 1919, pp. 48-51; Montana 2008.

²⁶ Cf. further e.g. *Schol. in Ar. Nub.* 790a Holwerda (on the superlative ἐπιλησόμετατον «most forgetful»; some partial parallels are cited), *Schol. in Ar. Vesp.* 680c Koster (on «unusual» [ἄηθες] act. μετέπεμψα «I sent for» instead of med. μετεπεμψάμην).

²⁷ Perhaps with some exceptions in the early stages of Aristophanic scholarship: to judge by *Schol. in Ar. Av.* 299a Holwerda, Euphronius (who belonged to the very first generation of *hypomnema* authors: see Section 1) seems to have concluded from *Ar. Av.* 299 that κειρύλος was the Attic equivalent of the bird name κηρύλος «halcyon» as attested in the Doric of Alcman (fr. 26.2 Page), thus failing to see the pun on κείρω «shear» (as subsequently noted by Didymus, if not before). The text printed by Holwerda 1991, p. 54, is misleading and should rather be, in line with ms. V, φησὶ δὲ Δίδυμος τὸ κατὰ φύσιν ὄνομα κήρυλος λέγεσθαι «Didymus says that the name is κηρύλος by nature», i.e. when not comically altered (cf. Benuzzi 2023, pp. 91-93).

²⁸ Note also *Schol. in Ar. Pac.* 415 Holwerda where a virtually impossible reading ὑφ' ἄρματωλίας instead of ὑφ' ἄμαρτωλίας «by means of cheating» is defended against the odds by postulating an extremely far-fetched pun on ἄρμα «chariot»; cf. Olson 1998, p. 160.

Holwerda because there the ‘ungrammatical’ vocative ὦ Στρεψιάδες (instead of ὦ Στρεψιάδη) is not only designated as a form comically coined «against the rule», but additionally said to serve a more specific characterizing purpose as the speaker, Strepsiades himself, «made a mistake about the vocative, being an uneducated man» (ὡς ἄγροικος περι τὴν κλητικὴν ἐσφάλῃ· ἔδει γὰρ εἰπεῖν ὦ Στρεψιάδη· ἔπαιξεν οὖν παρὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν).²⁹

Another factor occasionally – if not always convincingly – invoked by Aristophanes’ critics when dealing with apparent linguistic ‘irregularities’ was metre. Thus, rather than saying something to the effect that «διδάχθῃσμαι does not exist in Attic»,³⁰ they sought to justify Aristophanes’ use in *Ar. Nub.* 127 of διδάξομαι in the passive sense of «I’ll get taught» through the assumption of a metrically conditioned omission of a reflexive pronoun ἐμαυτόν added to a regular middle future (*Schol. in Ar. Nub.* 127 Holwerda, νῦν μὲν παθητικῶς ἀποδεκτέον τὸ “διδάξομαι”. βούλεται γὰρ λέγειν “διδάχθῃσμαι”. ... “διδάξω” μὲν γὰρ ὁ διδάσκαλος ἐρεῖ, “διδάξομαι” δὲ ὁ πατήρ καὶ πᾶς παραδιδούς ἕτερον μανθάνειν. δυνατὸν οὖν καὶ νῦν μὲν εἶναι τὸ αὐτό, ἴν’ ἢ νοούμενον “διδάξομαι, ἐπεὶ οὐ τὸν υἱόν, ἐμαυτόν”, τοῦ δὲ μέτρου οὐκ ἐπιτρέποντος εἰπεῖν “ἐμαυτόν” “διδάξομαι” ἔφη “αὐτὸς βαδίζων εἰς τὸ φροντιστήριον”); and in response to the perfect infinitive ἑορακέναι in *Ar. Plut.* 1045, which must have been regarded as irregular although ἑορ- is well-established within the perfect system in classical times, someone equally maintained that this has a short -ο- «because of the metre» (*Schol. in Ar. Plut.* 1045 Chantry, διὰ τοῦ ο μικροῦ τὸ “ἑορακέναι”, διὰ τὸ μέτρον).³¹

