

EUPOLIS AND THE λῆρος OF THE POETS:
A NOTE ON EUPOLIS 205 K-A

Abstract: It has been argued that fragment 205 K-A from Eupolis' Maricas buttress the claim that comedies were performed in the afternoons after tragedies. However, the sources give no reason to believe that the concept of λῆρος is intrinsically tragic, in fact, the opposite seems to be the case: the semantics of λῆρος fit far better into the discourse on comedy. Thus Eupolis is engaging in an intertextual battle against his rivals at the Lenaea of 421 BC.

Ian Storey has recently argued for a reduction of the number of competing comedies during the Peloponnesian War adding a new piece of evidence, which, he states, has “interesting ramifications for the production of comedy”,¹ since he believes that λῆρος and its cognates here alludes to tragedy and thus the fragment must have been performed after a tragic tetralogy. The text he adduces is a passage from Eupolis' *Maricas* (205 K–A) and it runs as follows:

ἀφνιπνίζεσθαι < > χρῆ πάντα θεατήν
ἀπὸ μὲν βλεφάρων αὐθημερινὸν ποιητῶν λῆρον ἀφέντα.²
Now every spectator must wake up and wipe away
from their eyes this day's nonsense from the poets.

Whereas Ian Storey finds that ποιητῶν λῆρον must refer to tragic performances, I will here try to elucidate the meaning of this “non-sense” exploring the semantics of the word λῆρος and its cognates to see whether Storey is right insisting that λῆρος “refers to something

¹ Storey (2003) 211-12; Storey (2002) 164-6.

² For different readings, cf. K–A (420). If the reading αὐθημερινῶν ποιητῶν is adopted the focus is transferred from the poets works to the poets themselves (cf. Ar. *Ran.* 92-95), see footnote 8 below. It is unclear whether the fragment (in anapaestic tetrameter verse) is from the beginning of the play, thus Aristeides; Storey (2003: 350); Bakola (2010: 34), or from the parabasis, thus Biles (2011: 34. n. 88); Rusten (2011: 253. n. 40). It is nonetheless “parabatic” in nature.

that pretends to grandeur and takes itself (far) too seriously, i.e., tragedy and philosophy”.³ His examples are all, however, taken from *Frogs* (tragedy) and *Clouds* (philosophy)⁴ even though *λήρος* and *ληρεῖν* are found in all the plays of Aristophanes except *Acharnians* and *Peace*.⁵

My main sources for this short investigation are the comedies of Aristophanes, but the evidence beyond the confines of this small corpus of texts points to the same conclusion; that there is nothing intrinsically tragic or philosophic about *λήρος* as maintained by Storey. “Nonsense” can be applied to any kind of utterance, but it is of course fun to mock the intellectuals, whether poets⁶ and philosophers,⁷ who themselves at least think that they are exempt from it. The verbal use of *λήρος* is often confined to discussions, where characters reproach each other.

As the fragment stands, a general attack on poets (tragic, comic, epic etc.) seems out of the question due to the emphasis on “this day’s” (*αὐθημερινὸν*)⁸ nonsense. The fragment must be directed at either tragic or comic playwrights; the genre of poet(s) alluded to in Aristophanes, if not attributed immediately, is often clear from the context,⁹ and similarly *αὐθημερινὸν* clearly qualifies these poets. Thus, Storey is basically correct when he finds the fragment interesting with a view to the structure of the Dionysian festivals during the Peloponnesian War. However, to see an explicit reference to tragic playwrights in this fragment seems to me as an unwarranted interpretation and the tendency to argue for a traditional comic critique

³ Storey (2002) 164.

⁴ *Ran.* 923, 945, 1005, 1497, *Nub.* 359.

⁵ I have counted 31 incidences of the verb (incl. two composite), 7 of the noun and the occurrence in *κρουνοχυτροληραῖον* (*Eq.* 89). I have included *Ran.* 1004.

⁶ On poets in general, see Xenarch. 7 K–A; Isocr. 12. 33. 5.

⁷ Plato, of course, disagrees on this, *Theat.* 152^b, but see Athen. 336^e.

⁸ On this word, see Storey (2002) 163 n. 22; See entry in *LSJ*. *αὐθημερινός* is connected with the more common adverb *αὐθημερόν*, e.g. *Ar. Ach.* 522; *Lys.* 114; *Thesm.* 813. *αὐθημερινός* could be equivalent to *αὐθημερός* meaning “made on one day” thus Sommerstein (2009) 121 n. 31, and though this would make the attack more general in tone, the meaning “on the same day” is confirmed by Thphr. *Sign.* 10, and by Et. Gud. sv. *κραυπάλη τὶ διαφέρει κραυπάλη καὶ μέθη; διαφέρει. Μέθη λέγεται ἢ αὐθημερινῆ οἴνησις· κραυπάλη δὲ ἢ χθεσινῆ μέθη.* (Hangover; how does hangover differ from being drunk? Being drunk is on the same day as the drinking, while hangover is the following day’s drunkenness).

