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P. OXY. 2737 AND ARISTOPHANES' EARLY CAREER

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In the Select Addenda to the 1988 reprint of Pickard-Cambridge, *Dramatic Festivals of Athens*² J.Gould and D.M.Lewis, addressing themselves to the evidence afforded by the new fragment of Eratosthenes preserved in P.Oxy. 2737, lines 44-51 (CGFP 56 = Ar.F590 K.-A. = Plat. test.7 K.-A.): φ[ησι δὲ] καὶ Ἐρατοσθένης περὶ Πλάτωνος ὅτι ἕως μὲν [ἄλ]λοισι ἐδίδου τὰς κωμωιδίας, εὐδοκίμει, δι' αὐτοῦ δὲ πρῶτον διδάξαι τοὺς Ῥαβδούχους καὶ γενόμενος τέταρτος ἀπεώθη πάλιν εἰς τοὺς Ληναϊκοὺς express the opinion that there was 'a category of poets who were or were not entitled to compete at the Dionysia' and that there was 'some kind of barrier that competitors at the Dionysia had to cross and that those entitled to compete at the Lenaea were on a lower level'¹ (p.359).

This passage, perhaps, may also provide a clue to the secrecy which surrounded Aristophanes' career prior to his successful production of the *Knights* at the Lenaea of 424 BC, a secrecy about which we learn from an early and reliable source, Aristophanes himself.² The explanation of the scholiasts (*Clouds* 530c, *Tzetzes Clouds* 518ab, 530b, *Vita XXXIIB*, p.145,5-7 Koster) that Aristophanes was prevented from producing the *Banqueters* in his own name by a law which prescribed a minimum age,³ though in itself

¹ The barrier to be crossed need not have been a law but a tradition, or even just a reluctance of the archons to grant a chorus for the more prestigious Dionysia to unqualified beginners. The text has attracted a fair crop of discussion, see esp. Th.Gelzer, *RE Suppl.* XII (1970) col.1564; W.Luppe, *APF* 21 (1974) 93-110; *ZPE* 46 (1982) 147-159; 54 (1984) 15-16; G.Mastromarco, *RhM* 121 (1978) 19-34; *ZPE* 51 (1983) 29-35; R.M.Rosen, *ZPE* 76 (1989) 223-228, with references. Gelzer believes that a success at the Lenaea entitled the winner to a chorus at the Dionysia; Mastromarco argues that there was a 'norma agonistica' according to which a failure at the Dionysia restricted the losing poet to the Lenaea for one year, in the case of Aristophanes the Dionysia of 422 BC; Luppe denies an existence of such a 'norma' and believes that Plato, on account of his diffidence, voluntarily refrained for quite a long time from competing at the Dionysia; Rosen suggests that it was 'a caprice of the archon in charge of poet-selection' (p.226). It is worth noting that contrary to Plato's experience Aristophanes did succeed in winning a victory with the first play he produced without the assistance of others. Perhaps it was this success with the *Knights* at the Lenaea of 424 which paved the way for granting him a chorus for the Dionysia of the following year, the ill-starred production of the *Clouds* in 423.

² See *Wasps* 1018-22, *Clouds* 528-33. According to the 'orthodox' interpretation to which I subscribe, the secret period falls in the years 427-5, before Aristophanes asked for a chorus (*Knights* 513) and produced a play on his own in 424. Three known plays of Aristophanes fall within this period, the *Banqueters* (427), the *Babylonians* (426) and the *Acharnians* (425). G.Mastromarco, *QS* 10 (1979) 153-96 and S.Halliwell, *CQ* 30 (1980), 33-45, who postulate a tripartite division of Aristophanes' early career, assign the secret period to the years preceding the production of the *Banqueters* without offering an explanation of the secrecy or the need for it; on that point see D.M.MacDowell, *CQ* (1982) 22; the entire question was recently summed up in detail by F.Perusino, *Dalla commedia antica alla commedia di mezzo*, Urbino [1987] 37-57.

³ See K.J.Dover, *Aristophanes: Clouds* (Oxford 1968) ad 530 and p.xviii, and Halliwell's discussion, *art.cit.* (note 2, above) 33-4 and references nn.5-7. Halliwell argues that *Knights* 512-6 is intelligible only if we assume that Aristophanes had a choice and was not legally prevented by an age barrier from producing his own plays. But granting that there was no age barrier, still his choice may have been limited to the Lenaea where the *Knights* was produced.

suspect of being an explanation inferred from the text of *Clouds* 530-1, seems nevertheless to imply that the secrecy resulted from some sort of a transgression, if not of law then of custom, which it was necessary to cover up. P.Oxy. 2737,44-51 allows us to surmise that this transgression had something to do with producing plays at the Dionysia when one was not yet entitled to compete at that festival.

It is not known at which festival Aristophanes' first play, the *Banqueters*, was performed.⁴ Since the *communis opinio* has it that the *Babylonians* was performed at the Dionysia (Σ Ach.378), Gelzer, on the strength of the evidence of P.Oxy. 2737,44-51, concludes that the *Banqueters* must have been produced at the *Lenaea*, and that it was its success which qualified Aristophanes' *Babylonians* for the Dionysia.⁵ Gelzer, however, does not address himself to the secrecy problem and does not take into account the fact that the play was not produced by Aristophanes himself but by Callistratus, who was not a beginner and could compete, therefore, at the Dionysia. It was precisely because Callistratus produced Aristophanes' plays where and when Aristophanes himself was not entitled to that the authorship of Aristophanes had to be kept secret.⁶

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⁴ See Ar.test. *20 K.-A. The view that it was performed at the *Lenaea* rests on the erroneous interpretation of Ach. 1155ff. advanced, among others, already by F.V.Fritzsche in *De Daetalensibus Aristophanis Commentatio* (Lipsiae 1831) 9, against which A.Briel warned in his dissertation *De Callistrato et Philonide* (Berlin 1887) 19; see more recently A.C.Cassio, *Aristofane: Banchettanti* (Pisa 1977) 20, who states that there is a probability but no proof that it was performed at the *Lenaea*. Russo's preference for the Dionysia rests, unfortunately, on wrong premises (the existence of two theatres), see C.F.Russo, *Aristofane, autore di teatro*² (Firenze 1984) 20-31, esp. p.31, ἐνθάδε - here in the theatre of Dionysus at the Dionysia.

⁵ See note 1, above.

⁶ Whether a comparable secrecy was a feature also of Plato's early career cannot be deduced from P.Oxy. 2737, nor can general conclusions be drawn regarding the nature of the relationships of other poets with their producers or the degree of secrecy with which such relationships were surrounded. Why the production of the *Acharnians* at the *Lenaea* of 425 was kept secret as well is unclear, but since Aristophanes himself tells us it was (see above), the conclusion must be reached, which many have been reluctant to draw, that all references to the poet in the *Acharnians* are references to Callistratus and not to Aristophanes, as was already argued by Briel (note 4, above); this view was endorsed by Rennie and by others, see MacDowell, art.cit. (note 2, above) 21-26; Aristophanes was derided by other comedy writers as working for others (test. 1,7-10; 3,9-10 K.-A); if it was in Aristophanes' interest to keep his authorship unknown he would not have circulated at this particular time copies of his plays bearing his name and thus disclose his identity (but see Dover, *Clouds*, p.xvii n.2).