

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2013

Seattle, Washington

A Brief History of Athenian Political Comedy (c. 440–c. 300)

JEFFREY HENDERSON

Boston University

SUMMARY: This paper reassesses the production-pattern of politically engaged comedy of the Aristophanic type, traditionally considered the hallmark of the Old Comic period, in light of recent work on the comic fragments, and finds that such plays were relatively infrequent, produced only when demagogues were ascendant by poets who opposed them, and that this pattern seems to hold for the fourth century as well.

THIS PAPER DOES NOT ADDRESS THE USUAL QUESTIONS ABOUT WHETHER Aristophanic a.k.a Old Comedy was political and if so, how so.¹ Rather, it examines the production-pattern and the theatrical and historical contexts of politically engaged comedy—which I define as a particular type of play that took a recognizable and more or less coherent political stance on actual public issues—over a much longer period of time than is usual in this context, and in light of the recent revival of interest in the comic fragments and consequent development of less Aristophanocentric approaches in general. I will focus on a few straightforward questions: Is this type, or any other type, really useful in defining eras in the history of comedy?; Just how often was this politically engaged type of comedy produced?; Does its pattern of production track particular political environments?; and What was its relationship to competing types of comedy? All of this needs further investigation, as do the other principal types and subtypes of comedy both separately and in their relationships to one another, so here I can offer only general thoughts and suggestions.

¹ Recent surveys of views on these questions are Walsh 2009 and Olson 2010.

We may begin with the familiar standard model, concisely captured by Horace's programmatic assignment of the origins of satire to fifth-century Attic comedy (*Sat.* 1.4.1–5):

Eupolis atque Cratinus Aristophanesque poetae
atque alii, quorum comoedia prisca virorum est,
siquis erat dignus describi, quod malus ac fur,
quod moechus foret aut sicarius aut alioqui
famosus, multa cum libertate notabant.

Eupolis, Cratinus, and Aristophanes and all the other poets of Old Comedy would point out with great freedom anyone who deserved to be put down as a bad person or a thief, an adulterer, a cutthroat, or in some other way notorious.²

According to this (ultimately Peripatetic) literary-historical model, already standard in Horace's day, there were three eras of comedy that developed along an evolutionary or teleological path from Old to New by way of a transitional Middle: Old Comedy (from c. 486, when comedy was added to the City Dionysia, to c. 387, the end of Aristophanes' career); Middle Comedy (c. 386 to 321, Menander's debut); and New Comedy thereafter.³ Because plays by Aristophanes and other topically engaged poets most impressed and interested ancient scholars, they were the type chosen to exemplify Old Comedy, while the topically disengaged comedies of Menander exemplified the genre's evolutionary end-point, with nothing equally noteworthy in between.⁴ A theory was developed to explain this evolution: Old Comic poets must have been granted a special license to castigate anyone who scandalously misbehaved and thus threatened public morality or good order, but this laudable freedom fell victim to legal and/or political suppression when true democracy came to an end or, alternatively, when the poets began to abuse their freedom by attacking *good* people; thereafter, in the Middle period, poets were allowed to satirize only covertly and in more decent language, until by Menander's time they abandoned personal satire altogether.

That this model has seemed to account for our comic canon fairly well is unsurprising, given that the model itself for the most part generated the criteria

²All translations in this paper are my own.

³The major testimonia are collected and translated in Henderson 2007: T 52–95 and Storey 2011: 1.2–41.

