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TROUBLE IN THE EARLY CAREER OF PLATO COMICUS: ANOTHER LOOK AT
P. OXY. 2737.44–51 (*PCG* III 2, 590)

aus: *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 76 (1989) 223–228

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45 φ[ησὶ δὲ] καὶ Ἐρατοθέ-
νης περὶ Πλάτωνος ὅτι
ἕως μὲν [ἄλ]λοιοι ἐδίδου τὰς
κωμωιδίας εὐδοκίμει δι'
αὐτοῦ δὲ πρῶτον διδάξας
τοὺς Ῥαβδούχους καὶ γενό-
50 μενος τέταρτος ἀπεώσθη
πάλιν εἰς τοὺς Ληναϊκοὺς.

It has been nearly twenty years since the publication of P.Oxy. 2737, and the interpretation of lines 44-51 in particular still remains in dispute. These lines are especially vexing because they touch upon a wide range of issues, among them the early career of Plato Comicus and aspects of dramatic competition in fifth-century Athens. Four articles concerned with these lines have appeared in this journal alone over the past decade, and by now the central problems are familiar.¹ What really happened to Plato after his failed production of the (previously unattested) *Rhabdoukhoi*? Is the phrase ἀπεώσθη πάλιν εἰς τοὺς Ληναϊκοὺς evidence of a "qualification-rule", i.e. was Plato "officially" demoted to the Lenaian festival after his failure with *Rhabdoukhoi*?² Or, as Luppe has argued, does the expression refer, if somewhat infelicitously, to a voluntary decision by Plato, shamed at his defeat, to restrict himself to the Lenaian festival for an extended period.

I wish to offer here a slightly different explanation of the passage, one which, I believe, creates fewer logistical problems than the others, and also avoids arguments that, however ingenious, must remain completely hypothetical in the absence of further evidence. Before I do this, however, I would like to offer some observations on the current state of the contro-

¹ The various approaches can be traced through the following works: E. Lobel, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (London 1968) 35 pp. 39-45; T. Gelzer, "Aristophanes", *RE* Suppl. XII (1970) col. 1564; D. Sutton, "P.Oxy. XXXV 2737: New Light on the Production of Old Comedy", *BASP* 13 (1976) 125-27 [= Sutton¹]; G. Mastromarco, "Une norma agonistica del teatro di Atene", *RM* 121 (1978) 19-34 [= Mastromarco¹]; Sutton, "Plato Comicus Demoted: A Reconsideration", *ZPE* 38 (1980) 59-63 [= Sutton²]; W. Luppe, "ἀπεώσθη πάλιν εἰς τοὺς Ληναϊκοὺς", *ZPE* 46 (1982) 147-59 [= Luppe¹]; Mastromarco, "Gli esordi di Aristofane e di Platone Comico", *ZPE* 51 (1983) 29-35 [= Mastromarco²]; Luppe, "Der Komiker Platon und die Dionysien", *ZPE* 54 (1984) 15-16 [=Luppe²].

² Many scholars assume that Plato produced *Rhabdoukhoi* at the Dionysia, though this is far from certain. See below, n. 4.

versy. In order to avoid repeating previously published arguments and counter-arguments, I shall limit myself here to several issues that I believe remain unresolved or improperly examined in the bibliography listed in note 1.

The theory that Plato was somehow "demoted" to the Lenaia, as a result of an institutionalized "rule" regulating the selection of poets from year to year, seems at first glance an appropriate and attractive reading of the passage; there is no doubt that ἀπεώσθη πάλιν, mentioned as the consequence of failing with *Rhabdoukhoi*, has negative connotations.³ Unfortunately, however, we have no other evidence that even hints at the existence of such a rule, and as the studies of Gelzer, Mastromarco and Sutton have shown, the papyrus does not offer enough information for us to reconstruct securely even the general nature of such a rule.⁴ In 1982 Luppe set out to repudiate the qualification-rule hypothesis on logical and philological grounds.⁵ But while his criticisms of the competing theories were often sensible, his own explanation, namely that ἀπεώσθη πάλιν must be understood as *avoluntary* decision to avoid the Dionysia out of shame for his failure with *Rhabdoukhoi*, is no better substantiated than the theory of a qualification-rule.⁶ He seeks support for his argument in the experience of Aristophanes with *Nubes*, as described in Hypoth. VI (Ἄριστοφάνης ἀπορριφθεὶς παραλόγως ᾤθη δειν ἀναδιδάξαι τὰς Νεφέλας τὰς δευτέρας), noting that in this passage the scholiast's language is as imprecise as that of our papyrus. Aristophanes, he argues, was not literally forced to produce *Nubes* a second time; the phrasing of the Hypothesis indicates only that he was upset at his loss, and felt compelled to produce it again for artistic and personal reasons. Similarly, according to Luppe, ἀπεώσθη in the papyrus is used figuratively to describe Plato's personal decision to perform only at the Lenaia for a while.⁷ The Aristophanes-hypothesis, however, is not really apposite, since the key phrase

