Of Armpits and the Origins of Comedy: Aristophanes fr. 264 and 265

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THE COMPLEX and murky origins of comedy have long attracted a great deal of scholarly interest. Rather less attention has been paid to what extant comic texts have to say about their own generic past. This essay studies two Aristophanic fragments about the early days of comedy, first setting them within a wider poetic and intellectual context and then offering new answers to unresolved questions of interpretation.[1]

Lexicographical sources preserve a snippet from Aristophanes' *Danaids*:[2] οὕτως αὐτοῖς ἀταλαιπώρως ἡ ποίησις διέκειτο, "so careless for them was the making of poetry" (fr.265). The meter, catalectic anapaestic tetrameter, strongly suggests that this fragment derives from a parabasis,[3] and its metapoetic

[1] Comic fragments and testimonia are cited according to *PCG* unless noted; Aristophanes' extant plays are cited according to Wilson's OCT. All translations are my own.

[2] For what little can be deduced about the plot of this comedy see especially A. M. Andrisano, "A proposito delle *Danaidi* di Aristofane (fr. 264 K.-A.): costumi primitivi e antiche coreografie," *RivFil* IV.12 (2014) 133–157, at 133–136, and M. Pellegrino, *Aristofane: frammenti* (Lecce 2015) 168–177.

[3] M. Whittaker, "The Comic Fragments in Relation to the Structure of Old Attic Comedy," *CQ* 29 (1935) 181–191, at 190; L. P. E. Parker, *The Songs of Aristophanes* (Oxford 1997) 58–59; O. Imperio, *Parabasi di Aristofane: Acarnesi, Cavalieri, Vespe, Uccelli* (Bari 2004) 45–46. For ποίησις as the art and process of poetic composition see C. Austin and S. D. Olson, *Aristophanes: Thesmophoriazusae* (Oxford 2004) 65, on *Thesm.* 38.

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content supports that inference. The antecedent of αὐτοῖς must then have been something like "poets of old": only for those who created poetry could ποίησις have been careless (or painstaking). The closely related fr.264, discussed below, points in the same direction: that fragment also derives from the parabasis of the *Danaids* and describes the primitive comic chorus. In keeping with the self-reflexive poetics of the parabasis, fr.265 was also probably concerned not with older poets generally but with older comic poets in particular.

Brief as it is, fr.265 thus implies a familiar large-scale narrative of literary history: once upon a time comic authorship required no substantial effort, but now things are different—and better. The same patently self-serving story of artistic progress features repeatedly elsewhere in Aristophanes. The parabasis of *Peace*, for example, describes the poet's place in comic history (748–750):

> τοιαῦτ' ἀφελὼν κακὰ καὶ φόρτον καὶ βωμολοχεύματ' ἀγεννῆ
> ἐποίησε τέχνην μεγάλην ὑμῖν κἀπύργωσ' οἰκοδομήσας
> ἔπεσιν μεγάλοις καὶ διανοίαις καὶ σκώμμασιν οὐκ ἀγοραίοις…
>
> Having removed such base, cheap and ignoble buffoonery, he made for you a great craft and built it up into a towering structure with great words and ideas and jokes that aren't vulgar…

As Hunter writes, Aristophanes is "primary witness to, and source for, the developmental narrative of Old Comedy."[4]

Fr.265 implies the valorization of painstaking composition: poets of old did not take much trouble with making their comedy, but now Aristophanes does. Preserved plays more explicitly advertise his careful craftsmanship. The extant version

[4] R. L. Hunter, *Critical Moments in Classical Literature: Studies in the Ancient View of Literature and its Uses* (Cambridge 2009) 79. Cf. Ar. *Eq*. 518–540, *Vesp*. 1046–1047, *Life of Aristophanes* XXVIII.2–4 Koster. For a parallel narrative of progress applied to tragedy see Ar. *Ran*. 939–945, 973–974 (both of Euripides), 1004–1005 (of Aeschylus). For this and other tropes of early literary history see further H. L. Spelman, "Staging Literary History in Old Comedy," *CP* 116 (2021) 305–335.

of *Clouds*, for example, describes the original play as the most sophisticated of Aristophanes' comedies and "the one which gave me the most work" (ἣ παρέσχε μοι / ἔργον πλεῖστον, 523–524). Elsewhere he faults Cratinus for being "overly quick with his poetry" (ὁ ταχὺς ἄγαν τὴν μουσικήν, *Ach.* 851).[5]

Fr.265 is illuminated by, and in turn illuminates, fr.264, also from the lost *Danaids*:

> ὁ χορὸς δ' ὠρχεῖτ' ἂν ἐναψάμενος δάπιδας καὶ στρωματόδεσμα διαμασχαλίσας αὐτὸν σχελίσιν καὶ φύσκαις καὶ ῥαφανῖσιν.
>
> The chorus used to dance dressed in rugs and bed sacks, having tucked ribs of beef and sausages and radishes under their arms.