⁴"Middle Comedy is a backwater; the fourth century is a century of prose: many single pages of Plato and Demosthenes are worth all these remnants. Between the excitingly varied landscape of Old Comedy and the city of Menander stretches a desert: therein the sedulous topographer may remark two respectable eminences, and perhaps a low ridge in the middle distance, or a few nullahs, and the wayfarer will greet with delight one or two oases with a singing-bird or so; but the ever-present foreground of his journey is sand, tiresome, barren and trickling" (Norwood 1932: 38).

for selecting the canon⁵; what did not suit the model comes down to us as a chance residue of fragments, a vast but forbidding and poorly charted world. The standard model has seemed good enough to discourage re-evaluation and the laborious but quite possibly fruitless voyage to the fragment-world that re-evaluation would require. But in 1983 the fragment-world began to acquire better roads and more helpful signage, when the Kassel-Austin *PCG* began to appear, and the thirty years since then have seen the publication of the first full commentaries on individual poets,⁶ translations of at least the more interesting fragments,⁷ book-length appraisals of Eupolis and Cratinus,⁸ and surveys of the broad comic terrain beyond Aristophanes generally.⁹ This sort of groundwork has attracted major funding from the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften for an international team, under the direction of Bernhard Zimmermann at the University of Freiburg, to produce editions with commentaries of every fragmentary comic poet over the next fifteen years (2011–2026, in 28 volumes projected). And while it is true that fragments can tell us only so much, it is surprising how much they can tell us if we ask the right questions.

How well is the standard model holding up against this new information? Not very, it seems, and the root of its limitations—where it got off on the wrong foot—was its narrow emphasis on personal mockery in defining the genre’s character, history, and periodicity. Not that explicit mockery (ὄνομαστί κωμωδεῖν) is not in fact very frequent in fifth-century comedy: ancient scholars correctly noted its ancestry in archaic iambic poetry and its similarity to certain ritual behaviors, particularly those associated with Dionysus and Demeter, and they noted as exceptional its avoidance by certain poets—in particular, Crates and Pherecrates¹⁰—or its absence in particular plays, for example, Cratinus’s *Odysseis*, which some ancient scholars accordingly classified as Middle Comic¹¹: a sign, incidentally, that there were other ancient models for classifying a play in which content or style trumped chronology.¹²

⁵ See esp. Csapo 2000.

⁶ Hunter 1983; Arnott 1996; Konstantakos 2000; Millis 2001; Olson 2007; Telò 2007; Orth 2009; Papachrysostomou 2008; Pirrotta 2009.

⁷ Henderson 2007; Rusten 2011; Storey 2011.

⁸ Storey 2003 and Bakola 2010.

⁹ Nesselrath 1990; Belardinelli 1998; Harvey and Wilkins 2000.

¹⁰ For example Pherecrates T 2, “Pherecrates ... followed the example of Crates and likewise refrained from personal abuse (τοῦ ... λοιδορεῖν).”

¹¹ Platonius, *Diff. com.* 29 p. 4 Koster (ὁ τῆς μέσης κωμωδίας τύπος), 47 p. 5 (“contains no personal castigation [οὐδενὸς ἐπιτίμησιν] but is only a send-up [διασυρμὸν] of Homer’s *Odyssey*.”)

¹² Succinctly observed by Olson 2007: 22–26.

But mockery, though very frequent, was for the most part incidental: it was a stylistic ingredient, much less frequently the main point that defined a *type* of play. In the fifth century there was indeed considerable variety when it came to types—mythic/myth burlesque, paraepic/paratragic, fantastic/escapist, cultural/literary/intellectual, personal, political/forensic, and perhaps domestic if this was as yet a type and not just an ingredient. And there were hybrid types too, since elements of each main type could be used in various combinations, for example, cultural and domestic in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, political and domestic in *Knights* and *Wasps*, mythic and political in *Acharnians*. Found in all of these types and combinations and with equal frequency was incidental mockery of individuals and groups, mostly Athenian, and not mainly "bad people and thieves." Incidental mockery ranged across the broadest spectrum of celebrity, from mere foibles, physical abnormalities, or character flaws—centered mainly on money, eating, drinking, and sex—to activity with political or social impact, but it took the form mostly of drive-by jokes: asides, references, or brief songs, unconnected with the main plot or themes of the play, and thus easily inserted or detached. Most of the targets (*komoidoumenoi*) were men associated with politics and the courts, their friends and favorite courtesans, the rest mainly associated with the arts (especially theater) and the trades or professions (Sommerstein 1996). Poets seemed to specialize in certain targets: Pherecrates, for example, liked to mock poets and musicians but not politicians, Eupolis the reverse.