⁹ e.g. *Ran.* 367-8; *Vesp.* 1018, 1051; *Eq.* 519.

against Tragedy with a reference to *Birds* 787¹⁰ is dubious at best.¹¹ There are two problems with Storey's arguments.

Firstly, if the comic production of this play was performed after a tragic tetralogy, this day's nonsense can only apply to one poet, namely the one who has written and produced the three tragedies and the satyr play (which it is very hard to see could pretend "to grandeur"); the reference to poets in the plural becomes unintelligible. This is, as I see it, the major fault of Storey's point here.

My second point concerns the alleged use of *λήρος* as something intrinsically tragic or philosophic. Before approaching this problem, however, I will investigate the semantics of the "nonsense". The core of the meaning of *λήρος* is something trivial or of no quality,¹² but it came to take on a more aggressive tone¹³ to mean something stupid or even crazy.¹⁴ Perhaps this development was colloquial and therefore apt for the comedies in which this mocking tone of *λήρος* prevails. *λήρος* is twice in Aristophanes connected with proverbial stupidity¹⁵ and we find it connected with *φλυαρία*¹⁶ and *φλύαρος* which occur as synonymous.¹⁷ Though late, Plutarch sums

¹⁰ Storey (2003) 212; e.g. Dover (1993) 318 *ad* 1004; Slater (2002) 19.

¹¹ Lech (2008). *Birds* 786-9 is in fact a strange passage, which ultimately implies that the performance sequence of the festival was: comedy – tragedy – comedy. On the *αὐτίς αὐ*, see Dunbar (1996) 481 *ad* 786-9. This of course was never the case.

¹² Ar. *Lys.* 860; *Ran.* 809; 452 K-A; Xen. *An.* 7. 7. 41; Pl. *Ph.* 72^c.

¹³ Ar. *Eq.* 89-90. Here the one slave is talking nonsense (*κρουνοχυτροληράιον*) and this is understood by the other slave as a reproach (*λοιδορεῖν*); similarly, Pl. *Lach.* 195^a {ΛΑ.} Οὐ μέντοι μὰ Δία ταῦτά τοι καὶ ληρεῖ. {ΣΩ.} Οὐκοῦν διδάσκωμεν αὐτὸν ἀλλὰ μὴ λοιδοροῦμεν.

¹⁴ e.g. *Ran.* 1377; *Plut.* 508; Pl. *Lys.* 205^a; Isoc. 15. 90. 4-5; S. *Tr.* 434-5. This meaning is enforced by adding *παρά* to the verb, e.g. Ar. *Eq.* 531; *Ran.* 594; Arist. *Rh.* 1356^b. 35; Isoc. 12, 23; Pl. *Th.* 169^a.

¹⁵ *Nub.* 1272, *Vesp.* 1370, with Macdowell (1971) *ad loc.*

¹⁶ Ar. 63 K-A; *λήροι καὶ φλυαρία* in Pl. *Hp. Ma.* 304^b as a *hendiadys*, silly nonsense; compare Plut. *Mor.* 716^f, 1065^c.

¹⁷ e.g. *Lys.* 159, *Ran.* 202. *ληρεῖς ἔχων* (e.g. *Vesp.* 1370; *Lys.* 945; Cratinus 208 K-A) is interchangeable with *φλυαρήσεις ἔχων* (*Ran.* 202, 524, *φλυαρεῖς ἔχων* is attested in Pl. *Gor.* 490^c) and the same applies for the expression *λήρος ἐστι τᾶλλα* (*Lys.* 860; *Ran.* 809 ~ *Nub.* 365). Halliwell (2008 116, n. 41) has recently shown how *φλυαρία* is connected with mockery in symposiac contexts, but he did not take *λήρος* into consideration. They are, however, synonymous not only in Aristophanes but in Plato as well (*λήρων τε καὶ παιδιῶν*, *Prt.* 347^d). The connection of *λήρων* and *παιδιῶν* is equivalent to *παιδιὰ καὶ φλυαρία* in *Crito* (46^d) and is found in *Frogs* (523-4) too.

up the definition of *λήρος* very clearly when he states (Plut. *Mor.* 716^f):

τὴν γοῦν μέθην οἱ λοιδοροῦντες φιλόσοφοι λήρησιν
 πάροιον ἀποκαλοῦσιν· τὸ δὲ ληρεῖν οὐδέν ἐστιν ἄλλ' ἢ
 λόγῳ κενῶ χρῆσθαι καὶ φλυαρώδει· λαλιᾶς δ' ἀτάκτου καὶ
 φλυαρίας εἰς ἄκρατον ἐμπεσοῦσης ὕβρις καὶ παροιμία τέλος
 ἀμουσώτατον καὶ ἀχαριστότατον.