³ Noted by Mastromarco¹ 23 and Sutton² 60 against Lobel (above, n. 1) 44 (on col. II 15f.). Sutton² 59-60, offers a brief summary of the five prevailing interpretations of the rule, [though note Luppe's correction (Luppe¹ 155 n. 20) of Sutton's # 3].

⁴ It is even unclear at which festival Plato produced *Rhabdoukhoi*. The assertion that it was the Dionysia (Mastromarco¹ 22, Sutton² 60) is overconfident. There is no didascalical record of the play—indeed the title appears for the first time in our papyrus—and Plato could just as easily have been "driven back to the Lenaia" as a result of having failed at the preceding year's Lenaia, (as Gelzer {above, n. 1} holds). Luppe¹ too is aware of this fact (p. 153), though he believes that it was the Dionysia.

⁵ Luppe first expressed his disbelief in a qualification-rule in "Der 'Anagyros'-Kommentar Pap. Oxy. 2737", *APF* 21 (1971) 106, but there only on the grounds that the two festivals were independently administered. As we shall see below, the evidence for this is far from conclusive.

⁶ Mastromarco¹ 24 broached, but rejected, such an explanation even before Luppe.

⁷ The exact length of such an alleged absence is wholly uncertain, and any calculation is also complicated by the unknown date of *Rhabdoukhoi*, as well as by the dispute over the number of comic competitors during the Peloponnesian war. (The papyrus mentions that Plato placed *fourth* with *Rhabdoukhoi*, which implies that there were the normal five competitors instead of the reduced number of three traditionally proposed for the war years. Luppe, however, argues cogently that the number never was actually reduced, in "Die Zahl der Konkurrenten an dem komischen Agonen zur Zeit des peloponnesischen Krieges", *Philologus* 116 [1972] 53-75). See Luppe²'s tentative chronological framework of Plato's early career (p. 16).

there is $\phi\eta\theta\eta$ δεῖν: "he *thought* it was necessary..." to produce the play again, not "he was forced" to do so. In the papyrus, there is no mention of Plato's thought-process, and there is nothing about the phrasing of the line that demands we import it there.

Luppe's uneasiness with a "qualification-rule", however, is understandable, when we attempt to envision how it might have operated on an annual basis.⁸ Let us posit, for the moment, with Mastromarco, a rule whereby if a poet failed to place at the Dionysia one year, he could not participate in the Dionysia of the next year. The premise behind this, of course, is that the Dionysia is the more "international" and, hence, prestigious of the two festivals.⁹ Let us suppose that a comic poet has just had a success at the Dionysia of 427. He applies for and is granted a chorus to compete in both the Lenaia and the Dionysia of 426. In 426, he comes in fifth place at the Lenaia. Would it not be strange to have a system that was supposed to ensure that only the best comic poets compete at the Dionysia, but allowed a poet to perform at the Dionysia who had just failed at the Lenaia?¹⁰

The problems that arise when we hypothesize any qualification-rule for determining participation in the festivals vividly highlight our nearly complete ignorance of the actual procedure for acquiring a chorus. All we really know is that a poet "applied" ("χορὸν αἰτεῖν", cf. Aristophanes *Equites* 512) to one of the archons—the Eponymous for the Dionysia, the Basileus for the Lenaia—and that the archons made the decisions by "granting a chorus".¹¹ We assume that this took place at the beginning of the Athenian new year (in July) at the change of magistracies, though Aristotle *Ath. Pol* 57.1, our earliest source, describes conditions of the fourth century. We have only a vague idea of what the poet presented to the archons,¹² and no information about whether one could apply simultaneously to the two archons with the same play, whether the archons acted independently of one another or whether the festival programs were in any way coordinated. If we could answer any of these questions, we would be in a more secure position to speculate about how a supposed qualification-rule might have worked, and it is possible that some of the objections to such a

⁸ Cf. Luppe's anxieties (pp. 150-51) about the logistical problems that arise when we try to imagine poets constantly being disqualified, then somehow requalifying.