The standard model does not distinguish this incidental mockery from the political type of play. The political type is not simply a play that contained a lot of mockery or certain kinds of mockery—*Lysistrata*, for example, is fully engaged politically but contains only one fleeting reference to an identifiable politician (490)—but rather a play that focused on current public issues and took a recognizable and more or less coherent political stance. Such plays engaged with individuals and/or civic/political issues in a sustained thematic way; criticized or admonished the spectators; and could involve the poet himself (or the poet's persona, if you prefer) as a partisan, at least in the case of Aristophanes in his series of plays frontally attacking Cleon, from *Babylonians* in 426 to *Wasps* in 422. This, what we might call forensic, type of comedy was relatively infrequent, was produced by a small subset of poets and only in certain periods, and should be distinguished from a subtype of plays that focused not on the target's politics or civic life but rather on his family or friends—the type of play that Eupolis may have invented and that would become popular in the fourth century: *Spongers* (*Kolakes*) of 421 about the young Callias, who squanders his inheritance on women and sophists, and *Autolycus* of 420, about Callias's young lover. In fact only three of Eupolis's plays were of the political type (*Demes*, *Marikas*, *Cities*), perhaps four if we

include *Golden Race*. Despite his canonical place in the Old-Comic triad, the rest caricature the private lives of celebrities, though not literary celebrities.¹³

The standard model also holds that any miscreant, and eventually everyone else, was fair game for attack, but while that might hold for incidental mockery it certainly does not hold for political comedy. A striking feature of the political type of comedy—however we wish to account for this fact—is its consistent bias. Virtually all of the targets are democrats in the populist mold of Pericles and his successors (the “demagogues” who emerged after Pericles’ death in 429), while rightist figures like Nicias, Laches, Alcibiades; those implicated in the scandals of 415; and the oligarchs disenfranchised after the coup of 411—all obvious potential targets for political abuse—are almost entirely spared and occasionally even defended; and in the few instances when they *were* mocked it was on private, never on political grounds. Nor were the attacks on politicians solely personal: at the ideological and policy level too, the political poets consistently espouse the social, moral, cultural, and political sentiments of elite conservative democrats; deplore full popular sovereignty (the *demos* is a gullible majority intent on soaking the rich and empowering scoundrels); decry the operation of the council, the assembly, and the courts (to its own detriment the *demos* believes the flattery and lies of selfish demagogues); criticize the poor as a class but never the wealthy (at least in the fifth century); avoid the real and always-live threat of oligarchy while instead ridiculing the populist bogey of elite tyranny (Henderson 2003); and attack the prosecution of the Peloponnesian War when (and only when) it either exposed the Attic countryside, and thus the landowners, to enemy devastation or bolstered the authority of leaders like Cleon. Like Thucydides (esp. 2.65), the comic poets agreed on a narrative of degeneration¹⁴ and held that the *demos* needed but no longer tended to choose the best as its leaders, except that comedy did not include Pericles in the latter category (Rusten 2006).

This ideological complexion of politically engaged comedy jibes with its clumpy pattern of production: a roster shows that such comedies appeared only in periods when the elite were politically sidelined or came under populist attack (the target demagogues appear in parentheses):

431	Cratinus <i>Nemesis</i> (Pericles)
430	Hermippus <i>Moirai</i> (Pericles)
429	Cratinus <i>Ploutoi</i> and <i>Dionysalexander</i> (Pericles)
426	Aristophanes <i>Babylonians</i> (?Cleon)
425	Aristophanes <i>Acharnians</i> (Cleon)

¹³ See Storey 2003: 338–48.