At any rate, those philosophers who wish to give indulgence in wine a bad name define it as “vinous babbling” and babbling means precisely, engaging in empty and frivolous conversation. The outcome of undisciplined chatter and frivolity, when it reaches the extreme of intemperance, is violence and drunken behaviour – an outcome wholly inconsistent with culture and refinement.

This description recalls the behaviour of Philocleon at the symposium in *Wasps* (e.g. 1319-23.), a behaviour which Plutarch also applies to Philip II of Macedon, “who talked a lot of nonsense (πολλὰ ληρῶν) due to his drunkenness and made a fool of himself” (Plut. *Mor.* 715^c). The usage of *λήρος* is seemingly by its nature more linked with mockery and laughter, good or ill natured, symposiac or not, than to the (far too) elevated nature of tragic poetry or other intellectual pursuits.

Λήρος implies not the nature of tragedy, but that of reproach. Even if this is not necessarily the comic genre *per se*, the mode of reproach in a theatrical frame points in that direction. In addition, since *λήρος* and *φλυαρία* are so close in nature, it might be a matter of some importance that Socrates recalls that his alter ego in the comedy *Clouds* πολλήν φλυαρίαν φλυαροῦντα “talked a lot of silly stuff”.¹⁸

The main usage of *λήρος* and its cognates in the plays of Aristophanes is as a reaction of one character to the stupid or nonsensical utterance of another. There seems furthermore to be a touch of intellectual superiority of the character uttering the *τί ληρεῖς*, “you’re

¹⁸ Pl. *Ar.* 19^c; *λήρος* connected with comedy, Plut. *Lys.* 13. 5: ὁ κωμικὸς Θεόπομπος ἔοικε ληρεῖν. All this concur with the entry Σ 1219 of the etymology of Hesychius Lexicogr., Lexicon (Π – Ω) which runs as follows σκώπτει· γελοιάζει, παίζει, ληρεῖ.

speaking like a fool”,¹⁹ whether an imagined superiority as in the case of Philocleon²⁰ or real as that of the chorus of clouds towards Socrates.²¹ Even the Scythian archer in *Thesmophoriazusae* is in some way superior to Echo, alias Euripides, who of course repeats the *ληρεῖς* to him, revealing the real hierarchy and the stupidity of the Scythian (1080, 1112). *Clouds*, in particular, testifies to this hierarchy: Clouds to Socrates (359), Socrates to Strepsiades (367, 500), Pheidippides to Strepsiades (829), and finally Strepsiades to the one he owes money (in an imagined state of superiority 1273, compare it with Philocleon in *Vesp.* 1370). This last effort to get the upper hand, however, misfires, leaving him the butt of the joke as in nearly all the other instances found in *Clouds*. Though Socrates is mocked as speaking nonsense in *Clouds* it seems rash to conclude that philosophy is *λήρος*. Nonsense is clearly the hallmark of the boorish Strepsiades.

Turning to *Frogs*, I cannot find any piece of evidence that *λήρος* should be intrinsically tragic,²² but 1005 is clearly interesting. In the new *OCT*, the editor Nigel Wilson reads *κλήρον* instead of the transmitted *λήρον*.²³ This reading, noticed but dismissed by Kenneth J. Dover,²⁴ does not affect my point, but the cluster *τραγικὸν λήρον* itself suggests that *λήρος* was clearly not thought of as something tragic in itself when needing an adjective limiting its meaning. This is tragic nonsense as opposed to multitudes of nonsense meanings, genres, utterances etc.

That line 1497 of *Frogs* should refer to the tragic style of Euripides²⁵ seems out of the question or at least not the only point, since the passage clearly depicts the chattering of Socrates and his friends, one of whom Euripides is thought to be. It is not tragic nonsense as such, but intellectual trifling on a par with the use in *Clouds*.

¹⁹ In *Clouds*, see below, e.g. *Av.* 341, 572; *Thesm.* 595, 622, (1081?), 1112.