As may be expected, with such explanatory rescue avenues being available, very little linguistic material was in the end left where a serious critic could still find fault; and it must have taken considerable self-confidence to do so. An unambiguous, though itself questionable, rejection of Aristophanic usage is thus found only in *Schol. in Ar. Av.* 1514 Holwerda and *Schol. in Ar. Thesm.* 828 Regtuit. In the former, the expression πηνίκ’ ἄττ’ ἀπώλετο; «At about what time did he perish?» is qualified as «not Attic, nor old or accurate»: ἄττα is redundant here, since its placement

²⁹ Thus, no suggestion is made, as in the modern commentary of Dover 1968, p. 238, that «possibly names in -(ι)άδης could have a vocative in -(ι)άδες as early as the fifth century» (e.g. along the lines of *ὅτι “ὦ Στρεψιάδη” καὶ “ὦ Στεψιάδες” ἑκατέρως ἔλεγον). Dover himself also prefers a characterizing interpretation, suggesting that «Strepsiades is under the impression that abnormal morphology makes his utterance poetic». In reality, though, Strepsiades may simply be applying what he has been taught in the grammatical scene of *Ar. Nub.* 658-693, esp. *Ar. Nub.* 689-691: using a vocative in -η would mean to call himself (Strepsiades) a woman.

³⁰ Dover 1968, p. 110.

³¹ Cf. further *Schol. in Ar. Vesp.* 704a Koster with the erroneous suggestion that τιθασευτήν «tamer» has only one sigma διὰ τὸ μέτρον, and *Schol. in Ar. Nub.* 818 Holwerda for a metrical claim that is even worse: according to the latter annotation, the otherwise respectable commentator Symmachus would have postulated that the final -α of acc. Δία could be long in Attic, perhaps not always (which to assume would have been preposterous), but as a metrical license (Σύμμαχος φησιν ἐκτείνεσθαι τὸ α τοῦ “Δία” ἄττικῶς). If this is true, it is another instance of a commentator trying to save at all costs a badly transmitted text (*Ar. Nub.* 819 with omitted initial τόν).

is illogical as it means neither “some” nor “whichever”; none of this fits with πηνίκα [“at what time”]» (ὅτι οὐκ ἀπτικὸν τὸ “πηνίκ’ ἄπτ’ ἀπώλετο” οὐδὲ ἀρχαϊκὸν οὐδὲ ἀκριβῶν. ... παρέλκει γὰρ τὸ “ἄπτα” νῦν· ἀλόγως γὰρ κεῖται. οὔτε γὰρ τὸ “τινά” σημαίνει οὔτε τὸ “ἄτινα”. οὐδὲν γὰρ τούτων ἀρμόζει τῷ “πηνίκα”). In the latter, which deals with the dat. pl. στρατιαῖς for «military campaigns», it is said that Aristophanes, just like Eupolis, «often mixed this up: for a στρατιά is the group [i.e. “army”], and a στρατεία the “campaign”» (συνέχεεν καὶ οὗτος ὡς Εὐπολις πολλακίς· στρατιά μὲν γὰρ τὸ πλῆθος, στρατεία δὲ ἡ στράτευσις).

4. *Aristophanes the historical source*

Since not every source of information that is *useful* also has to be *authoritative* by virtue of this usefulness, the third and last area to be considered presents us with yet another kind of data. While ancient readers of comedy could be curious to learn more about the life and history of classical Athens, and at the same time enjoy correlating the richly allusive comic material with independently attested facts, they did not have to do so under the premise that what Aristophanes wrote was to be believed by default. In parallel with what we have seen in our discussion of ‘external inaccuracy’ in the literary domain (Section 2.3), the comic poet might of course be given the benefit of the doubt, but there were clear limits to that – not least because, again, comedy often says things tongue-in-cheek. When, for example, Euripides in the initial scene of *Thesmophoriazusaē* begins to describe to his Inlaw the tragic poet Agathon by saying «There is this Agathon—», only to be immediately interrupted by the Inlaw who asks «Ah, the dark-skinned, strong guy?» (Ar. *Thesm.* 31, (Εὐ.) ἔστιν τις Ἀγάθων— (Κη.) μῶν ὁ μέλας, ὁ καρτερός;), this was enough for the commentators of Aristarchus’ school as well as Didymus to assume that there must have lived a real *second* Agathon at the time, who would have looked like that; it was left to a subsequent interpreter (Symmachus?³²) to then express disbelief and reasonably hypothesize that Aristophanes merely «said this because he wants to make fun of Agathon as being neither strong nor dark-skinned» (*Schol. in Ar. Thesm.* 31 Regtuit, οἱ περὶ Ἀρίσταρχον καὶ Δίδυμόν φασιν εἶναι τοιοῦτον Ἀγάθωνα. ἐγὼ δὲ οὐχ ἠγοῦμαι, ἀλλ’ ἐπειδὴ βούλεται κωμῶδειν τὸν Ἀγάθωνα ὡς μήτε καρτερόν μήτε μέλανα, τοῦτο εἶπεν).³³