¹⁴ Reflected also in contemporary tragedy, e.g., Eur. *Supp.*

- 424 Aristophanes *Knights* and *Farmers* (Cleon)
 422 Aristophanes *Wasps* and Eupolis *Cities* (Cleon)
 421 Aristophanes *Peace* (generally), Platon *Peisander* (Peisander), Eupolis
Marikas (Hyperbolus)
 420 or 419 Hermippus *Breadwomen* (Hyperbolus)
 418 Platon *Hyperbolus* (Hyperbolus)
 417 Eupolis *Demes* (generally)¹⁵
 411 Aristophanes *Lysistrata* (generally)
 405 Aristophanes *Frogs* (Cleophon) and Platon *Cleophon* (Cleophon)
 c. 402 Archippus *Rhinion* (Rhinion) and Theopompus *Teisamenus* (Teisamenus)

Conversely, the political poets did not complain when traditional politicians were ascendant, as, for example, between the ostracism of Hyperbolus c. 417 and the reinvestment of Attica in 412, and that is because they seem to view Periclean and demagogic democracy as disruptions of a traditional, normal, and optimal state of affairs.¹⁶ If the political poets had consistent views, they did not express them consistently.

Of course the poets were *kaloï kagathoi* themselves, so this attitude is understandable. But at the same time the spectators responded favorably to their attacks and apparently made no demand for plays critical of the right; otherwise at least some poets would have catered to it. This is an interesting phenomenon that needs further thought, but meanwhile our pattern of production, though not incompatible with recent suggestions that the theater audience itself must have been more conservative than the demos at large (Sommerstein 1998), does not support the assumption that this was always or consistently so, as we might assume were the political type of comedy a staple of the genre. Nor does it support Aristotle's view that Attic comedy had been personally abusive from the start: "the composition of plots (τὸ μῦθους ποιεῖν) came originally from Sicily; of those at Athens Crates was the first to abandon the iambic mode (ιδέας) and compose general plots and stories (καθόλου ποιεῖν λόγους καὶ μῦθους, *Poet.* 1449b)." In fact our earliest evidence begins only around 440, when the Lenaea festival was inaugurated, providing a more parochial venue for comedy, and when Pericles took Athens to war against Samos and heated up tensions with Sparta.¹⁷ Thus Aristophanes' statement in *Knights* that late in his career (i.e.,

¹⁵ For this dating, see Storey 2012: 308–10.

¹⁶ Thus [Xen.] *Ath. pol.* a.k.a. the "Old Oligarch" warns against the complacent assumption that democracy would soon fail of its own accord.

¹⁷ Edwards 1993 suggests on theoretical grounds that an originally demotic entertainment (Bakhtin's "popular grotesque"), brought into the city as a check on aristocratic leaders, was commandeered by Cratinus and company to be turned against the leaders chosen by the newly empowered *demos*.

in the 430s) Magnes was rejected because he was deficient at *skoptein* seems to imply that *skoptein* was a more modern feature.¹⁸

In the invention of the political type of comedy Cratinus seems the key figure. In the 430s, during the run-up to the Peloponnesian War, he and then Hermippus launched such plays in order to criticize not only Pericles' character and private life, notably his relationship with Aspasia, but also his policies; Plutarch's *Life* is a main source. Cratinus and Hermippus apparently worked by repurposing or allegorizing myth comedy, a dominant type of comedy at that time, especially Trojan War mythology involving Helen, perhaps inspired by Euripides' sensational *Telephus* of 438.¹⁹ In Cratinus's *Dionysalexander*, where Dionysus impersonates Paris in the Judgment, Pericles was somehow "comedized very convincingly by implication (δι' ἐμφάσεως) for bringing the war on the Athenians" (T 1.44–8). Zeus is also assimilated to Pericles in *Nemesis*, produced at around the same time, where Zeus seduces Nemesis in Attica and the Helen-egg is hatched by Leda in Sparta (Henderson 2012). In Hermippus's *Moirai* a "king of satyrs" (i.e., Pericles: Plut. *Per.* 33.6) is chided for his pusillanimous conduct of the war (F 47). The tradition that Hermippus prosecuted Phidias for impiety, and Aspasia for arranging liaisons for Pericles with free-born women, may well derive from his comedies of this period (Plut. *Per.* 32.1).

