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Wild Neighbors: Perceptions of Megarian Ethnic Identity in Fifth-Century Athenian Comedy

The characterization of barbarians in fifth-century drama as wild, untrustworthy, effeminate, and childish has been well-documented (T. Long, *Barbarians in Greek Comedy*, 1986; E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, 1989). On the other hand, the presentation of the various Greek groups in Old Comedy has received little scholarly attention. In this paper, I focus specifically upon the stereotype of the Megarians in the Athenian comedies produced during the Peloponnesian War.

In the first part of the paper, I explore the differences between the Athenians and the Megarians portrayed in Old Comedy and show that the stereotype of the Dorian Megarians shares certain characteristics with both barbarian groups and the (mostly Ionian) subjects/allies of Athens. In addition to the lengthy scene with the Megarian merchant in the *Akharnians*, fourteen other references create a vivid and consistent stereotype of Megara: the comic poets repeatedly characterize the Megarians, like the barbarians and the Athenian subjects/allies, as inferior, vulgar, childlike, and conniving. In the *Prospaltioi* for example, one of Eupolis' characters criticizes a joke as "Megarian"; it is also vulgar (*aselges*) and excessively frigid or silly (*sphodra psuxron*). The character next finds fault with the audience for laughing at childish things (*ta paidia*, frag. 2). In the *Akharnians* of Aristophanes, the Megarian merchant characterizes his own daughters as clearly worthless (*phaneran zamian*); he must resort to a "Megarian trick" (*Megarika machana*) and disguise them as pigs in order to sell them to the Athenian comic hero Dikaiopolis.

Why do the Megarians not conform to the comic stereotypes of other Dorian groups? I suggest in the second part of the paper that the stereotype of the Megarians is inextricably linked to Athenian imperial ideology. By attributing characteristics typically associated with barbarians and subjects/allies to their Megarian neighbors, the comic poets suggest that the local Greek landscape requires Athenian control and, thereby, sanction Athenian mastery over it.

In *Inventing the Barbarian* (1989), Edith Hall has suggested that tragedy's articulation of ethnicity reflects "a move towards a simpler, binary articulation of the Hellenocentric world" (p. 161). As this paper will show however, Attic comedy can present even its own neighbors as different, inferior, and in need of Athenian control. The Athenian stereotyping of the Megarians thus reveals the strength of ethnic prejudice within Hellas itself, and the canonical antithesis of Greeks and barbarians is undermined by a more complicated vision in Old Comedy of intra-Hellenic conflict.