

Studies in Comedy, I: Alexis and the Parasite's Name

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“THE PARASITE has a history which goes back to Epicharmus but as far as we know he only becomes a stock character in the fourth century.” So with his usual pithy acumen writes T. B. L. Webster.¹ But there is a pretty little problem connected with this standardisation of the parasite² as a type figure in fourth-century intrigue comedies. Before this standardisation the parasite in real life and on the comic stage seems to have been called *κόλαξ*. The word *παράσιτος* appears not to have been applied to him before the earlier half of the fourth century.³ What accounts for the rise of the new name?

The investigation inevitably starts from our main source of information about ancient parasite lore: Athenaeus' long and richly enter-

¹ See p.64 of *Studies in Later Greek Comedy* (Manchester 1953)—that *vade-mecum* of all students of the history of Greek drama.

² The starting point for modern study of ancient parasites is still O. Ribbeck's magisterial *Kolax. Eine ethnologische Studie* (*AbhLeipzig* 9.1 [1883] 1–113). Four other works are of direct relevance to the topics discussed in this paper: A. Giese, *De parasiti persona capita selecta* (Diss. Kiel 1908); L. Ziehen / Ernst Wüst / A. Hug in *RE* 18 (1949) 1377–1405 s.vv. *Παράσιτοι* / *PARASITOS*; J. M. Brinkhoeff, “De Parasiet op het romeinsche Tooneel,” *Neophilologus* 32 (1948) 127ff; and Webster, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1). Cf. also J. O. Lofberg, *CP* 15 (1920) 61ff (on the Phormio type of parasite; with a postscript in *CW* 22 [1928–9] 183ff); and V. Ehrenberg, *The People of Aristophanes* (Oxford 1951) 242 (on fifth-century parasites). In the course of this paper works listed here will be referred to by name of author alone.

³ *κόλαξ* (in the more general sense of ‘flatterer’) was in common Athenian use from at least the last quarter of the fifth century B.C. onwards (it appears in Aristophanes, *Eupolis*, *Crates* fr.212 Kock; see *LSJ* and Ribbeck, 1ff). *παράσιτος* was apparently confined in the fifth and early fourth centuries to its ritual sense; its secondary, more general sense of ‘parasite’ did not develop until ca. 360–50 (see below). This lexical history is clearly reflected in a pontification by Phrynichus (*Ecl.* 114, p.139 Lobeck, p.214 Rutherford), *παράσιτους οὐκ ἔλεγον οἱ ἀρχαῖοι ἐπ’ ὀνειδούς, ὡς νῦν, ἀλλὰ κόλακας*. The relationship between the corresponding verbs *κολακεύω* and *παρασιτέω* seems to have been the same; *κολακεία*, however, did sole duty as the abstract noun throughout the classical period; the form *παρασιτία* does not occur until Lucian. Cf. D. B. Durham, *The Vocabulary of Menander* (Diss. Princeton 1913) 85; and Starkie's note on *Ar. Vesp.* 45.

taining chapter (6.234C–262A). One sentence of that chapter runs as follows (6.235E): τὸν δὲ νῦν λεγόμενον παράσιτον Καρύστιος ὁ Περγαμνὸς ἐν τῷ περὶ διδασκαλιῶν εὔρεθῆναί φησιν ὑπὸ πρώτου Ἀλέξιδος, ἐκλαθόμενος ὅτι Ἐπίχαρμος ἐν Ἐλπίδι ἢ Πλούτῳ παρὰ πότον αὐτὸν εἰσήγαγεν οὕτωςι λέγων . . . As Athenaeus here demonstrates, Carystius' statement, if taken at its face value, is inaccurate.⁴ Alexis did not invent the parasitic genre. The first person to put a parasite on the comic stage, so far as we and Athenaeus know, was the Sicilian Epicharmus. It has been suggested that Epicharmus modelled his character on some figure in the later epic cycle.⁵ A more likely source of inspiration was contemporary life; Epicharmus was writing at the time of the lavish tyranny in Syracuse in the first half of the fifth century, where and when opportunities for real-life *κολακεία* were rife.⁶ And even in Athens Alexis was not without predecessors. Athenaeus (6.236E) quotes from Eupolis' *Kolakes*, produced in 421 B.C., a fragment of the parabasis (fr.159 Kock) in which the chorus describe their ways; and their ways are typical of comic parasites of all periods. Again, Paphlagon-Kleon in Aristophanes' *Knights* reveals many traits of character notoriously parasitic.⁷ Admittedly these fifth-century parasites referred to themselves as *κόλακες* and not as *παράσιτοι*. Admittedly we can find no trace of the stock figure in fifth-century Athens drawn as a generalised individual portrait as opposed to a fantasy chorus on the one hand or to a political caricature on the other. The seeds, however, from which the fourth-century character could germinate were already planted.