³² This is of course a mere guess, but Symmachus (2nd cent. CE) was the most important post-Didymean commentator of Aristophanes, and he did voice disagreement with Didymus elsewhere, too; cf. Boudreaux 1919, pp. 144-160; Montana 2003; Willi 2024a, p. 362.

³³ Contrast e.g. *Schol. in Ar. Pac.* 676a Holwerda, which correctly acknowledges that the qualification of the notorious «deserter» Cleonymus as ἀποβολιμαῖος (τῶν ὄπλων) contains a pun on ὑποβολιμαῖος for a «supposititious» child (cf. *Schol. in Ar. Pac.* 678 Holwerda), but still seems to take seriously the claim that Cleonymus was an illegitimate son (οὔτε γὰρ γνήσιος ἦν τῷ πατρὶ, ἀλλὰ καὶ ρίψασπις ἦν).

No such uncertainty arose when a given piece of information in Aristophanes directly clashed with what the commentator knew from (in his eyes) more trustworthy sources. For instance, it was common knowledge that, despite the wording Σωκράτης ὁ Μήλιος in *Ar. Nub.* 830, the real Socrates was not a Melian, but an Athenian: hence, to designate him as Μήλιος is «ahistorical» and just an attempt at denigrating him through an association with the well-known atheist Diagoras of Melos (*Schol. in Ar. Nub.* 830a Holwerda, παρ' ιστορίαν. Ἀθηναῖος γὰρ ὁ Σωκράτης· ἀλλ' ἐπειδὴ Διαγόρας Μήλιος ὦν διεβάλλετο ὡς θεομάχος, καὶ τὸν Σωκράτην δὲ ὡς ἄθεον διαβάλλει, διὰ τοῦτο αὐτὸν Μήλιον ἔφη; cf. e.g. *Schol. in Ar. Nub.* 641 Holwerda on the historical inaccuracy of implying that Socrates taught poetry and music; *Schol. in Ar. Vesp.* 1267a/b Koster on another comically adjusted personal naming formula). However biased it may be,³⁴ the literary purpose (in our case, comic disparagement (διαβολή)) may thus trump historical accuracy. Moreover, once it is acknowledged that such accuracy will sometimes be absent for a discernible reason, it also becomes easier to accept it where a reason is trickier to pin down. When Trygaeus in *Ar. Pax* 989-990 says that he and all other lovers of Peace have been desperately longing for her already for thirteen years (οἱ σου τρυχόμεθ' ἤδη || τρία καὶ δέκ' ἔτη), this is hard to align with the fact that *Peace* was staged (and commonly known to have been staged) at the City Dionysia of 421 BCE. If the Peloponnesian War – at least from an Athenian perspective – started under the archonship of Pythodorus in 432/1 BCE, «the hero's count of years is a bit loose».³⁵ Facing this difficulty, and marking the line with an X «because what he is saying is not in agreement with chronology» as established by the reckoning of historiographical authorities such as Philochorus and Thucydides, the ancient commentator whose opinion is reflected in *Schol. in Ar. Pac.* 990a Holwerda came to the conclusion «that Aristophanes has given himself the wriggle room that sometimes there was a pause and sometimes there was war, so that the beginning of neither the war nor the piece is firmly established» (τὸ γ, ὅτι οὐ συμφωνεῖ τοῖς χρόνοις ἃ λέγει ... λεκτέον τοίνυν, ὅτι αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ ὁ Ἀριστοφάνης τὸν ἐνδόσιμον δέδωκε, πῆ μὲν ἀνάπαυλαν, πῆ δὲ πόλεμον γενέσθαι, ὡς μηδὲ τὴν ἀρχὴν βεβαίαν εἶναι μήτε τοῦ πολέμου μήτε τῆς εἰρήνης); or more simply, and to quote a parallel scholion, «the poets often improvise with regard to chronology» (*Schol. in Ar. Pac.* 990b Holwerda, οἱ δὲ ποιηταὶ πολλάκις αὐτοσχεδιάζουσιν εἰς τοὺς χρόνους).