This fragment is preserved in the epitome of Athenaeus (57B), who cites these words in order to show that Callias (fr.26) meant "radish" when he used the word *raphanos* in a list of cheap vegetarian foodstuffs somehow connected with the antiquity of comedy.[6] Athenaeus uses questionable reasoning to identify the vegetable,[7] but his citation of Aristophanes does reveal that this comedian, too, was discussing the olden days of his own genre.[8]

Meter (catalectic anapaestic tetrameter) suggests that this fragment, like fr.265, derives from the parabasis of the *Danaids*. Kock already saw that the two fragments are very closely related indeed.[9] As fr.265 disparages primitive comic com-

[5] Cf. Pind. *Isthm.* 2.3, Cratinus fr.255, Thuc. 1.20.3, Hor. *Ars P.* 289–294, Anon. *On Comedy* V.23–24 Koster. One could, by contrast, valorize quick composition as inspired: *Adesp.* 102 *PCG*, Nicaenus *Anth.Gr.* 13.29 (= Cratinus T 45).

[6] περὶ γοῦν τῆς ἀρχαιότητος τῆς κωμῳδίας διεξιών φησιν, "describing the antiquity of comedy, at any rate, he says …" (Ath. 57A).

[7] S. D. Olson, *Athenaeus' The Learned Banqueters* I (Cambridge [Mass.] 2007) 319 n.151; Andrisano, *RwFil* IV.12 (2014) 138–139.

[8] περὶ τῆς τοιαύτης ἀρχαιότητος ἐν Δαναίσι γράφων καὶ αὐτός, "himself, too, writing about such antiquity in his *Danaids*…" (Ath. 57A).

[9] T. Kock, *CAF* I (Leipzig 1880) 456: "artissime coniungendum."

position in general terms, so fr.264 disparages primitive comic chorality in general terms.[10] δάπιδας καὶ στρωματόδεσμα, "rugs and bed sacks," suggest rudimentary stagecraft. What marks this costume as primitive is not the inherent cheapness of rugs and bed sacks,[11] but rather the fact that these commonplace objects were not created in order to be worn on stage—or to be worn at all. The costumes of Aristophanes' choruses often entailed rather more effort and expense and as a result provided more interesting and varied mimetic spectacles.[12] Indeed, the plural title of *Danaids* strongly suggests that the chorus of this particular comedy was arrayed in exotic, feminine Egyptian garb recalling tragic precedents: Phynichus (fr.4) and Aeschylus (frr.41–46 *TrGF*) had written homonymous plays. If Aristophanes' comic chorus, adorned as elaborately as tragic forerunners, described the primitive costumes of older comic choruses, then fr.264 was making a deeply Aristophanic point about dramatic history: comedy was once something trivial and shabby, but it now stands on the same high level as its more prestigious generic older brother.[13]

Pherecrates fr.199 offers a strikingly similar description: ὁ χορὸς δ' αὐτοῖς εἶχεν δάπιδας ῥυπαρὰς καὶ στρωματόδεσμα, "their chorus used to have dirty rugs and bed sacks." These rugs are "dirty" because they have not been washed before being recruited from everyday life into dramatic service and perhaps

[10] ὠρχεῖτ' ἄν (fr.264) describes a habitual, repeated action; ὁ χορός thus refers not to a single chorus but to "the chorus" as a generic constant: cf. Ar. *Ran*. 914–915.

[11] Compare and contrast Andrisano, *RivFil* IV.12 (2014) 141; cf. Pherecrates fr.199.

[12] See, in general, G. Compton-Engle, *Costume in the Comedies of Aristophanes* (Cambridge 2015), especially the discussion of "choral spectacle" in ch. 5.

