

# Studies in Comedy, II: Toothless Wine

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*In youth Corton is a savage wine, insolent, loud-voiced and blustering. But after seven years or so he has learnt manners, and can come into a room like an educated gentleman. J. B. MORTON ['Beachcomber'], A Bonfire of Weeds (London 1939)*

**A**N AMUSING but enigmatic fragment from a fourth-century Athenian comedy appears to give the lie to the idea that the precious, humanising metaphors of wine connoisseurs are a purely modern linguistic phenomenon. This fragment derives from Alexis' *Orchestrais*,<sup>1</sup> and runs as follows:

γυναιξὶ δ' ἄρκει πάντ', ἐὰν οἶνος παρῆ  
πίνειν διαρκής. — ἀλλὰ μήν, νῆ τῶ θεῶ,  
ἔσται γ' ὅσον ἂν βουλώμεθ', ἔσται καὶ μάλα  
ἠδύς γ', ὀδόντας οὐκ ἔχων, ἤδη καπρός,  
γελῶν, γέρων γε δαιμονίως. — ἀσπάζομαι  
γραῦν σφίγγα.

The source of the quotation is Athenaeus 10.441c, and the text printed is basically that of the *codex Marcianus* with the exception of the first word in v.5. There the *Marcianus* has λέγων, but it is difficult to see how a wine can 'tell' or 'say', even in the imaginistic fantasies of the wine connoisseur who speaks vv.2–5 of the fragment, and so I have accepted with considerable hesitation the conjecture of Bergk<sup>2</sup> in its place. The resultant metaphor would be no bolder than Aeschylus' *ποντίων τε κυμάτων | ἀνήριθμον γέλασμα* (PV 89f) or the phrase *τὰ γελῶντα πλέοντες ὑδάτη* in an anonymous Hellenistic lyric (fr.32.4 Powell, *Coll.Alex.* p.195). Does not the modern oenologist talk about his 'smiling little wines'?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Meineke, *FCG* III. 459f=Kock, *CAF* II.358f=Edmonds, *FAC* II. 454 (fr.167 Kock and Edmonds).

<sup>2</sup> Zimmermann's *Zeitschrift für die Althertum* 4 (1837) 48. The only other conjecture that deserves serious consideration is Meineke's own, γέρων, γέρων γε δαιμονίως.

<sup>3</sup> In the same verse the *Marcianus*' δαιμονίως is likely to be right. One can fairly certainly exclude here the possibility that a scribe failed to make a correct word-division, and that

The first speaker cannot safely be identified, but the wine enthusiast is a bibulous old crone of a type familiar enough from Graeco-Roman comedy.<sup>4</sup> It is her speech that gives to the fragment its prime interest, for it is couched in the language of a conundrum or *αἰνιγμα*, as the other character acknowledges when he (or she) calls the crone a *σφίγγξ*. It was already a commonplace of later Greek comedy to compare and contrast the properties of matured wine with the human character.<sup>5</sup> Alexis' crone here goes one better. She wittily selects for the description of her wine a series of ambiguous terms that can be applied both to wine and to aged human beings without excessive violence to contemporary idiom. The adjectives *ἡδύς* and *σασπρός* suit wine and wight with equal appropriateness, although *σασπρός* was doubtless a vulgarism when applied to people.<sup>6</sup> The noun *γέρων* of course properly belongs to the human sphere, but from the time of Homer (*Od.* 22.184, *γέρον κάκος*) poets employed and declined it adjectivally, and applied it in the general sense of 'old' to things as well as to people.<sup>7</sup> The technique, which Aristotle in the *Poetics* (1457b16) calls *τὸ ἀνάλογον*, will clearly be most successful when every term in the conundrum fits with unforced ambiguity both the subject of the riddle (here, wine) and the object of comparison (here, an old person). Can this be said also of the one phrase in the conundrum that has not yet been discussed: *ὀδόντας οὐκ ἔχων*? Toothless Methuselahs, yes; but toothless wine—is that merely verbal fantasy on Alexis' part, a grotesquery created for the one comic moment, or does the phrase rather reflect contemporary Attic idiom?