³⁴ *Schol. in Ar. Nub.* 96d Holwerda attests an extensive discussion among scholars about whether Aristophanes had composed *Clouds* out of «hatred» towards Socrates or not; those who doubted such hatred argued, among other things, that the very divergence between Aristophanes' portrayal and Socrates' actual teachings proved their position.

³⁵ Olson 1998, p. 258; after rejecting a modern theory whereby 13 would have been «often a nominal figure best translated “many”», Olson himself finds it «likely that use of the number is conditioned primarily by metrical considerations».

There may be an unavoidable corollary to this notion that poets must not be judged with the same strict yardstick as historiographers are. As far as historical events are concerned, the previously observed willingness to trust Aristophanes unless there are strong reasons not to do so seems more limited than it is otherwise. Symmachus' refusal to believe the story alluded to in *Ar. Eq.* 84-85, whereby Themistocles committed suicide by drinking the blood of a sacrificial bull, may betray nothing but healthy scepticism, and it is underpinned by the argument that «neither Herodotus nor Thucydides relate the matter» (*Schol. in Ar. Eq.* 84b Jones, Σύμμαχος δέ φησι ψεύδεσθαι περὶ Θεμιστοκλέους, οὔτε γὰρ Ἡρόδοτος οὔτε Θουκυδίδης ἱστορεῖ). More substantially, however, *Schol. in Ar. Eq.* 794b Jones also declares as «ahistorical» (παρ' ἱστορίαν) the Sausage-Seller's criticism of Cleon for «scattering the peace, when Archeptolemus was presenting it» and for «driving away out of the city with a slap in the back the embassies who were calling for a truce» (*Ar. Eq.* 794-796, Ἀρχεπτολέμου δὲ φέροντος || τὴν εἰρήνην ἐξεσκέδασας, τὰς πρεσβείας τ' ἀπελαύνεις || ἐκ τῆς πόλεως ῥαθασπυγίζων, αἱ τὰς σπονδὰς προκαλοῦνται). This, the scholion thinks, must refer to a moment eight years into the war when «the Athenians and the Peloponnesians committed to a year-long truce, sending embassies to each other – but without there being any ambassador Archeptolemus: instead, for the Spartans there was an ambassador Taurus, Echetimides, Athenaeus etc.» (παρ' ἱστορίαν τοῦ Ἀρχεπτολέμου ἐμνημόνευσεν. ὄγδοον γὰρ ἔτος ἔχοντος τοῦ πολέμου τούτου, ἔτι ζῶντος τοῦ Κλέωνος, ἐνιαύσιον ἐποίησαντο πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἐκεχειρίαν οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι καὶ οἱ Πελοποννήσιοι, πρεσβείαν πέμψαντες πρὸς ἀλλήλους, οὐ μὴν Ἀρχεπτολέμου πρεσβεύοντός τινος, ἀλλὰ τῶν Λακεδαιμονίων ἦν πρεσβευτῆς Ταῦρος, Ἐχέτιμίδης, Ἀθηναῖος κτλ.). The list of (sometimes garbled) ambassador names which is here given to prove that there was no Archeptolemus among them is extracted from Thucydides (IV, 119); but in Thucydides it relates to those who negotiated the armistice of 423 BCE. In other words, the annotator who came up with this 'proof' that Aristophanes must be wrong failed to notice his own anachronistic mix-up with an event that actually postdated the staging of *Knights* in early 424 BCE. The idea that Aristophanes might have been thinking of a different occasion does not seem to have crossed his mind any more than, say, the thought that Archeptolemus could have been instrumental in such negotiations in something other than an official capacity. Yet, Aristophanes' face was nevertheless saved because the note ends by pulling everything back to the literary level and underlining that Ἀρχεπτόλεμος (lit. «War-Leader») was simply an ideal speaking name under the circumstances: «So it is likely that he [Aristophanes] mentioned Archeptolemus making use of the name so that he could present Cleon more distinctly as the driving force behind the war, since Cleon did not accept peace when (even) «War-Leader» offered it» (εἰκόδς οὖν Ἀρχεπτολέμου μνημονεῦσαι χρησάμενον τῷ ὀνόματι ἵνα

