

ANCIENT COMEDY: TESTIMONY OF SOURCES

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In his treatise *Poetics* Aristotle says:

Αἱ μὲν οὖν τῆς τραγωδίας μεταβάσεις καὶ δι-
ῶν ἐγένοντο οὐ λελήθασιν, ἡ δὲ κωμῳδία διὰ
τὸ μὴ σπουδάζεσθαι ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔλαθεν. (Aris-
totelis *Ars poetica* 1449a 38–39).

Now, tragedy's stages of development, and those responsible for them, have been remembered, but the comedy's early history was forgotten because no serious interest was taken in it.

Aristotle is right – in antiquity comedy was not an object of theoretical reflection. Thus but meager information from antiquity on the theory of comedy is available – sporadic, non-systemized statements in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Still there is some evidence that there may have been more material on comedy in the *Poetics* than we find in the surviving text.

The foremost source of this information is Aristotle himself. As to the *Poetics*, the first sentence of the text says:

Περὶ ποιητικῆς αὐτῆς τε καὶ τῶν εἰδῶν αὐτῆς,
ἦν τινα δύναμιν ἕκαστον ἔχει ... λέγωμεν ...
(Aristotelis *Ars poetica* 1447a).

We are to discuss both poetry in general and the capacity of each of its genres ...

Such discussion in the *Poetics* is missing. The text deals solely with tragedy. The few comments on comedy as well as on epic poetry and historiography are given

in the context of tragedy analysis as points of comparison that help to illuminate the superior qualities of tragedy¹.

On the other hand, two of Aristotle's statements in the *Rhetoric* indicate discussion of comedy in the *Poetics*:

διώρισται δὲ περὶ γελοίων χωρὶς ἐν τοῖς περὶ
ποιητικῆς (Aristotelis *Ars rhetorica* 1372a1)
(*The ridiculous has been discussed separately in the Poetics*)

and

εἴρηται πόσα εἶδη γελοίων ἔστιν ἐν τοῖς περὶ
ποιητικῆς (Aristotelis *Ars rhetorica* 1419b) (*We have stated in the Poetics how many kinds of jests there are*).

Modern classical scholarship generally accepts the fact that there was a second book of the *Poetics* which dealt with the theory of comedy², although some doubt is occasionally expressed³.

¹ G. M. A. Grube, *The Greek and Roman Critics*, Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995, 73 (hereinafter referred to as "Grube 1995"); S. Halliwell, "Aristotle's *Poetics*", in: *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Volume I: Classical Criticism, Cambridge: CUP, 1997, 179 (hereinafter referred to as "Halliwell 1997").

² Halliwell 1997, 179; S. Halliwell, "Introduction", in: *Aristotle Poetics*. Aristotle XXIII, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 11; G. A. Kennedy, *Aristotle on Rhetoric. A Theory of Civic Discourse*, New York & Oxford: OUP, 2007, n. 214, 92; n 215 (hereinafter referred to as "Kennedy 2007"), 248; J. de Romilly, *A Short History of Greek Literature*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1985, 163.

³ Grube 1995, 141.

The available information on the ancient theory of comedy is so insufficient that any text that could expand knowledge in this area merits consideration. This is the case with the treatise *Tractatus Coislinianus*, the only complete surviving Greek text on comedy. Still scholarly evaluation of this material for several reasons is guarded⁴.

First, *Tractatus Coislinianus* has survived in one 10th century manuscript. Its authorship and date of composition are not known. As the manuscript contains also some other texts – fragments of Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics* and of the 3rd century Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry’s *Introduction to Categories* (often considered to be a commentary on Aristotle’s *Categories*) and several 6th century commentaries to Porphyry’s texts, tentative attempts have been made to date the *Tractatus* with the 6th century. Still, what is more important – a number of characteristics of the treatise, foremost terminology and in some cases also contents, point to its link with antiquity in general and Aristotle in particular.

Secondly, the narrative qualities of *Tractatus Coislinianus* are more characteristic of a remodeled text than of an original one. The treatise deals with three wide subject areas – the system of poetic genres, characterization of comedy and sources of laughter. The material is presented inconsequentially without logical structure.

⁴ S. Halliwell (Halliwell 1997, 181) and G. M. A. Grube (Grube 1995, 142, 149) consider *Tractatus Coislinianus* to be an unsuccessful attempt to apply Aristotle’s theory of tragedy to comedy. R. Janko in his *Aristotle on Comedy. Towards a Reconstruction of Poetics II* (London: Duckworth, 2002, 100–104 (hereinafter “Janko 2002”)) thinks *Tractatus Coislinianus* to be a major source for the reconstruction of the ancient theory of comedy and the second book of Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

This feature of the text could be the result of compilation. The manner of narration – abrupt statements and enumerations without further explanation and the size of the text – less than a thousand words (for comparison – Aristotle’s *Poetics* is about 10 000 words) – remind of a synopsis.