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*δαιμόνι*, *ὡς ἀσπάζομαι γρασὺν σφίγγα* should be assigned to one speaker. The addressee here is female, and although *δαιμόνιος* is occasionally declined in Attic with two terminations (*LSJ s.v.*), I know of no case where *δαιμόνιε* in the vocative is feminine. Cf. also E. Brunius-Nilsson, *ΔΑΙΜΟΝΙΕ* (Diss. Uppsala 1955). In v.3, *δσον ἄν* is the reading of the Epitome Mss; the *Marcianus* has *δε ἄν*.

<sup>4</sup> The passages have been collected by P. E. Legrand, *The New Greek Comedy*, transl. Loeb (London 1917) 103f, 470f; cf. also T. B. L. Webster, *Studies in Menander*<sup>2</sup> (Manchester 1960) 165; H. G. Oeri, *Der Typ der komischen Alten in der griechischen Komödie* (Basel 1948) 13ff, 39ff.

<sup>5</sup> Wine similar to people: Alexis fr.45, Antiphanes fr.240, Plaut. *Curc.* 98; cf. Cic. *Sen.* 65. Wine not similar to people: Alexis fr.278.

<sup>6</sup> *σασπρός* abusively of people: *LSJ s.v.* π.2 cites Ar. *Vesp.* 1380, *Pax* 698, *Eccl.* 884, Hermippus fr.10, Eupolis fr.231, Philemon fr.170; add Ar. *Lys.* 378. *σασπρός* of wine: Ar. *Plut.* 1086, Eupolis fr.442, Philyllius fr.24 (*LSJ s.v.* π.3).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *LSJ s.v.* *γέρων* π. It is applied to wine in Eubulus fr.124, Epinicus fr.1.6, Men. *Dysk.* 946f (in his edition Handley argues that here *γέροντα* may be substantival), Longus 4.16.

In seeking to answer this question, we must always remember that competent comedians like Aristophanes, Alexis and Menander may be expected to talk good sense, rooted in sound comic logic. For that reason I am inclined to believe that the phrase *ὀδόντας οὐκ ἔχων* in this fragment of Alexis was carefully chosen because of a double appropriateness—to the aged pantaloon who has lost his teeth, and to wine itself. If one could not legitimately talk of ‘toothless wine’ in a non-comic context in fourth-century Athens, the present conceit of Alexis loses much of its wit and half its point. But what evidence is there that a phrase such as *ὀδόντας οὐκ ἔχων* could be applied naturally to wine in Alexis’ Athens? And what would such a phrase mean precisely, in an alcoholic context?

Part of the answer to these questions may be provided somewhat paradoxically not by contemporary Greek authors, but by Latin, in two passages of Plautus and Petronius respectively. First, a passage of Plautus’ *Poenulus* (699–702), in which Lycus the pimp refers to *uetustate uino edentulo* (‘wine toothless with age’):

. . . *ubi tu Leucadio, Lesbio, Thasio, Chio,*  
*uetustate uino edentulo aetatem inriges;*  
*ibi ego te repplebo usque unguentum geumatis,*  
*quid multa uerba?*

The toothless wine is an old one both in Plautus (*uetustate . . . edentulo*) and in Alexis (*ἡδὴ καπρός . . . γέρων γε*); that is one obvious link between the two passages. There is, however, a further possible link of even greater significance. In 1959 I attempted to substantiate the argument that Plautus’ *Poenulus* was adapted from a Greek original by Alexis, and not from Menander’s *Karchedonios*.<sup>8</sup> The recently published Oxyrhynchus fragments of Menander’s play support rather than challenge this view.<sup>9</sup> Is it then so outrageous to suggest that Plautus’ phrase *uetustate uino edentulo* was translated from a similar phrase in Alexis’ *Karchedonios*? In other words, that this phrase ‘toothless wine’ was current in the Athens of Alexis’ time and used sometimes in a serious alcoholic or at least purely liquid context?

