The Identity of the Δεσπότης at *Ecclesiazusae* 1128f

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THE IDENTITY of the δεσπότης in the final scene of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* (1128f) has long been a source of controversy and confusion. The scholarly consensus, apparently first voiced by J. H. Voss,[1] has been that he is Blepyrus. This is the solution of Rogers in his own edition and in the Loeb, of Hall and Geldart in the old Oxford text, of Coulon in the Budé, and of Ussher in the new Oxford edition.[2] It has been adopted by scholars as diverse as Wilamowitz, Murray, Schmid, Roos, Webster, Seuss, Russo, Gelzer, Dover, and Newiger.[3] Although Fraenkel has dissented, identifying him as Chremes, he has found few supporters.[4] In fact, both stagings are demonstrably mistaken. A careful examination of the action shows that the δεσπότης must be an anonymous character, who appears on-stage for the first time at 1128.

The identification of the δεσπότης as Blepyrus seems at first a natural and obvious choice. After all, he is a central figure in the first half of the play, and Praxagora is a reasonable candidate for the wife who summons her husband to dinner (1137f). The arguments that Ussher (xxxiii) musters in support of this position, however, are not persuasive. That the wife of the δεσπότης is μακαριωτάτη (1113) does

[1] Cited by E. FRAENKEL, "Dramaturgical Problems in the *Ecclesiazusae*," in *Greek Poetry and Life: Essays Presented to Gilbert Murray* (Oxford 1936 [hereafter 'Fraenkel']) 270.

[2] B. B. Rogers, ed., *The Ecclesiazusae of Aristophanes* (London 1902) and *Aristophanes* III (London 1924); F. W. Hall and W. M. Geldart, edd., *Aristophanis Comoediae* II² (Oxford 1907); V. Coulon, ed., *Aristophane* V (Paris 1930); R. G. USSHER, ed., *Aristophanes: Ecclesiazusae* (Oxford 1973 [hereafter 'Ussher']).

[3] U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Aristophanes, Lysistrate* (Berlin 1927) 219f; G. Murray, *Aristophanes: A Study* (New York 1933) 197; Schmid-Stählin I.4 (Munich 1946) 368; E. Roos, "De exodi Ecclesiazusarum fabulae ratione et consilio," *Eranos* 49 (1951) 5–15; T. B. L. Webster, *Studies in Later Greek Comedy* (Manchester 1953) 14; W. Seuss, "Scheinbare und wirkliche Inkongruenzen in den Dramen des Aristophanes," *RhM* 97 (1954) 289–97; C. F. Russo, *Aristofane autore di teatro* (Florence 1962) 346; T. Gelzer, *RE* Suppl. 12 (1970) 1497 *s.v.* "Aristophanes"; K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (London 1972) 196; H. J. Newiger, *Gnomon* 55 (1983) 394.

[4] Fraenkel 273; *cf.* G. Maurach, "Interpretationen zur attischen Komödie," *AntCl* 11 (1968) 3f.

not mark her out as in any way unusual. In fact, the Maid goes on to apply the adjective to "all you women here at the doors and all the neighbors and demesmen and myself as well" (1114–16). There is thus no reason to assume that the δέσποινα is Praxagora.[5] Nor do the invitations issued at 1136–43 demonstrate the extraordinary authority of the γυνή. The summons of the citizenry at large is not even made specifically in her name, but seems to come from the women in general (*n.b.* παρέξομεν at 1143).

The identification of the Master with Blepyrus is actually open to decisive objections. At 725–27 Blepyrus declares that he is going off to the Agora to bask in his wife's reflected glory. This makes his return as the unfed δεσπότης impossible. He can scarcely reappear later and be said to be going only now where we know he has already been and is in fact coming from, ἐπὶ τὸ δεῖπνον (1128, 1135) in the Agora. Nor does it make any sense that the Maid be unaware of his whereabouts (1125f) when he is said to be precisely at her mistress' side (πλησίον, 725).[6]

Ussher tries to dispose of these difficulties by manufacturing off-stage activities for Blepyrus. Thus he conjectures that Blepyrus set off for the Agora with Praxagora but was "deflected . . . from his purpose on encountering the [dancing-]girls."[7] Blepyrus, however, is not a real person with real offstage activities that can be reconstructed. He is a dramatic figment, a character who exists only onstage or in offstage activities specifically described onstage. Blepyrus says he is going to the Agora (725–27), so that is where he goes. Ussher's staging, and that of so many critics before him, in short, is another example of Waldock's documentary fallacy. Blepyrus cannot be the δεσπότης.