Ever since the first publication of *Tractatus Coislinianus* in 1839, classical scholarship has discussed the possibility of using the *Tractatus* for reconstruction of the ancient theory of comedy. John Anthony Cramer, the first publisher of the treatise, was fairly optimistic in regard to reconstruction of Aristotelian theory of laughter with the help of *Tractatus Coislinianus*⁵. His idea was that the author of *Tractatus Coislinianus* had made use of a more complete text of Aristotle’s *Poetics* than the one available to us, thus the analysis of the sources of laughter which has not survived in the existing variant of the *Poetics*, is of special importance. This view is firmly upheld by the classicist Richard Janko in his “hypothetical reconstruction” of the second book of Aristotle’s *Poetics* on the basis of the *Tractatus* information, supplemented by Aristotle’s statements on comedy in the *Poetics* in conjunction with the information of Aristotelian scholia⁶.

Shortly after *Tractatus Coislinianus* was first published, classicist Jacob Bernays expressed a more cautious point. His idea was that the author of the *Tractatus* had

⁵ J. A. Cramer, *Anecdota Graeca e codd. Manuscriptis Bibliothecae Rehaie Parisiensis*, Oxford, 1839–41, repr. Hildesheim, 1967.

⁶ Janko, 2002, Another eminent, but less convincing example is L. Cooper who in his *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy* (New York, 1922) practically rewrites *Poetics*, applying Aristotelian analysis to comedy.

made use of the Aristotelian theory of the sources of laughter, and this material had been a part of the original *Poetics*. Bernays considered the rest of the *Tractatus* to be a compilation of several Aristotelian texts and as such – useful for general studies of Aristotle’s views⁷.

Modern classical scholarship in regard to *Tractatus Coislinianus* has shifted the focus of study. The idea that the author of the *Tractatus* has mechanically and without much understanding compiled several sources, including Aristotle’s *Poetics*, is generally accepted. The *Tractatus* is just an indirect source of information which echoes the ideas of the ancient theory of comedy.

Thus although Aristotle’s *Poetics* is the major for the study of ancient theory of comedy, it should be pointed out that the primary objective of this text is the analysis of tragedy and discussion of comedy highlights only some aspects of comedy. They are: *first*, the specifics of comedy characters and, *secondly*, the nature of laughter in comedy.

In Aristotle’s view, author’s choice of the poetic object has been the keystone for branching of poetry into tragedy and comedy. Thus the dichotomy of tragedy and comedy rises from the characters of the genre:

Ἐν αὐτῇ δὲ τῇ διαφορᾷ καὶ ἡ τραγωδία πρὸς τὴν κωμωδίαν διέστηκεν· ἡ μὲν γὰρ χείρους ἢ δὲ βελτίους μμεισθαι βούλεται τῶν νῦν (Aristotelis *Ars poetica* 1448a 17).

This very distinction separates tragedy from comedy: the latter tends to represent people inferior, the former superior, to existing humans.

⁷ J. Bernays, “Ergänzung zu Aristoteles’ Poetik”, *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*. VIII (1853), 561–596.

Aristotle gives a more detailed characterization of comedy characters:

Ἡ δὲ κωμωδία ἐστὶν ὡσπερ εἶπομεν μίμησις φαυλοτέρων μὲν, οὐ μέντοι κατὰ πᾶσαν κακίαν, ἀλλὰ τοῦ αἰσχροῦ ἐστὶ τὸ γελοῖον μόριον. Τὸ γὰρ γελοῖον ἐστὶν ἀμάρτημά τι καὶ αἰσχος ἀνώδυνον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν, οἷον εὐθύς τὸ γελοῖον πρόσωπον αἰσχροῦν τι καὶ διεστραμμένον ἄνευ ὀδύνης (Aristotelis *Ars Poetica*. 1449a 31–36).

Comedy, as we said, is an imitation of baser (φαυλοτέρων), but not wholly vicious characters (κατὰ πᾶσαν κακίαν), rather, the laughable (τὸ γελοῖον) is one category of the shameful (τοῦ αἰσχροῦ). For the laughable comprises any fault (ἀμάρτημά) or mark of shame (αἰσχος) which involves no pain or destruction: most obviously, the laughable mask is something ugly and twisted, but not painfully.