<sup>8</sup> “The Author of the Greek Original of the *Poenulus*,” *RhM* 102 (1959) 252–62.

<sup>9</sup> *POxy.* 2654, first published by E. G. Turner, *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 33 (1968) 1–8. I reopened the question about the relationship of Alexis, Menander, and Plautus’ *Poenulus* in the light of the new papyrus evidence in a paper read to the III Congresso Internazionale di Studi sul Damma Antico, in Syracuse (Sicily), May 1969, and to be published under the title of “*Attica ciuis in Plautus’ Poenulus*” in a forthcoming number of *Dioniso*.

In Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis* the startlingly parallel phrase *aqua dentes habet* occurs (Sat. 42.2):

“ego,” inquit, “non cotidie lauor; baliscus enim fullo est, aqua dentes habet, et cor nostrum cotidie liquescit. sed cum mulsi pultarium obduxi, frigori laecasin dico. nec sane lauare potui; fui enim hodie in funus . . .”

The speaker of this rambling rigmarole is Seleucus, one of Trimalchio's boorish guests. “I don't have a bath every day,” he says; “the bathman (if this is what *baliscus* means<sup>10</sup>) is a scrubber; the water's got teeth.” Now it is true that this section of the *Cena* is heavily charged with those stylistic elements of ‘personification’ and conundrum-type ‘identification’ which Eduard Fraenkel has convincingly analysed and attributed to the native genius of the Latin language.<sup>11</sup> Yet at the same time some other relevant facts here need to be borne in mind: that Seleucus' name implies Greek descent, that Petronius' novel teems with Greeks and half-Greeks, and lastly that a living language characteristically naturalizes phrases and idioms that originate in another language by translating them literally. This it does especially when large numbers of aliens speaking one language are absorbed into a community that speaks another. Just as American English has translated and thus adopted many German idioms as a result of the extensive immigration of German speakers in the nineteenth century,<sup>12</sup> so also must Latin have absorbed a great number of Greek idioms in Petronius' Campania, although the ecological explanation in this case is somewhat different.<sup>13</sup> If *aqua dentes habet* is just such a Greek idiom transplanted into Latin, it provides a further

<sup>10</sup> The word has been suspected of corruption (cf., for instance, Müller's apparatus *ad loc.*, and D. C. Swanson, *A Formal Analysis of Petronius' Vocabulary* [Minneapolis 1963] 126), but has been defended by A. Marbach, *Wortbildung, Wortwahl und Wortbedeutung als Mittel der Charakterzeichnung bei Petron* (Diss. Giessen 1931) 39f, and A. H. Saloniuss, *Die Griechen und das Griechische in Petrons Cena Trimalchionis* (Soc. Scient. Fennica, *Comment.Hum.Litt.* II.1, Helsinki and Leipzig 1927) 25.

<sup>11</sup> *Plautinisches im Plautus* (Berlin 1922) ch. 2, esp. p.47=*Elementi Plautini in Plauto* (Florence 1960), esp. 43f.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (1947) 153ff, 212ff; *Supplements I* (1948) 313ff, II (1948) 201ff.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. L. R. Palmer, *The Latin Language* (London 1954) 80ff, 100f, 183ff; Leumann-Hofmann-Szantyr, *Lateinische Grammatik II* (Munich 1965) 759ff (with a massive bibliography). The grecisms in Petronius are fully discussed by the works of Marbach and Saloniuss cited in n.10.

example of the relevant application of this dental metaphor to liquids: relevant, that is, to the interpretation of Alexis fr.167.

Water, therefore, with teeth; and wine without teeth. The meaning is now as clear as a good wine. A liquid that had teeth was one marked by an astringent harshness, like water with a mineral content. But wine that has lost its original tartness and been mellowed by age—such wine *ὀδόντας οὐκ ἔχει*.

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