[13] The self-praise of Ar. *Pax* 749 echoes the description of Aeschylus in Pherecrates fr.100 and thereby suggests that Aristophanes has now done for the history of comedy what Aeschylus had once done for the history of tragedy: see n.18 below.

because the producer who provided them was too frugal to provide anything better.[14] Since sartorial considerations were generally important to the visual impact of performance, choruses would normally wear freshly cleaned garments.[15] Our sources provide no substantial clues about the meaning or context of this fragment, but its content and meter, catalectic anapaestic tetrameter once again, strongly suggests a parabatic context.

The parallels with Aristophanes' *Danaids* are too obvious to need expounding. Of the nine words in Pherecrates fr.199, seven appear in the same form in Aristophanes fr.264 and 265. Presumably in Pherecrates αὐτοῖς refers to comic poets of old, as in Aristophanes fr.265, and ὁ χορός refers to the comic chorus of old, as in Aristophanes fr.264. There is clearly some intertextual relationship here,[16] but the direction of the intertext remains unclear. Certainty is impossible,[17] yet the large-scale chronology of these playwrights' careers inclines the balance of probabilities toward the possibility that here, as

[14] Cf. Eupolis fr.329: εἶδες χορηγὸν πώποτε / ῥυπαρώτερον τοῦδε; "have you ever seen a *choregos* shabbier than this one?" The rudimentary costumes of Pherecrates fr.199 and Aristophanes fr.264 just possibly aimed at a primitive sort of humor as well as thrift: cf. Ar. *Ran*. 404–406.

[15] *Od*. 6.64–65: οἱ δ' αἰεὶ ἐθέλουσι νεόπλυτα εἵματ' ἔχοντες / ἐς χορὸν ἔρχεσθαι, "they ever want to enter the chorus wearing freshly washed clothes"; cf. e.g. *Il*. 18.595–596, Alcm. 1.64–65 *PMGF*, Eur. *El*. 190–192.

[16] T. K. Hubbard, *The Mask of Comedy: Aristophanes and the Intertextual Parabasis* (Ithaca 1991) 32, writes of a "stock joke," but, when it comes to Old Comedy, two extremely similar passages do not a *topos* make.

[17] All our evidence for Pherecrates' victories dates them to before the start of Aristophanes' career: T 2, 5, 6; see further S. D. Olson, "The Comic Poet Pherecrates, a War-casualty of the Late 410s BC," *JHS* 130 (2010) 49–50. Aristophanes' *Danaids* has been dated to after 420 and before 400: P. Geissler, *Chronologie der altattischen Komödie* (Berlin 1925) 45 and the addendum at p. xiv of the second edition (Dublin 1969); J. Henderson, *Aristophanes: Fragments* (Cambridge [Mass.] 2007) 229.

elsewhere in his preserved plays,[18] Aristophanes echoed Pherecrates' literary history. In describing the olden days of comedy, Aristophanes was probably drawing directly on an older comic poet of the preceding generation.

If Aristophanes fr.264 alludes to Pherecrates fr.199, then it is nonetheless hard to know what to make of the connection on available evidence. We cannot exclude the possibility that Aristophanes somehow assimilated his near predecessor to the distant and inferior olden days of their genre, but the conclusion of this essay will suggest that Aristophanes in fact offers a more complex and ambivalent view of early comedy.

Whatever might have been its intertextual connections to other comic texts, the parabasis of Aristophanes' *Danaids* clearly constructed a two-fold 'do-it-yourself' literary history[19] in which progress in the sophistication of comic authorship (fr. 265) paralleled progress in the sophistication of comic stagecraft (fr.264). Such double-barreled stories were commonplace in this era. Aristophanes' contemporary Timotheus presents himself as the apogee of a lyric history which combines increasing poetic and technological sophistication.[20] Glaucus of Rhegium, whose career probably overlapped with that of Aristophanes, penned a history of poetry and music in which he traced technological inventions alongside increasing formal

[18] Ar. *Pax* 749 (ἐποίησε τέχνην μεγάλην ὑμῖν κἀπύργωσ' οἰκοδομήσας, "[Aristophanes] made for you a great craft and built it up into a towering structure") looks to Pherecrates fr.100 (ὅστις <γ'> αὐτοῖς παρέδωκα τέχνην μεγάλην ἐξοικοδομήσας, "I [sc. Aeschylus] constructed and handed down to them a great craft"). On the direction of that intertext see e.g. Z. P. Biles, *Aristophanes and the Poetics of Competition* (Cambridge 2011) 5.