The next stage was the transition from Cratinean myth-allegory to more direct political attack, and this began with the ascendancy of Cleon and other untraditional (i.e., non-elite) political leaders after 429. Here it was Aristophanes who took the lead. Initially he too used mythological *emphasis*—in *Babylonians* of 426—though Cleon's reaction, to prosecute Aristophanes,²⁰ suggests that something new was afoot: perhaps the play's *emphasis* was more transparent than had been the practice hitherto. Certainly the poet's engagement is more overt the following year in *Acharnians*, though the plot is still at least semi-mythical, modeled as it is on Euripides' *Telephus*, and Cleon is not a character. It was in the following year that Aristophanes inaugurated the "demagogue comedy" with *Knights*, the first comedy devoted to attacking a single individual (Sommerstein 2000). *Knights* was also the first political play without mythical trappings: this time the allegory is domestic, with a Paphlagonian slave all but portraying Cleon. This transition from mythical to direct

¹⁸ Ar. *Eq.* 524–25 τελευτών ἐπὶ γήρωσ, οὐ γὰρ ἐφ' ἤβης, ἐξεβλήθη πρεσβύτης ὦν, ὅτι τοῦ σκόπτειν ἀπελείφθη ("in old age, though never in his prime, he ended up getting booted off the stage, veteran though he was, because he was deficient at mockery").

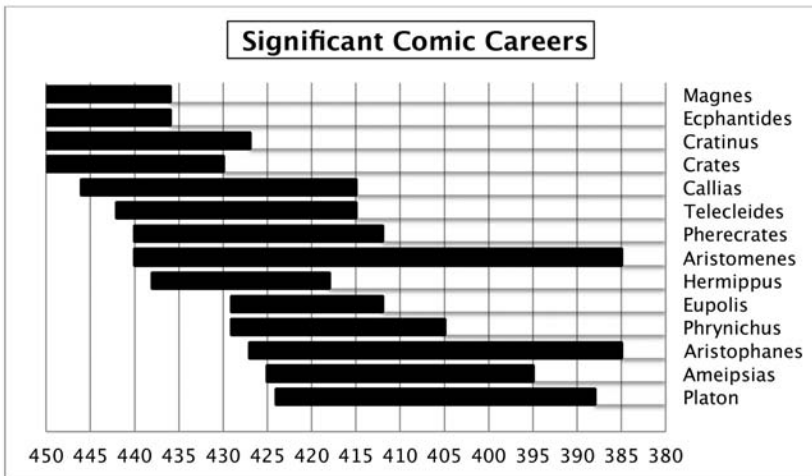
¹⁹ See in general Wright 2007.

²⁰ Cf. Ar. *Ach.* 377–82, 502–3, 515–16, 576–77, 630–31 with Σ at 378 (and note [Xen.] *Ath. pol.* 2.18). In their intensity, defensiveness, and obsessive detail, Aristophanes' responses can hardly be mere fictions, as some have suggested.

attack was probably not purely arbitrary: myth much better suited the Olympian aristocrat Pericles than the fawning miscreants of the marketplace now in ascendancy (Henderson 2003). In fact myth comedy seems suddenly to fall out of favor wholesale at just this time, all but vanishing from the record from 429 to c. 410,²¹ when it resumes where it had left off (e.g., in the birth comedies fashionable after c. 410, a type not seen since it was inaugurated around 430 by Cratinus's *Nemesis* and Hermippus's *Birth of Athena*). From c. 410 myth comedy returns to vogue until about 350, when it gives way mainly to domestic types of comedy but also, once again, as I will suggest, to the political type.