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[5] Ussher's further argument (xxxiii) for identifying the Maid with Praxagora's Heraldess (834–52; *cf.* 713), and thus Praxagora as the Master's wife, is circular ('if Praxagora is the wife, then the Heraldess and the Maid could be the same character, and if that is the case, Praxagora is the wife'). Why Ussher thinks that 593f suggest that Praxagora and Blepyrus have no servants is not clear. Praxagora is speaking in general terms about the situation of different elements in the citizenry and makes no specific reference to her own situation.

[6] Dover (*supra* n.3: 193) notes this problem and then ignores it.

[7] Ussher xxxiii. His assumption (xxxiif; *ad* 1125–27 and 135–38) that the μείρακες accompany the Master onstage is not well-founded. Were the δεσπότης in the company of a troupe of lovely young girls, he would probably react more positively to the Maid's address (ὦ μακάριε καὶ τρισόλβιε, 1129) than with a dubious ἐγώ; (1130). Second, it rather diminishes the force of the final scene if all the Maid has to offer the Master is an invitation and a single escort to somewhere he is already going in high style anyway. Finally, the use of the deictic τασδί at 1138 suggests that the μείρακες are being pointed out here for the first time, probably because it is only now that they appear onstage. Their unexplained presence throughout 1128–38 would be distracting in any case, and we have a good parallel for the appearance of specialized dancers, called onstage separately to form part of the exodos, at *Vesp.* 1497ff.

Ussher's objections (xxxiv) to Fraenkel's identification of the δεσ-πότης as Chremes/the First Citizen (372–477, 564–871) are not convincing. To argue that Chremes is not the right sort of character to enjoy a sexual and gustatory paradise is to ignore the rôle of food, drink, and sex as pleasures typical of the Aristophanic world, appreciated by all alike—even by the warlike general Lamachus at *Acharnians* 1079. To declare that Chremes/the First Citizen cannot appear as the δεσπότης because that would give the play a 'message' is *a priori* argumentation, in that it adopts as a principle for interpretation of action what can only be a conclusion from a critical examination of that action.

Considerably more powerful objections can be raised against the appearance of this character as the Master. The projected order of the new Athens, first of all, makes this extremely unlikely. At 711–16 Praxagora announces that she is going to the Agora to supervise the reception of the citizens' χρήματα in anticipation of the first common meal. There she will distribute lots assigning individuals their dining halls (682). All the designated sites are within the Agora (683–86).[8] The First Citizen sets off to the Agora with all his possessions, intending to turn them in and eat (728f, 870f). There is thus no occasion for him to be found later, wandering about the city unfed. This is particularly so since, before he leaves, the Heraldess announces that all things are ready, and that all one need do is hurry to the Generaless, receive one's lot, and dine immediately (834–52).[9] As was the case with Blepyrus, moreover, the First Citizen cannot be both coming from the Agora at 1128 (as he must if he exited there at 876) and going ἐπὶ τὸ δεῖπνον. Fraenkel's position is also wrong. Chremes/the First Citizen cannot be the δεσπότης.

The Young Man (938–1111) cannot be the Master, for not only has he already been to dinner (*cf.* 987), but after 1101 he has no leisure to wander about the city (*cf.* 1098–1101). Four possibilities remain. First, there is the Second Citizen (746–876). Or, if Chremes (372–77) and the Neighbor (327–56) are not to be identified with the two Citizens (564–987), one of them might emerge here from his house to take the part of the Master. Finally, the δεσπότης might be an anonymous character, appearing at 1128 for the first time in the drama.

The Second Citizen seems never to have been considered seriously

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[8] *Cf.* Ussher's discussion *ad loc.*

[9] It is not clear why Fraenkel (272f) concludes that Chremes/the First Citizen has not yet gone to the feast.

as a candidate for the δεσπότης. He exits to the Agora at 876, behind the First Citizen. Although he claims to have thought of μηχανήματός τινος for gaining entry to the feast (872–76), the First Citizen tells him he will fail, "if the women have any sense" (856). Most critics nevertheless assume that the Second Citizen is successful; alternatively, he might be driven away without anything: when the Maid appears, she is looking precisely for the one citizen who alone out of 30,000 has not had his dinner (1132f). The Second Citizen would seem a good candidate.