[19] Cf. S. Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry* (Cambridge 1998) 123–144, on the subjective literary history in poetic texts and on allusion in particular as a means to construct tendentious visions of tradition.

[20] Timotheus 791.221–233 *PMG*; compare and contrast Pherecrates fr. 155.

complexity.[21] Aristotle's far more famous histories of comedy and tragedy likewise link rising sophistication in composition with rising sophistication in dramaturgy (*Poet.* 1449a2–b.9). There are already traces of similar stories about the histories of various genres elsewhere in Aristophanes.[22]

Aristophanes fr.264 describes the primitive days of comic dramaturgy, but a number of fascinating questions remain. The hardest problems concern διαμασχαλίσας. Cogently criticizing previous interpretations, Andrisano has recently offered by far the most developed and imaginative explanation of this puzzling participle: "all that remains is to read the second verse of the fragment as comic metaphor and hypothesize that with this bold image Aristophanes caricatured the traditional comic costume which included a short chiton with or without sleeves, hairpieces and a phallus and prosthetic arms and legs, apparently shortened, that stuck out awkwardly. A different and comic μασχαλισμός."[23] On this interpretation, σχελίσιν refers to the performers' legs and arms, φύσκαις is a metaphor for their padded costumes, and ῥαφανῖσιν is a metaphor for their prosthetic phalluses.

This ingenious solution faces several problems. The posited

[21] The best collection of fragments is that of G. Lanata, *Poetica preplatonica: testimonianze e frammenti* (Florence 1963) 270–281. For Glaucus' master narrative of progress see A. Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton 2002) 141–142; J. C. Franklin, "Remembering Music in Early Greece," in S. Mirelman (ed.), *The Historiography of Music in Global Perspective* (Piscataway 2010) 1–42, at 26–27.

[22] Cf. Ar. *Nub.* 537–544 and fr. dub. 968 (comedy), fr.467 (lyric), fr.696 (tragedy).

[23] This is my translation of Andrisano, *RivFil* IV.12 (2014) 148: "non rimane che leggere il secondo verso del frammento in chiave di metafora comica e ipotizzare che con questa immagine ardita Aristofane rendesse caricaturale il tradizionale costume comico che prevedeva un chitone corto con o senza maniche, imbottiture e fallo posticci e gambe e braccia, apparentemente accorciate, che fuoriuscivano goffamente. Un diverso e comico μασχαλισμός."

image is very complex—indeed, perhaps too riddling to be readily comprehensible. The hypothesized metaphors are hard to parallel. Moreover, the act of dressing in such a primitive comic costume does not much at all resemble the grisly act of μασχαλισμός, which refers to cutting off the extremities of a corpse and placing them under its armpits.[24]

The challenges facing Andrisano's innovative thesis are serious enough to warrant further exploration of the traditional interpretation of the verb: to "stick under one's arms" (LSJ[9] s.v.). The compound verb διαμασχαλίζω, a hapax, is based upon the only slightly more common but highly memorable simplex verb μασχαλίζω, which is attested twice in tragedy. The participle in our fragment thus ought to describe some action basically similar but paratragically dissimilar to the μασχαλισμός, as in the definition of LSJ[9]. The point of the prefix in διαμασχαλίσας (Ar. fr.264), which is hard to explain on Andrisano's interpretation, is presumably that the ancient chorus stuck three different types of foods through their armpits.[25]

But why should a comic chorus put food through their armpits? Kaibel deems the idea incredible and admits that he does not adequately understand the verb.[26] Meineke judges the

[24] See P. J. Finglass, *Sophocles: Electra* (Cambridge 2007) 224, adding Hesychius M 382, discussed below, to the evidence cited there. αὐτόν (Ar. fr. 264) perhaps points up the oddity of doing something similar to oneself. Unsurprisingly, in our ancient sources the μασχαλισμός is never said to have been actually performed in historical times; it is always confined to the mythical past. The rite perhaps evoked a grisly, backward age now bygone.

[25] Or just possibly that they stuffed their armpits *fully*. A baggy, loose-fitting costume of rugs and bed sacks would be conducive to hiding quite a lot under one's armpits: cf. A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy*[2] (rev. T. B. L. Webster, Oxford 1962) 159.