If Alexis did not invent the parasite, he did not invent the word *παράσιτος* either. This word has a history going well back into the fifth century at least: not, it is true, in the general sense of 'parasite', but in a technical sense belonging to the sphere of religious ritual. In this older, ritualistic use the *παράσιτος* was a temple acolyte who received free food and meals in return for services like that of the selec-

⁴ On Carystius see Jacoby in *RE* 10 (1919) 2254–55 s.v. ΚΑΡΥΣΤΙΟΣ. He was active in the last quarter of the second century B.C. His work was probably based on Aristotle's didascalical lists, but adorned with "literary-historical" discussions (so Jacoby).

⁵ So Giese, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 5ff.

⁶ So E. Wüst, "Epicharmus und die alte attische Komödie," *RhM* 93 (1950) 359ff.

⁷ So Ribbeck, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 10f. G. Süß, *De personarum antiquae comoediae Atticae usu atque origine* (Diss. Giessen 1905) 48ff, and Giese, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 11, note that Paphlagon-Kleon's *κολακεία* has some points in common with Theophrastus' description of his *κόλαξ*; cf. Ribbeck, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 54 n.2, 57 n.10.

tion of the sacred grain for use in particular festivals. We hear of such παράσιτοι in the shrine of Heracles at Cynosarges in Attica and elsewhere in Greece. A suitable translation of παράσιτος in this application is 'companion of the holy feast', as Polemon suggests in the long fragment which is our main source of information about the subject, quoted by Athenaeus (6.234Dff).⁸

Did Alexis invent anything at all that is relevant to this discussion? If the words of Carystius have any element of garbled truth, we must interpret them by assuming that Alexis was the first comic poet to transfer the word παράσιτος from its cloistered world of religious ritual to its later, more general sense of 'parasite'. There is some evidence to suggest that, if we do make this assumption, we are at last on the right track. First, however, two ostensible obstacles to our assumption must be removed. One, an ancient statement which conflicts directly with the assumption of Alexis' priority, comes from two grammarians: Pollux (6.35), saying ἐπὶ μέντοι τοῦ παρασιτεῖν, κατὰ λιχνείαν ἢ κολακείαν πρῶτος Ἐπίχαρμος τὸν παράσιτον ὠνόμασεν, εἶτα Ἀλεξίς; and the Towneley scholiast on *Iliad* 17.577, saying τὸ δὲ ὄνομα τοῦ παρασίτου εἴρηται ἐν Ἐλπίδι παρ' Ἐπιχάρμῳ. Epicharmus' *Elpis* or *Ploutos* was the play in which his parasite appeared, but these two allegations that Epicharmus used the term παράσιτος presumably as a designation of that parasite must be dismissed as a careless and false inference by Pollux and the scholiast. So judicious scholars⁹ have recognised ever since Isaac Casaubon wrote in his *Animaduersiones in Athenaeum* (col.417), "Ego non dubito lapsum Pollucem incogitantia et ἀπροσεξία: quod ei facillimum fuit, Epicharmi et Alexidis uersus de quibus quaeritur, ob oculos non habenti. Athenaeus uero qui potuit, cum locum integrum Siculi poetae describeret? Falsum igitur est quod ait Pollux . . . Lege uersiculos Epicharmi: nusquam in iis nomen παράσιτος; at res eo nomine significata graphice ibi describitur; hoc uoluit Athenaeus cum ait de Epicharmo, τὸν παράσιτον παρὰ πότον εἰσήγαγεν. Ipsum quidem nomen et Epicharmo fuit incognitum, et iis qui proxime illum sunt insecuti." The arguments of Casaubon are conclusive enough. A question may be added to them as a corollary. If the assertion of Pollux and the scholiast were true, why does Athenaeus take such care to

⁸ On such priestly parasites see Ribbeck, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 18ff, and L. Ziehen, *RE s.v. Παράσιτοι* (*supra* n.2).

⁹ E.g. Meineke, *FCG* I.377; Wilamowitz in Kaibel, *CGF* I.97 (on fr.36).

avoid saying precisely that Epicharmus used the word *παράσιτος*? It is wise to conclude that Pollux and the scholiast were summarising inaccurately substantially the same material that Athenaeus quotes at full length. Certainly, everything else that Pollux records about parasites can be found at greater length in Athenaeus. And it is notable that the statements of Pollux and the scholiast are not supported by any citation.