Aristophanes abandoned demagogue comedy after the death of his great target Cleon in 422, but it continued to be pursued by rival poets: Eupolis, Hermippus, and Platon attacked Hyperbolus before his ostracism in 417 and also Peisander; after the period of elite leadership ushered in by Hyperbolus's ostracism, Cleophon became the target; and probably just after the democratic restoration in 403 Archippus attacked Rhinon and Theopompus attacked Teisamenus. Other topical plays such as Aristophanes' *Clouds*, and mostly by this same group of poets, addressed political/civic issues more broadly, but these plays too seem to be clustered in periods of populist leadership: c. 430 to c. 417, 413 to early 411 (the failure of the Sicilian expedition and renewed investment of Attica), 410–405 (after the oligarchy, when Cleophon was ascendant), and for a short time after 403, when popular democracy was restored and the laws reformed.

In mapping comic types and themes, generational factors were also at work, as indicated by this chart mapping the careers of representative poets:



²¹ During this hiatus we find only a *Medea* and a *Tereus* by Cantharus, perhaps paratragic.

It is clear that 429, a watershed year in Athenian political history, also marked the arrival of a significant new cadre of comic poets. It is also interesting to observe significant overlaps in the case of longer careers: important when evaluating any model of periodicity. The young Aristophanes' novel style of social/political engagement innovated on the Cratinean style by capitalizing on the stresses occasioned or aggravated by the onset of the Peloponnesian War and on the post-Periclean political changes. This won him the first Dionysian victory by a new poet in ten years (Storey 2003: 65) and a string of subsequent successes. But Aristophanes was not the only ambitious newcomer: among this young, post-Cratinean generation there is evident copy-cutting, competition for credit, and perhaps even collaboration (e.g., Eupolis F 89) as the novel ideas catch on.²² This sort of opportunism and novelty must qualify the evolutionary teleology of the standard model, as do such non-linear trends as we observed in the case of myth comedy. Why was myth comedy seemingly incompatible with political comedy between 429 and the 410s? Was it simply seen as old-fashioned? Was the audience tired of it? Had it been more political than we think or ancient scholars realized, but supplanted by the more overt kind of attack that Aristophanes inaugurated?

Such patterns prompt questions about the chronological division of Old and Middle in the standard model. On the criterion of political comedy the division does not stand up very well, for at least incidental mockery and *ὄνομαστι κωμωδεῖν* continue strong into the fourth century, and there are no signs of suppression during the putative transition: well into the 350s orators and philosophers alike continue to cite or deplore both the comic poets' irresponsible mockery and their political criticisms.²³ The political focus does, however, seem to change after 403, perhaps becoming more satirical than personal, ideological, or partisan; and what personal comedy there was now included foreigners as well as Athenians, and focused more on private than on public life.²⁴

But here again types leapfrog the eras of the standard model: private satire resumes after the fashion of Eupolis's *Spongers* (421) and *Autolyclus* (420), which therefore look to be false starts, ahead of their time. Similarly returning to vogue, as the lifestyles of the wealthy again became a major theme, were courtesan (*hetaera*) comedies, a subgenre pioneered in the 430s by Pherecrates but sidelined during the demotic phase after 429.²⁵ So also intellectual comedies, resuming experiments like Aristophanes' *Clouds* (423), became a staple

²² Kyriakidi 2007; Biles 2011.

²³ E.g., Isoc. 8.14 (in 355) and Aeschin. 1.157 (in 345); Pl. *Leg.* 935e; Arist. *Pol.* 1336b; for the striking similarities between comic and forensic abuse, cf. Henderson 1998.

²⁴ For a brief survey, see Arnott 2010: 300–8.

²⁵ See Henderson 2000 and 2002.

in an era generally more sophisticated about the world of ideas; Plato is the most frequently attested *komoïdōmenos* of the fourth century.²⁶

So the most straightforward explanation for the eclipse of political comedy after 403 looks to be the same as for similar eclipses earlier: a shift in leadership back to the wealthy and to rightist policies—which, for whatever reason, were unappealing targets for the political poets. And when we ponder the role of the spectators in these trends, who were apparently content with the poets' rightist bias, it is worth bearing in mind that in all periods of the fifth and fourth centuries, oligarchic sentiment was not confined to private clubs and dining rooms (cf. Murray 1990) but was also a potent factor in open political life, and one that democratic sentiment was constantly at pains to negotiate with, or placate. Although the two sides periodically resorted to partisan violence,²⁷ both regularly contested the same patriotic (including democratic) vocabulary.²⁸ It is in times of demotic self-assertion or counter-revolution that we find political comedy. And so when Konstantakos asserts that what "is truly rare in 4th-century theatre is full-scale political comedy" (2011: 167) he overestimates how common such comedies had been even in the fifth century and neglects the clumpy pattern of their attestation in either century.