μᾶλλον ἔξαρχον ἐπιδείξει τοῦ πολέμου τὸν Κλέωνα, ὅτι Ἀρχεπτολέμου εἰρήνην διδόντος οὐ κατεδέξατο Κλέων).³⁶ In that sense, the scholion nevertheless shows a more charitable attitude than *Schol. in Ar. Av.* 1047a Holwerda, which argues that Aristophanes got his institutional facts wrong when the Decree-Seller wants to summon Peisetaerus on a charge of assault «for the month of Mounichion» (*Ar. Av.* 1046, εἰς τὸν Μουνιχιῶνα μῆνα). This, the note claims, is said «as if it were in that month that foreigners who are summoned from other cities are brought to court; however, that was not so, but it was in Maimakterion, as Philetaerus makes clear in his *Months* [fr. 12 K.-A.]: “Which one is Maimakterion? The courtroom month”» (ὡς ἐν τούτῳ τῶν ἐναγομένων ξένων ἀπὸ τῶν πόλεων καλουμένων. οὐκ ἦν δέ, ἀλλ’ ὁ Μαιμακτηριῶν, ὡς Φιλέταιρος ἐν “Μησι” δηλοῖ: “τίς ἐστι Μαιμακτηριῶν; μὴν δικάσιμος”). One cannot help but feel that the evidential basis for demonstrating the ‘mistake’ is insufficient here,³⁷ and that the commentator who came up with it was more interested in displaying his own wide reading and learning than in trying to do justice to Aristophanes.

5. Conclusion

Despite the great esteem in which Aristophanes was held throughout antiquity, as a comic poet, as an accomplished user of ‘proper’ Attic, and as a first-hand observer of classical Athenian culture and history, he was never considered infallible *a priori*. His ancient commentators did, however, usually try their best to explain to their audiences why the comedies they discussed contained passages that were potentially open for questioning from a literary, linguistic, or historical point of view. In doing so, they kept editorial intervention to an absolute minimum; an Aristarchus athetizing five lines he found aesthetically inadequate was a rare exception, not the rule (Section 2.1). Play-internal inconsistencies without an obvious comic aim could on occasion be taken to result from secondary revisions, typically by the poet himself (Section 2.2). Where Aristophanes’ own explicit or implicit intertextual references went astray, this might be deliberate and intended as a challenge to the primary audience’s perceptiveness, or alternatively it might be a mirage due to the later interpreters’ inability to access the correct (version of an) intertext (Section 2.3). In his use of language, Aristophanes would normally ‘define’ what was to count as canonical, so much

³⁶ This is not an impossible idea as such; modern scholars such as Neil 1901, p. 115, and Gomme 1958, p. 4, still subscribe to some version of it. The point is just that there is no visible attempt instead to believe Aristophanes on this historical matter; contrast nowadays e.g. Sommerstein 1981, p. 186.

³⁷ On the question of specific ‘judicial months’ in Athens, see MacDowell 1978, pp. 228-229, who, on the basis of *Ar. fr.* 289 K.-A., considers it possible (but not more) «that treaty cases were regularly tried in Maimakterion». However, Peisetaerus is not summoned for a treaty case, and even *if* his foreign residency were relevant here, it should be noted that, according to *Dem.* 33.23 (whether emended or not), Mounichion was in any case one of the months when trials involving foreign ἔμποροι could be held.

so that in those rare instances where his usage would seem to break a purist's rule, that rule itself risked being too strict; though of course the poet's freedom to produce humour by linguistic means also had to be taken into account, alongside any potential constraints imposed by dramatic metre (Section 3). Similarly, the few demonstrable misrepresentations of historical facts were readily ascribed to a comic purpose or to the simple truth that a comedian need not operate with the same accuracy of detail as a historiographer (Section 4). All in all, then, the great Aristophanes hardly got anything wrong – but the knowledge and insight of his critics was still needed to prove to the world at large that that was indeed the case.

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