The second obstacle to our previously mentioned assumption about Alexis' priority occurs in Athenaeus' own chapter about parasites. At 6.237A he says, *τοῦ δὲ ὀνόματος τοῦ παρασίτου μνημονεύει Ἀραρῶς ἐν Ὑμεναίῳ διὰ τούτων* (fr.16 Kock):

*οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅπως οὐκ εἶ παράσιτος, φίλτατε·
ὁ δ' Ἰσχόμαχος ὀδὶ τρέφων σε τυγχάνει.*

Directly before this lemma and fragment there appears in Athenaeus the quotation from Eupolis' *Kolakes* in which the chorus of *κόλακες* describe their characteristics (fr.159 Kock), and which Athenaeus has cited as evidence for his statement that fifth-century parasites were called *κόλακες*, not *παράσιτοι*. This juxtaposition of lemmata led Casaubon and his successors¹⁰ to the belief that Araros, according to Athenaeus, was the first comic poet to use the word *παράσιτος* in its new sense. But Athenaeus does not say precisely that; he says simply that Araros used the word, in a play that cannot now be dated. Athenaeus' statement about Araros, therefore, cannot fitly be used as an argument for Araros' alleged priority over Alexis in the new use of *παράσιτος*. Although Araros may have begun producing plays at least a quarter of a century before Alexis,¹¹ he was still writing and producing them at the time when Alexis produced his own play entitled *Parasitos* (about which we shall have more to say in a moment). Of that we can be sure. In the *Parasitos* Alexis (fr.179 Kock) refers to a well that was *ψυχρότερον Ἀραρότος*; this withering remark implies that Araros' comedies were still being produced in competition against Alexis' own. On the basis of this evidence, therefore, it is quite possible that the play from which Athenaeus quotes Araros' use of the word *παράσιτος* was written later than Alexis' *Parasitos*; that possibil-

¹⁰ E.g. Meineke, *loc.cit.*

¹¹ Araros may have produced a comedy (of Aristophanes'?) in 388-7 B.C. (cf. A. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens* [Oxford 1953] 109); he certainly produced his father's *Kokalos* and *Aiolosikon* soon after 388 (cf. the hypothesis to Ar. *Plut.*). The *Suda* gives the 101st Olympiad as the date of Araros' first production (of one of his own plays?).

ity will be transformed into near certainty when the remaining pieces of evidence are inserted into the puzzle. And with the priority of Alexis then established, it will occasion no surprise to observe the way in which the word *παράσιτος* is employed in the quoted fragment of Araros—a way which suggests that its new general use was already well established in colloquial speech.

If Alexis was the first comic writer to use *παράσιτος* in its later sense, Carystius' statement becomes intelligible as a slightly garbled version of the true fact. We may now advance a little further, on two fronts. First, Carystius' statement appeared in a work entitled *Περὶ διδασκαλιῶν*. Carystius' subject, therefore, was the information to be gleaned from didascalical records.¹² It would be concerned to some considerable extent with the recorded titles of plays. It seems reasonable to suppose from this that Carystius' words have a further implication—that Alexis' *Parasitos* was the first play to be produced with that title,¹³ antedating other homonymous plays, including one by Antiphanes.¹⁴ What then was the date of Alexis' *Parasitos*? We cannot be sure. Alexis' first plays seem to date from shortly after 360 B.C.¹⁵ His *Parasitos*, as we have seen, contained an allusion to Araros' continuing dramatic activity. Although the date of Araros' death is unknown, it is unlikely that his dramatic activity went on into the second half of the fourth century.¹⁶ Webster's suggested dating of Alexis' *Parasitos* to ca. 360–50 B.C. is thus hardly contestable. Partial confirmation of it is given by a further fragment (fr. 180 Kock) extant from the play which refers to Plato in terms implying that the philosopher was still alive.

We may now move to our second point of advance, by examining the opening lines of the main surviving fragment (fr. 178 Kock) of Alexis' *Parasitos*. They run as follows:

καλοῦσι δ' αὐτὸν πάντες οἱ νεώτεροι
Παράσιτον ὑποκόρισμα.

¹² Cf. n.4.

¹³ Cf. Kock, *CAF* II.363f, and Kaibel, *RE* 1 (1894) 1470 s.v. ALEXIS 9. It would be foolish to reject Carystius' statement (as Athenaeus does) as a contemptibly careless error. To judge from Carystius' other remarks (cf. Jacoby, *op.cit.* [*supra* n.4]), he must have studied the didascalical records with some care.

¹⁴ So first Meineke, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.9).

¹⁵ See the present writer's summary of the facts in *RhM* 102 (1959) 256 n.11.

¹⁶ Cf. Webster, *CQ* n.s.2 (1952) 17f (the date of Alexis' *Parasitos*), 23 (Araros' bottom date).