Since he exits to the Agora at 876, he must return from there as well. In that case, however, the repeated remark that he is going ἐπὶ τὸ δεῖπνον (1128, 1135) would make little sense. τὸ δεῖπνον in 1128, therefore, would have to mean just what it does in *Vesp.* 60 (οὔθ' Ἡρακλῆς τὸ δεῖπνον ἐξαπατώμενος): "his dinner." We would have to imagine that as the Second Citizen comes onstage, he is the last 'private' citizen of the old, pre-Praxagorean Athens, going off to the last private dinner, his own, which is unlikely to be like the feast he has just missed (*cf.* 838–45). He is accordingly astonished when the Maid calls him "blessed and thrice blessed" (1129); as far as he is concerned he is the most miserable man in the world. Having no desire to stay and endure the ridicule of the Chorus (1134), he glumly sets off once again away from the Agora, "to (my) dinner" (1135). Again he is stopped by the Maid, who tells him that he is now included in the invitation and directs him back to the Agora, this time assured of a good reception (1136–43).

So far, the equation of the δεσπότης with the Second Citizen makes sense. The outlaw has been brought within the new community. The truth of what Praxagora said earlier about the pointlessness of antisocial behavior in the women's utopia is underlined: when all goods are available to all men, hoarding is absurd (605–07). The one bad apple in the barrel is confronted with the consequences of his behavior and offered a second chance and a place in the new world.

Unfortunately this conception of the action involves substantial difficulties. First of all, the Second Citizen and the First Citizen agree that there will be a number of other individuals who will refuse to carry off their goods to the Agora (806–10). The world thus cannot be healed completely by the conversion of the Second Citizen alone, and the sort of moralizing interpretation of the drama as a whole that must lie behind such a staging would be fatally undermined. Second, the interpretation of ἐπὶ τὸ δεῖπνον in 1128 and 1135 necessary to make this approach work, while possible, is strained. τὸ δεῖπνον and related words have been firmly established in the language of the play

as referring specifically to the great common meal in the Agora (652, 856; *cf.* 675, 683–88, 837, 860, 876, 988, 1149, 1165, 1180; contrast 1147). The meaning required here would not fit the meaning of the word in the rest of the drama. Most importantly, we have been forced to furnish a dramatic character with an offstage history that finds no explicit support in the text. We cannot know what happens when the Second Citizen goes offstage to the Agora at 876. The question is inappropriate, for as a dramatic character the Second Citizen has no offstage existence at all. If this sort of invention is the price we must pay to identify him with the δεσπότης, it is too high. The possibility must be abandoned.[10]

Three candidates for the δεσπότης remain: Chremes, the Neighbor, and an anonymous character. It is difficult to imagine either Chremes or the Neighbor huddling inside his house for six to seven hundred lines, only to burst forth at the last moment to play the Master. It is unlikely that the stage-houses are even thought of as theirs anymore, after they have been occupied by the Young Girl and the Hags for hundreds of lines (877–1111). As Ussher points out, moreover, the use of ἔρχεται to describe the Master's entry makes it clear that he is not emerging from a house.[11]

The only realistic possibility is thus that the δεσπότης is an anonymous character. Ussher (xxxiif) maintains that this *a priori* is unlikely. Like all such arguments, this one simply assumes what it sets out to prove. In fact, there is a curious air of anonymity throughout the final scenes of *Ecclesiazusae*. Praxagora and Blepyrus, the central characters of the first 700 lines of the play, disappear completely after 727. The First and Second Citizens, whoever they may be, certainly do not approach their stature. The Hags, the Young Girl, and (most likely) the Young Man are all increasingly minor characters, many of whom we have never seen before and never will again. There is no reason to be surprised when this is true of the δεσπότης as well.

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[10] If the Second Citizen does not return as the δεσπότης, one other possibility deserves consideration. The Second Citizen exits towards the Agora and dinner at 876. Sixty lines of singing and quarrelling between the First Hag and the Young Girl intervene (877–937). Thereafter a male citizen (941) enters from the Agora, having eaten (988; with 978 *cf.* 692) and now ready for lovemaking. This character has traditionally been identified as the Νεανίας, though the manuscripts offer no support for so specific an identification. It is just possible that the rôle could be given to the Second Citizen, who may indeed have slipped into the feast but in the end gets what he deserves.

[11] Ussher *ad* 1128–33. Late Aristophanic uses of ἔρχομαι to refer to entry from the stage-house can be found (*Lys.* 727, 935), but Ussher is right to insist that ἐξέρχομαι is the standard verb for this.

This is a disturbing conclusion. We expect Aristophanes' comedies to end with a hero we recognize leading out the Chorus. Nevertheless, there is no reasonable way to escape the proposed staging. Its effect is to sever the end of the play radically from its beginning. *Ecclesiazusae* becomes much less the story of certain laughable dramatic characters, and much more a tale about 'average citizens' like the anonymous δεσπότης, potential representatives of Athens herself. The political folly that the play indicts and parodies, after all, is precisely the people's (*cf.* 205). It is appropriate that their representative should march at the head of the exodos.[12]

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