⁹ Cf. Arist. *Ach.* 502-508 and scholion *ad loc.*, also Luppe's reconstruction of lines 35-42 (*APF* 21, 1971, 103-105; App. *ad loc.* in PCG III 2, 590; below, n. 16).

¹⁰ Gelzer's hypothesis that a poet must have had a victory at the Lenaia before being granted a chorus for the Dionysia is perhaps more intuitively satisfying—it makes sense to think that a new poet must prove his mettle at the Lenaia before being allowed to compete at the Dionysia. Such a regulation, one presumes, would specify that one Lenaian victory would establish a poet's claim to a Dionysian chorus for the rest of his career. Mastromarco¹ 21-22, and Sutton² 60 have objected to this on the grounds that *Rhabdoukhoi* was performed at the Dionysia, meaning that Plato would have already made it beyond any supposed Lenaian qualification. But, as I have noted above, (n. 4), the venue of *Rhabdoukhoi* is still uncertain, and, as such, Gelzer's suggestion remains as possible (and speculative) as the others.

¹¹ Cf. A.W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*² (Oxford 1968) 84.

¹² Pickard-Cambridge (above n. 11) 84, cites Plato *Laws* 817d, which suggests that the poet read samples of his work to the archons.

rule discussed above could be overturned. But until we have such answers, it seems to me that we are better off trying to base any explanation of the Eratosthenes-anecdote on what we already know of the methods of poet-selection in the fifth-century.

To this end, I suggest simply that ἀπεώθη πάλιν εἰς τοὺς Ληναίκοὺς reflects the decision made by one of the archons¹³ as a consequence of Plato's failure with *Rhabdoukhoi*. Mastromarco and Luppe themselves stress how crucial an archon's decision was, and how unpredictable it could be.¹⁴ Luppe even cites the power of the archon's decision as an argument against a qualification-rule, but he evidently did not find this sufficient to explain the Eratosthenes-anecdote. I suggest, however, that behind the anecdote lies the following scenario: Plato applied to the Eponymous archon for a chorus for the Dionysia. The archon refused him, allegedly¹⁵ citing the miserable showing of *Rhabdoukhoi*. Plato then applied for and was granted a chorus for the Lenaia (or perhaps he had applied simultaneously to both archons for a chorus). According to this explanation, what happened to Plato would have been nothing especially unusual; it would have happened to many comic poets each year, as they subjected themselves to the caprice of the archon in charge of poet-selection. But, in any event, it would not have been an automatic result of an institutionalized qualification rule.

The context in which the Eratosthenes-anecdote is introduced seems to support this approach. Lines 27-28 seem to form a lemma that almost certainly involves the selection process for the Lenaia: ἀλλ' ἐχρῆν χορὸ(ν) | [δι]δόντα(ς) τὸν ἐπὶ Ληναίῳι] κκοπε[ί]ν --- What immediately follows these lines seems to be a description of the two festivals (lines 35-37: [μὲ]ν εἶναι τὰ θεά[τρα (or θεά[ματα] --- | [κα, τὸ δὲ Ληναίικ[--- |]ρίως ἐνδοξο[---;).¹⁶ The subsequent lines continue most probably with a description of the Dionysia. At 43-44 there is either a new lemma, or, as Luppe believes, a repetition of a citation from the lost top portion of the column.¹⁷ In any event, even if it is a question of a

¹³ Probably the Eponymous, since he controlled access to the Dionysia, from which apparently Plato was being debarred; though our knowledge of the interaction between the two archons over the festivals is uncertain (see below).

¹⁴ Mastromarco² 33, Luppe¹ 152-53. cf. Cratinus fr. 17KA, which complains that Sophocles had been denied a chorus in favor of the inferior Gnesippos. Aristotle at *Ath. Pol.* 56.3 says that the Eponymous archon appoints (καθίττησι) three choregoi for the tragic poets, and he mentions that "in earlier times" (πρότερον) this archon also appointed five choregoi for comic poets. While he does not offer us any specific information about the entire process, the passage does imply that the archon had complete control over the dramatic competition. At 57.1 Aristotle states that, although the Basileus arranges the *procession* of the Lenaia in collaboration with a board of ἐπιμελεταί, he administers the ἀγών proper by himself: τὸν δὲ ἀγῶνα διατίθειν ὁ βασιλεύς.

¹⁵ The archon in fact may not have had to give any reasons for his decisions; but Plato may have claimed in a play that the archon denied him a chorus because of *Rhabdoukhoi*. See below, n. 21 on the problem of using comic texts for historical evidence.