²⁰ *Vesp.* 767, 1370.

²¹ *Nub.* 359, and they show awareness of his character in 362-4. Notice that Socrates does not know the nature of the clouds in 365, which of course intensifies the humour of this passage.

²² Three of the eleven instances of the word are found before the *agon* in a very colloquial setting. Verse 809 is also uttered by a slave. This of course may colour the use of the word later on in the play.

²³ See his discussion in Wilson (2007) 176-7.

²⁴ Dover (1993) 318 *ad* 1004f.

²⁵ Storey (2003) 212.

Euripides' claim (923ff) that he has exposed the nonsense of Aeschylus is the closest we get to tragic *λήρος* as such. He simply tries to showcase his own intellectual superiority (945: οὐκ ἐλήρουν ὃ τι τύχοιμ'), while his examples of Aeschylean *λήρος* are in fact just pure nonsense (927: σαφές δ' ἂν εἶπεν οὐδὲ εἶν), as the response of Dionysus shows (930-2, see also 926: ἄγνωτα τοῖς θεωμένοις). The outcome, however, shows that his superiority was imagined (1136: Aeschylus to Euripides: ὄρας ὅτι ληρείς.) which on the other hand does not redeem Aeschylus' poetry either.

What Aeschylus and Euripides wrote could possibly be called nonsense at times – the *agon* in *Frogs* suggests so – and thus it seems likely that though one could call a given tragedy nonsense, this could (or would) not be applied to Tragedy as a genre (or *τέχνη*).

The same applies to *Thesmophoriazusae* 880, where the woman calls the “tragic performance” of Euripides and the Relative *λήρος*, but this is not because of the acting she sees, but because, as E. Hall has noticed, she simply does not understand what the two men are doing; she lacks the ability to understand a play in performance.²⁶ Another point of this is of course that this play within the play is extremely comic though (or because) of its paratragic nature.

With this in mind, there is no reason to understand the nonsense of the poets as a jibe against tragedy. Rather, it is very likely that Eupolis engages in an extradramatical *agon* against his rivals at the competition (probably the Lenaea of 421 BC²⁷). As have been shown,²⁸ some comic playwrights, Aristophanes, Eupolis and Cratinus at least – others may have done similarly – created *personae* which were involved in an inter-theatrical/textual battle during these years, and if the nonsense of the poets refers to the other comedians at the competition, Eupolis is reproaching his rivals through his chorus.

It is even possible that in *Maricas*, Eupolis deliberately²⁹ continues to employ the word and concept *λήρος* which Aristophanes

²⁶ Hall (1997) 95-6.

²⁷ Storey (2003) 198.

²⁸ Biles (2002), (2011); Bakola (2008), (2010); Sidwell (2009).

²⁹ *λήρον* is surely a pun on the word *λήμην*, meaning ‘sleep’, which is used figuratively in Greek for impediments to seeing reality or truth (e.g. *Clouds* 327) and so the punning meaning very much feeds in to the persona we find our comic poets adopting vis à vis their rivals: as purveyors of truths as opposed to the meaningless clichés of their rivals. I owe this acute comment to one of the *CJ* referees.

brought into play in the parabasis of *Knights*. Here Aristophanes attacked Cratinus for being “mindless (531: παραληροῦντ’)” and pretending (ironically) benevolence he wanted the spectators to feel pity with the old playwright, making him stop speaking nonsense (536: μὴ ληρεῖν) and turning him into a spectator himself.³⁰ Aristophanes on the other hand raises himself above the reproach acting wisely (545: σωφρονικῶς) while not having uttered any such nonsense like an imbecile (ἀνοήτως ... ἐφλυάρει). In the following year, Cratinus echoed these charges in his *Pytine* (208 *K-A*),³¹ and it seems that Eupolis did likewise with his *Maricas*, a play that apparently responded to Aristophanes’ *Knights* on many levels beyond the pure linguistic.³² These are however not the scope of this note.³³

In consequence of the matters discussed above, Ian Storey was surely right to view this fragment as an important piece of evidence regarding the overall structure of the Dionysian competitions. However, the fragment points at the comic competition, and thus the sequence of comic performances at Lenaea 421 BC. seems to have been five comedies on one day, rather than the three comedies following the tragic tetralogies in the afternoons.

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³⁰ Biles (2011) 106.

³¹ Biles (2002) 187-8, (2011) 147-8, 152; Olson (2007) 84.

³² Eup. 208 *K-A* echoes Ar. *Eq.* 198.

³³ See Storey (2003) 202-4.

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