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***Acharnians* 1118–21: A Study in Comic Hermeneutics**

The received understanding of [Ach. 1118-21](#) has Dicaeopolis continue his mimicry of Lamachus' actions (begun at 1097) by first calling for a spit of sausage in answer to Lamachus' call for his spear, then, when Lamachus removes the spear's sheath, pulling the sausage off its spit. While the initial capping of Lamachus' request has a clear comic point and finds parallels in the nine other matched requests presented in this scene, the expansion at 1120-21 is unusual. Dicaeopolis' response at 1121 does not effectively cap Lamachus' actions or further elaborate the nature of Dicaeopolis' festive triumph. Not only is his response ineffective, it is curiously brief and imprecise: whereas elsewhere the comic hero maintains a firm control of the scene's dynamic, here his rejoinder is limited to a half line in antilabe and is reduced to a merely mechanical imitation of his rival's actions. I propose to revive the notion (often mooted but generally rejected) that Dicaeopolis' TOU=DE in 1121b represents a comic *paraprosdokian*: rather than mimicking Lamachus directly, Dicaeopolis suddenly breaks the pattern of the scene by offering the slave his phallus. This explains not only the use of TOU=DE but also the brevity and verbal imprecision of Dicaeopolis' response, which now has a suitably comic force.

This reading of Ach. 1118-21 poses interesting methodological considerations. The study of Greek tragedy has for some time been influenced by what might be called Taplin's Law: the understanding that "there [is] no significant action" on the Greek tragic stage "other than that indicated by the [actors'] words" (Taplin, *Stagecraft* 28). Taplin's Law clearly does not apply to comedy, however, or at least not in the same fashion. The literal verbal signaling of stage action, so at home on the stately tragic stage, is anathema to the earthy pseudo-realism that comedy is wont to foster and its greater emphasis on the physicality of its actors. As an example I consider the opening of [Shakespeare, \*Twelfth Night\* III iv](#): as in *Acharnians*, the comic text contains within it the clues to its enactment, but those clues are only apparent to one who begins from the notion that the scene should be literal verbal marking of the action is not to be expected: quite simply, it would spoil the joke.

Comedy offers a different hermeneutical dynamic from that of tragedy: the types of markers employed are different, as is the enacted text's relation to its audience. Ultimately, the fundamental notion of what constitutes a "significant" action has to be rethought when one turns from the tragic to the comic stage.