If this explanation is valid, then we would expect a revival of political comedy during the ideological struggle over the threat of Macedon, when against oligarchic so-called appeasers Demosthenes championed an uncompromising policy strongly reminiscent of Pericles' anti-Spartan policy in the 430s (recall that Demosthenes was the funeral orator after Chaeroneia in 338). And we would expect an eclipse of political comedy after 322, when Antipater's henchman Phocion set up a hard oligarchy, the Greek revolt against Macedon was blamed on the democrats, whose leaders were purged, and all but 9,000 citizens, fully 60% to 70% of the citizen body, were disenfranchised. And we would expect that this eclipse would last, except for the brief democratic counterrevolution of 318, until 307, after the expulsion of Cassander's regent, the philosopher-king Demetrius of Phaleron, who had been somewhat more conciliatory and thus claimed in his memoirs that he "not only did not destroy (κατέλυσε) the democracy but even straightened it out (ἐπηνώρθωσε)" (Strabo 9.1.20). All this is what we do find: particularly noteworthy is Timocles, whose career covers the 340s until c. 317 and whose titles and fragments strongly recall the political style of the fifth century.²⁹ But

²⁶ Weiher 1913: 37–55; Arnott 1996: 6; Imperio 1998: 121–29.

²⁷ A careful recent discussion is Shear 2011.

²⁸ Only "freedom" seems to be exclusive (on the democratic side): Raaflaub 1983.

²⁹ In particular *Egyptians*, *Delos*, *Demosatyr*s, *Dionysiazousai*, *Icarians*, *Caunians*, *Conisalus* (a phallic demon), *Marathonians*, *Neaera* (the notorious, politically connected hetaera), *Orestautocleides*, *Philodicastes*.

we also find similar plays by other poets, for example, Mnesimachus's *Philip*, which portrayed Demosthenes at a banquet in Macedon (probably in 346, when he went there as an ambassador), to which Pharsalians are invited; on the menu is a roasted Achaean town (F 8), that is, Halus, reduced by Philip on behalf of the Pharsalians. In *Charinus* (c. 340), the title character was the pro-Macedonian politician. Not coincidentally, 321 was the year of Menander's debut, after which the completely apolitical, elite-oriented style of comedy that he perfected became permanently dominant.

But still political comedy was not quite finished. It makes a final appearance, predictably, in the brief period of democratic restoration after 307, as after earlier such restorations, in the plays of Archedicus and Philippides. Both were politically active oligarchs: Archedicus a partisan of Antipater and Demetrius of Phaleron and prominent in the regime of Phocion (Habicht 1993), Philippides a partisan of Lysimachus and a foe of Demetrius the Besieger (Philipp 1973). As in the days of "Old Comedy" their targets were then-ascendant populist leaders. For Archedicus the target was Demosthenes' nephew Demochares; the accusation (F 4) that he had blown the sacrificial flame after having orally prostituted himself was accepted by the historian Timaeus, who attributed it also to Demochares' enemies, namely "Democles and his circle" (566 F 35a *FGrH*)³⁰; but it was rejected by Polybius on the grounds that it was in fact leveled only by the comic poet (12.13). For Philippides the target was Stratocles, Demochares' rival and perhaps a character in a play³¹ that claimed that it is impious flattery of Demetrius that "destroys (καταλύει) the demos, not a comedy" (F 25.7), echoing a slogan of the day ([Plut.] *Mor.* 851e, f) and defending a prior comic criticism in a situation reminiscent of Aristophanes' defense against Cleon in *Acharnians*. Plutarch's comparison of Cleon and Stratocles as demagogues (*Demetr.* 11.2–3) was no doubt prompted by Aristophanic echoes in such comedies (O'Sullivan 2009: 72–75).³²