[26] Kaibel (manuscript note quoted *apud PCG*): "sed verbum διαμασχαλίσας non satis intellego, nam incredibile est choreutas talia secum apportasse in orchestram sub alis posita."

transmitted text unintelligible and posits a lacuna.[27] Kock hypothesizes that the chorus tucked under their arms the petty gifts which they had received from the *choregos*.[28] But why should a *choregos*, or the spectators, give gifts to the chorus before, rather than after, their performance? And why should they put these gifts under their armpits? More recently Wilkins remarks in passing that "comedy has rituals of its own associated with food."[29] But I know of no ritual, comic or otherwise, that involves putting food under one's armpit.

I suggest that the chorus has tucked this food beneath their armpits because they are stealing it. The idea of a chorus dancing with stolen food under their armpits is indeed absurd, as Kaibel notes, but it is no more absurd, and arguably not less funny, than Paphlagon leaving the Prytaneum with an anus stuffed full with food purloined from the civic feast.[30]

The armpit was a good place to hide things. Thus in the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* the titular divinity holds the tortoise-shell lyre underneath his armpit in order to conceal it from Apollo.[31] In later literature, someone often hides something ὑπὸ

[27] A. Meineke, *Fragmenta poetarum comoediae antiquae* II (Berlin 1840) 1052; similarly F. H. M. Blaydes, *Aristophanis deperditarum comoediarum fragmenta* (Halle 1885) 125.

[28] Kock, *CAF* I 456: "tenuia munera quae a chorego accepissent, ea ne sibi adimerentur secum portabant etiam saltantes"; cf. Ar. *Pax* 729–731 for thieves lurking around the stage. See also L. Radermacher, *Aristophanes' Frösche*[2] (Vienna 1954) 10–11.

[29] J. M. Wilkins, "The Significance of Food and Eating in Greek Comedy," *LCM* 18 (1993) 66–74, at 70.

[30] Ar. *Eq.* 280–281; cf. the Sausage-Seller's similar antics at 423 and 483.

[31] χέλυν δ' ὑπὸ μασχάλῃ εἶχε, "he held the tortoise-shell lyre under his armpit" (*Hom.Hymn* 4.242). See now O. Thomas, *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (Cambridge 2020) 234, who observes that "the armpit [was] a place for concealing—notably weapons, stolen goods, and delicate animals which need sheltering," citing instances of each of these categories. Martin Revermann points out to me that the 'Milan Cake-eaters' (RVAp Suppl. II 1/123) shows a certain Xanthias tucking food into his cloak.

μάλης, "under the armpit." As LSJ[9] s.v. μάλη observes, the noun is "almost confined" to this phrase, which is used especially often of concealed weapons. Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 985 provides one of the earliest examples of the idiom and shows that it was familiar enough to be recognized even through comic distortion: κἄπειτα δόρυ δῆθ' ὑπὸ μάλης ἥκεις ἔχων; "so then you've arrived with a spear under your armpit?"

The armpit was also a good place for hiding things in order to steal them. Lucian's Rooster describes Micyllus leaving after a meal with a bowl secreted under his arm; later his host Simon admits to doing the same.[32] The best parallel for our passage comes from Arrian's *Discourses of Epictetus* (3.22.98): ἐὰν δ' ὑπὸ μάλης ἔχων πλακουντάριον ἐπιτιμᾷς ἄλλοις, ἐρῶ σοι· οὐ θέλεις μᾶλλον ἀπελθὼν εἰς γωνίαν καταφαγεῖν ἐκεῖνο ὃ κέκλοφας; "but if you rebuke others while hiding a little cake under your armpit, I will say to you, 'wouldn't you rather go off into a corner and eat what you've stolen?'"

Aristophanes' διαμασχαλίσας will have evoked an extraordinarily macabre and literally tragic ritual, but there is also some further evidence suggesting that this verb could have been readily understood to have the more mundane and comic sense of "hide under one's armpit." Hesychius offers the following entry: μασχαλίττει· ὑπὸ κόλπον καὶ ὑπὸ μάλην φέρει, "*maschalittei*: carries under the folds of the garment and under the armpit" (M 382).[33] We have a dialect form of μασχαλίζει. It was perhaps the sense of the verb, as well as its dialect, that attracted lexicographical attention, but the gloss provided here is

[32] τὸ κεραμεοῦν τρύβλιον ὑφελόμενος ᾤχετο ὑπὸ μάλης ἔχων μετὰ τὸ δεῖπνον, "he stole the clay bowl and went off with it under his armpit after dinner" (Luc. *Gall.* 14); τὰ τρύβλια ὑπὸ μάλης ἄπειμι ἔχων, "I go away with the bowls under my armpit" (29). Alciphr. 3.10.3 describes a similar theft of a napkin from a symposium (cf. also Lys. fr.197 Carey). These thefts remind one of Old Comedy: cf. Ar. *Vesp*. 238, 354, Platon fr.129, Eupolis fr.395.