¹⁶ Luppe's supplements throughout are too bold, though his l. 37f.: τὸ δὲ Ληναίικ[ὸν οὐχ | ὄμ]οίως ἐνδοξο[ν δοκεῖ | εἶνα] seems quite likely.

¹⁷ Luppe¹ 149 n. 9 Luppe's supplements are ingenious if tendentious: τῶι δὲ ἴπ]ρὸς τῆ[ν] | πόλιν' ἑ]μαίνεται] δὴ τὰ Διονύσια. Austin in *CGFP* printed]ροστ [through Διονύσια as a

new lemma at 42-44, it is apparent that its subject matter remains the same as that of 27-29, namely aspects of Athenian theater production. Eratosthenes' anecdote about Plato, therefore, even if it is introduced ostensibly to explain the quotation at 42-44, seems also to be relevant to 27-29, which, as noted above, have to do with selection of poets for the Lenaia. Insofar as the papyrus seems to be a commentary on the parabasis of a lost play by Aristophanes,¹⁸ it is likely that 27-29 were spoken by the coryphaeus, who was complaining on behalf of the poet of ill-treatment by one of the archons—the Basileus, no doubt, since the Lenaia is at issue here—and offered advice on what sort of criteria *ought* to be used for selecting competitors (ἀλλ' ἐχρήν --- σκοπεῖν).¹⁹

Some uncertainty remains, of course, even when we understand ἀπεώθη πάλιν εἰς τοὺς Ἀθηναίους as I have suggested. In particular we are hindered by the imprecise phraseology: is ἀπεώθη to be taken literally, with <ὑπὸ ἄρχοντος> understood or omitted? Or—more likely—is the verb used simply to indicate that Plato applied for a chorus for the Dionysia, was rejected by the archon for that festival on the grounds that he had failed at the previous year's Dionysia, and was therefore *compelled* (if he wanted to perform at all) to apply for the Lenaian?²⁰ In either case, however, the wording can be easily taken, in my view, to refer to a unique event in Plato's career, when he felt that an archon held against him his failure with *Rhabdoukhai*. Eratosthenes doubtless got his information from an actual passage in Plato (probably a parabasis), which conceivably contained in it a boast about his past successes (hence the reference in the papyrus to his productions under others' names), perhaps an invective against the audience and judges for the verdict of *Rhabdoukhai* (as we find in Aristophanes *Nubes* 525-26), and a complaint about the archon's decision regarding a play he wanted to produce soon after *Rhabdoukhai*.²¹

new lemma. Kassel and Austin, however, now print πρὸς τῆ[v] πόλιν as the only certain part of the lemma.

¹⁸ The play has been identified with the Anagyros (accepted by Austin in *CGFP*56), but Kassel and Austin print it in *PCG* among *Incertarum fabularum fragmenta*. For bibliography on the identification cf. Mastromarco¹ 19 n. 1 and Luppe¹ 147 n. 1.

¹⁹ Mastromarco² 34-35 believes that the commentator brought in the Eratosthenes-anecdote because Plato and Aristophanes had similar early careers, i.e. each had successes with plays produced under others' names, and each failed with their first Dionysian performance, Aristophanes with *Clouds*, Plato with *Rhabdoukhai*. This much seems probable, but there is no evidence that Aristophanes was, as a result of his failure, subjected to a "norma dell' allontanamento". Cf. Sutton² 60-61.

²⁰ These questions raise others: was there a protocol in applying for choruses such that a poet had to approach one archon before the other? For example, did a poet start with the Eponymous archon in hopes of performing at the Dionysia, then, if rejected there, apply to the Basileus for the Lenaia? How would a poet secure a chorus for both festivals in a given year (as Aristophanes did in 411)?

²¹ No matter what the wording of the anecdote really means, we must not forget how dangerous it is to rely on comic texts for historical information. Especially in a parabasis, a comic poet was prone to exaggerate, and there is never any guarantee that what he says anywhere in a play reflects the full "truth". Even if we found in Plato a passage in which he complained of be-

The obscurity of lines 44-51 makes it impossible for us to feel comfortable with any of the theories proposed so far to explain them. While my own explanation does not provide the incontrovertible ἀνάγκη we are searching for, at least it has the advantage, as I have tried to show, of relying on a mechanism of theatrical administration securely attested for the fifth century. This makes it unnecessary to posit a qualification-rule, which, as we have seen, is plagued by both practical problems and a lack of corroborating evidence.

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ing "forced back to the Lenaia", it would be dangerous to infer from this an actual qualification-rule.