And as in the fifth century, when Cleon lashed out at Aristophanes, there are signs of demotic reaction to such comic outspokenness. It is probably true, as Diogenes Laertius says (5.79 = Menander T 9), that when Menander found himself among those arraigned in 307 as oligarchic sympathizers—the prime mover here was Demochares—it was not because of his plays but only because he was a friend of Demetrius of Phaleron. Still, we should bear in mind that both were alumni of the Lyceum, whose adherents now found themselves in

³⁰ *Suda* ω 263 further notes that Duris attributed the same charge to Pytheas against Demosthenes (*FGrH* 76 F 8).

³¹ F 26 with Plutarch's comment, *Amat.* 4.750e.

³² For reasons unclear the long decree of high honors for Philippides in 283/2 (*IG* ii² 657) does not mention his career as a comic poet.

hot water—philosophers were required to register, fled in protest (an event applauded by a character in Alexis, *The Knight* F 99), and returned the following year when the requirement was repealed³³—and should keep open the possibility that their elitist ideology might have colored Menander’s plays in ways that acquired political resonance in a time of demotic reaction.³⁴

Similarly intriguing is the statement, in a papyrus summary of Menander’s plays (*POxy.* 1235.107–12 = Men. T 52), about *Imbrians*:

ἐξ-]
 ἔδωκεν εἰς ἐργασίαν [εἰς]
 Διονύσια, οὐκ ἐγένετο δ[ὲ διὰ]
 Λαχάρην τὸν τυρανν[...]
 τα ὑπεκρίνετο Κάλ[λιπ]-
 ος Ἀθηναῖος

110–11 τυρανν[ον. ἔπει]τα Wilamowitz: τυρανν[ί]σαν]τα. Groenewald:
 τυρανν[εῦον]τα. Luppe: τυρανν[εῦσον]τα Henderson

He put it into production for the Dionysia [of 302/1] but it did not take place on account of Lachares the tyrant ... Callipus of Athens was the actor.³⁵

Was it the whole Dionysia or only Menander’s play that “did not take place”? Does the author correctly attribute the action to Lachares, who was not yet tyrant? Or did he simply assume that Lachares must have been responsible, perhaps mistaking Lachares for Stratocles? Was the whole incident a false inference from a contemporary comedy? If the statement is correct and it was something about the play or the festival as such that led to a cancellation by Lachares, then the latter must still have been the popular leader he seems to have been before throwing in with Cassander after Ipsus, and the designation “tyrant” is due to chronological carelessness, or perhaps simply to flag the identity of the sparsely attested Lachares; this would be made explicit if we supplement line 4 with the future participle, and translate “on account of Lachares the future tyrant.” In any case, such an action against Menander at this time would have been motivated on grounds similar to his arraignment in 307: associating with (anti-Antigonid) oligarchs or somehow espousing

³³ Arnott 1996: 260, 858–59. Compare the situation a century earlier, when Critias, as a member of the Thirty in 404, had enacted a law λόγων τέχνην μὴ διδάσκειν (Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.31).

³⁴ For the ideology, cf. Major 1997; for the economic status of Menandrian characters, Owens 2011, who argues that in *Dyscolus* (of 316) “Menander’s embrace of democratic attitudes is more apparent than real, a rhetorical positioning contrived to conciliate his audience as he made the case for the new regime” (351).

³⁵ For discussion, see O’Sullivan 2009.

their interests in a play or plays. After 301, of course, as far as comic politics goes, the rest is silence.

That concludes my survey, brief (as promised) and necessarily tentative: for there is plenty of work yet to be done, especially on the fourth-century material. But I hope at least to have made a case for looking outside the traditional box.

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