[33] Our sole manuscript in fact has μασχαλήττει. Heinsius and Vossius already corrected the easy itacistic error.

very close to what διαμασχαλίζω seems to mean in Aristophanes fr.264.

If the chorus is stealing this food, then they are stealing it from a meal that someone else has offered to them. That person would be their *choregos*. In addition to providing a post-performance epinician feast,[34] feeding the chorus in preparation for performance was also central to the duties of *choregia*, as Wilson rightly stresses.[35] While some sources describe chorus members fasting in order to excel in competition,[36] we also hear of a very different approach to their pre-performance dietary regime. Plutarch catalogues the lavish fare which *choregoi* would provide during training (*De glor. Ath.* 349A–B):

> οἱ δὲ χορηγοὶ τοῖς χορευταῖς ἐγχέλεια καὶ θριδάκια καὶ σκελίδας καὶ μυελὸν παρατιθέντες, εὐώχουν ἐπὶ πολὺν χρόνον φωνασκουμένους καὶ τρυφῶντας.
>
> The *choregoi* would provide a feast, serving eels, lettuces, ribs of beef and marrow to the chorus members who were training their voices and living a life of luxury for a long time.

Plutarch mentions ribs of beef, one of the three foods mentioned by Aristophanes in fr.264. Indeed, several of the foods listed here are known to us primarily through comedy. We might suspect, as Wilson suggests (125), that comic precedents, if not necessarily Aristophanes fr.264 in particular, are somehow in play here.

[34] Cf. Ar. *Ach.* 1150–1152, *Pax* 1357–1359, *Eccl.* 1181, fr.448. Note also Ar. *Nub.* 338–339.

[35] See P. Wilson, *The Athenian Institution of Khoregia: the Chorus, the City and the Stage* (Cambridge 2000) 124–126, adding *Adesp.* 1104.30–34 *PCG*, discussed below, to the evidence cited there.

[36] Pl. *Leg.* 665E and [Arist.] *Pr.* 901b describe chorus members fasting during training in order to improve their voices. Wilson, *Khoregia* 84, writes that "as for the paradox of largesse and fasting, these may represent divergent schools of thought." Or is the gluttony of Aristophanes' antique chorus instead yet another sign that nobody used to take pains in order to deliver a good comic performance (cf. ἀταλαιπώρως, fr.265)?

Some scholars, perhaps unduly influenced by Callias fr.26, describe the food of Aristophanes fr.264 as cheap, but the Plutarchan passage strongly militates against this popular line of interpretation.[37] Our fragment includes two meats which were well above the level of quotidian fare and which were appetizing enough to figure in Pherecrates' gastronomic fantasy of the underworld (fr.113.8, 13). Aristophanes' old-timey chorus was stealing something worth stealing. Indeed, these delicacies seem to stand in pointed contrast with their simple and rudimentary costumes. Since the *choregos* was charged with providing both costumes and food for his chorus, fr.264 might imply an antique *choregos* more concerned with serving a good meal than with financing a good show on the comic stage (see further below).

As with Paphlagon's theft from the Prytaneum (Ar. *Eq*. 280–281), the chorus' theft bespeaks their gluttony. A fragmentary commentary on an unknown comedy[38] provides a parallel (Adesp. 1104.30–34 *PCG* = 74 *CGFP*): **ἀλλὰ χορευτὴς / [ἐπιφ]ο̣ι̣τ̣ᾶν ὕστατος αἰεὶ / πλὴν [ἐπὶ δεῖ]π̣νον** ἐπειδὴ εἰς [τὰς μελ]έτας μόλις ἐφοίτων [καὶ πο]νηρῶς…, "'the chorus member ever the last to arrive, except for dinner': for they would go to their practices with difficulty and badly…" Several lexicographical sources preserve traces of a similar joke (Adesp. 549 *PCG*): φαρυγγίνδην. ὡς ἀριστίνδην. σκώπτοντες γὰρ τὴν γαστριμαργίαν τῶν χορευτῶν οἱ Ἀττικοὶ οὕτως λέγουσι, "*pharugginden*: like 'according to merit', for the Athenians talk thus in mocking the gluttony of the chorus members." Aristophanes' gluttonous old-timey chorus shared something in common with the comic

[37] Cf. Andrisano, *RivFil* IV.12 (2014) 137; Henderson, *Aristophanes: Fragments* 233 n.75: "presumably in the good old days when producers were generous." Contrast e.g. Meineke, *Fragmenta* 1052: "tenuem vilemque victum choreutarum."