Leo¹⁷ was, I believe, the first to realise that these verses contained a formula of introduction which is repeated elsewhere in Graeco-Roman comedy. This same formula recurs in the opening words of two Plautine parasites: in *Menaechmi* 77,

Iuuentus nomen fecit Peniculo mihi,

and in *Captiui* 69,

*Iuuentus nomen indidit Scorto mihi.*¹⁸

The fragments of Greek comedy reveal two further parallels. These come from Antiphanes' *Progonoi* (fr.195 Kock, vv.10–11):

καὶ καλοῦσί μ' οἱ νεώτεροι
διὰ ταῦτα πάντα Σκηπτόν,

and from Anaxippus' *Keraunos* (fr.3 Kock):

ὄρω γὰρ ἐκ παλαιίστρας τῶν φίλων
προσιόντα μοι Δάμππον.—ἦ τοῦτον λέγεις
†τὸν πέτρινον; τοῦτον† οἱ φίλοι καλοῦσί σοι
νυνὶ δι' ἀνδρείαν Κεραυνόν.

All these passages use an identical formula for introducing a parasite to the audience by his nickname. For all we know, this formula may have been as standardised for the purpose as certain other dramatic formulae were, like those employed in satyr plays and in new comedy for the introduction of their respective choruses. The inventor of the parasite formula may or may not have been Alexis. The passage quoted here from his *Parasitos* is, however, one of the two earliest of the five parallel quotations. The fragment of Antiphanes may perhaps have antedated that of Alexis, but there is simply no means of dating the play from which the Antiphanes fragment is derived, nor even for deciding whether its author was the elder of the two Antiphanes who produced comedies.

¹⁷ F. Leo, *Plautinische Forschungen zur Kritik and Geschichte der Komödie*³ (Berlin 1912) 106. Cf. Brinkhoff, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 131.

¹⁸ The similarity between the two Plautine passages led nineteenth-century scholarship, immersed as it was in its theories of post-Plautine *retractatio*, to feel that one of these two 'Plautine' instances of this formula was rather the work of a post-Plautine *remanieur* (e.g. P. E. Sonnenburg, *De Menaechmis Plautina retractata libellus* [Diss. Bonn 1882] 2; Ribbeck, *RhM* 37 [1882] 532). It is in fact far more likely that both these passages come from the hand of Plautus and were adapted from Greek models which contained the parasite's introduction formula in words basically similar to those of the Antiphanes fragment here quoted. Cf. especially Leo, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.17) 106; K. Abel, *Die Plautusprologe* (Diss. Frankfurt 1955) 53f.

In all these passages—and this is the crucial point—the audience is told the parasite’s nickname, which had been given to him by the group of young men with whom he had been associating. Sometimes the parasite reveals this information himself; sometimes the informant is another person talking about the parasite. But in each case the nickname is one that by a vivid image illustrates an aspect of the parasite’s character, such as his voracity. What Alexis did was to take the stock character, which at that time was still known as the κόλαξ, and to trick him out with the newfangled nickname Παράσιτος, a *nomen proprium* here to be spelled with an initial capital for modern readers, as Kaibel first saw.¹⁹ Other comic poets used metaphors like ‘Sponge’ and ‘Thunderbolt’ to symbolise their parasites’ voracity; Alexis with greater felicity chose his parasite’s metaphorical nickname from the world of religious ritual. Up to the moment when Alexis produced his *Parasitos*, we may be sure, the term παράσιτος was still reserved for the priestly dignitary who received free meals in the sanctuary of his god or hero. Alexis’ originality lay in decking out his parasite with a nickname that evoked for his audience a picture of priestly gormandisers, and especially doubtless those at Cynosarges in the service of Heracles, the archetypal glutton and patron of comic parasites.²⁰ And we may guess that what began as a colourful nickname for one stage parasite so impressed the audience by its aptness that they began to use it themselves as the *mot juste* for the type as a whole. Certainly already by the middle of the fourth century there are signs that the word παράσιτος was now in normal use in its later, more general sense.

This study is dedicated to a modest end, a minor but attractive detail in the history of Greek comedy. If a small addition to our knowledge is thereby achieved, it will have been achieved by the one means possible, given the very limited and fragmentary material that the historian of mid-fourth-century comedy has at his disposal. That means is the careful study of the comic fragments of the period. As K. J. Dover has written,²¹ “The attempt to trace through the frag-

¹⁹ In his edition of Athenaeus, *ad loc.* (10.421D). The nickname gives the play its title, as does that of the similarly introduced parasite in Anaxippus’ *Keraunos*.

²⁰ Hence the words of the parasite in Plaut. *Curc.* 358 when he relates the story of his gambling adventure, *inuoco aliam meam nutricem Herculem*.

²¹ See p.118 of Dover’s incisive, stimulating chapter in *Fifty Years of Classical Scholarship*, ed. Platnauer¹ (Oxford 1954).

ments of the fourth-century comic poets the development of elements common to Old and New Comedy and the origins of elements characteristic of New Comedy constitutes the true study of Middle Comedy."²²

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²² This paper is an expanded and revised version of some work-notes that have engaged my attention sporadically for several years. Cf. *BICS* 6 (1959) 78f.