[38] Perhaps Cratinus' *Men of Seriphus*: so E. Bakola, *Cratinus and the Art of Comedy* (Oxford 2010) 164–168. I give the text of C. Austin, *Comicorum Graecorum fragmenta in papyris reperta* (Berlin 1973) 46.

choruses of later generations.

But whereas contemporary Aristophanic choruses fondly look forward to a feast celebrating victory in the comic competition (see n.34 above), the chorus of old was apparently more concerned with the pre-performance meal than with their own performance. Keeping food tucked under the armpits would have severely inhibited a dancer's ability to dance.[39] Thus in the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* the god has to restrict his motion to keep the lyre hidden under his armpit.[40] Aristophanes fr.264 thus summons up the absurd image of a chorus dancing with their arms stuck to their sides. As the old-timey comic poets of fr.265 are not too concerned with composing comic poetry, so fr.264 seems to imply a comic *choregos* more concerned with food than with a visually interesting performance and a comic chorus which prioritizes eating lots over dancing well. In Aristophanes' version of the early comic past, as in that of Aristotle,[41] nobody seems to be taking comedy very seriously at all.

The parabasis of *Danaids* used the bad old days of comedy as a foil for its own more painstaking and sophisticated artistry, both poetic and dramaturgical. And yet one senses that things were not quite so simple. Whereas the older comic poet Pherecrates (fr.199) brands the same primitive costumes as dirty, Aristophanes, as far as we can tell, makes no such explicitly negative comment; whereas the older comic poet Callias (fr.26) links only cheap vegetarian foods with the early

[39] So, rightly, Andrisano, *RivFil* IV.12 (2014) 137, who takes this as an argument against the traditional interpretation of διαμασχαλίσας (fr.264). An overriding concern with food at the expense of more high-minded matters is not hard to parallel in Old Comedy.

[40] καὶ τὸ σπάργανον εἶχεν ἐπ' ὠλένῃ οὐδ' ἀπέβαλλε, "he kept his swaddling cloth on his arm and did not cast it off" (*Hom.Hymn* 4.388).

[41] Various steps in the early evolution of comedy are not remembered, according to Aristotle, "because from the beginning comedy was not taken seriously" (διὰ τὸ μὴ σπουδάζεσθαι ἐξ ἀρχῆς, *Poet.* 1449a38–b1).

days of comedy, Aristophanes describes a meaty meal worth stealing. His portrait of the comic past was not straightforwardly disparaging. Indeed, one can see points of continuity as well as contrast. In the casual attitude of Aristophanes' primitive comedians, we might find a validating, if partial, antecedent for his own sense of spontaneity and whimsy; in the old-timey chorus' overriding concern for food we may find an analogue for the enduring gastronomic obsessions of comedy; in their theft of food one sees a connection with the exultant roguishness of some of Aristophanes' own sympathetic characters. Although comic art has progressed a long way since the bad old days, its evolved Aristophanic form preserves within itself certain vital vestiges of its own outmoded antecedents.

Scholars of early Greek literature perhaps have their own particular reasons to suppose that the origins of literary genres naturally reveal important things about their essence and subsequent development. Yet the texts that we study need not be committed to this questionable idea. We might doubt his value as a historical source,[42] but for Aristophanes the point of discussing the vanished past of comedy was not so much to record what really happened as to illuminate his own contemporary art. In his hands, the history and even the essence of comedy are what he makes of them.[43]

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[42] One may plausibly connect the costumes of Pherecrates fr.199 and Aristophanes fr.264 with the "volunteers" (ἐθελονταί) mentioned by Aristotle (*Poet.* 1449b2). Aristophanes' comparably ambivalent portrait of Magnes (*Eq.* 520–525), from the first generation of comic poets to compete in the City Dionysia, does indeed imply a rather more advanced stage of authorship and dramaturgy.

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