Aristotle’s statement that comic characters carry a fault or mark of shame does not make it clear what kind of αἰσχροῦν he has in mind. It is evident that any mention of the specifics of other literary genres in the *Poetics* serves the purpose of providing comparison with tragedy. Comic characters are antipodes to tragic characters. If so, characterization of comic characters as “inferior” includes aesthetic evaluation.

In the discussion of comic laughter Aristotle distinguishes two types of laughter – iambic laughter and comic laughter. The difference lies in the nature of these two types of laughter. Iambic laughter is invective (ψόγος), and it is directed at a particular individual:

... οἱ δὲ εὐτελέστεροι τὰς τῶν φαύλων, πρῶτον ψόγους ποιοῦντες ... (Aristotelis *Ars poetica*. 1448b 26–27)

... the more vulgar [creators of characters] depicted the actions of the base, in the first place by composing invectives ...

Comic laughter (τὸ γελοῖον), on the other hand, is directed not at individuals, but at generalia:

Ἐπὶ μὲν οὖν τῆς κωμωδίας ἤδη τοῦτο δῆλον γέγονεν· συστήσαντες γὰρ τὸν μῦθον ... οὐχ ὥσπερ οἱ ἰαμβοποιοὶ περὶ τὸν καθ' ἕκαστον ποιούσιν (Aristotelis *Ars poetica*. 1451b 11–14).

In comedy, this point has by now become obvious: the poets ... do not, like iambic poets, write about a particular person.

Due to the social activity and topicality of ancient Greek comedy, the Aristotelian term to “the laughable” (τὸ γελοῖον) can be equated to the modern term “the comic”⁸. Any shortcoming, fault and ugliness may be the carrier of comic laughter, on the condition that this phenomenon is socially significant. In this connection Aristotle’s views on the history of development of comedy are of interest. In his opinion, invective, iambic poetry, comic poem *Margites*, phallic rituals, Sicilian and Attic comedy have all contributed to the development of comedy. Aristotle sees this process as movement from individual invective to exposure of general faults, i.e., to socially acceptable and ethical laughter⁹.

In comparison with the *Poetics*, the author of *Tractatus Coislinianus* deals with a wider scope of comedy related issues. Division of laughter into laughter arising from language (ὁ γέλως ἀπὸ τῆς λέξεως) and laughter arising from actions (ὁ γέλως ἀπὸ τῶν πραγμάτων) is of special interest. This material, when supplemented with the relevant information provides by the ancient authors (Demetrii *Περὶ ἑρμηνείας*

136 ff.; *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 1.6.10; Ciceronis *De oratore* 2.239 ff; Quintiliani *Institutio oratoria* 6.3.35 ff; Hermogenis *Περὶ μεθόδου δεινότητος* 34, 2.453 ff.), helps to form a more complete picture of the ancient understanding of the sources of laughter.

Other subject areas touched upon in *Tractatus Coislinianus* are the place of comedy in the system of poetic genres and characterization of comedy.

The author of *Tractatus Coislinianus* divides poetry into the mimetic (ἡ μιμητικὴ τῆς ποιήσεως *Tractatus Coislinianus*. 2) and the non-mimetic branch (ἡ ἀμίμητος τῆς ποιήσεως *Tractatus Coislinianus*.1). Comedy together with tragedy, mime and satyr plays represent the mimetic branch and precisely – the dramatic and action representing sub-branch (τὸ δραματικὸν καὶ πράκτικον *Tractatus Coislinianus*.2). Chronologically inconsistent with Aristotle is the division of comedy into the old, middle and new comedy (*Tractatus Coislinianus*.18).

Characterization of comedy constitutes the most extensive part of *Tractatus Coislinianus*. The author of the *Tractatus* has obviously used Aristotle’s *Poetics* for his model. His method of work with the Aristotelian text goes in two directions: *first*, he borrows from the *Poetics* the scarce information on comedy and *secondly*, he takes over from the *Poetics* the framework of tragedy analysis and applies it to comedy, in some cases with minor adjustments.

Thus *Tractatus Coislinianus* echoes Aristotle’s *Poetics* when it says that the comic jester (σκώπτων *Tractatus Coislinianus*. 8) strives to expose the faults of soul

⁸ O. Lāms, “Marks Tullijis Cicerons – komisma teorētiskis”, in: *Antiquitas viva. Studia classica*, LU ZR 645 sējums. Rīga: LU, 136.

⁹ Halliwell, 1997, 181.

and body (ἀμαρτήματα τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ τοῦ σώματος *Tractatus Coislinianus*.8). Just like the *Poetics*, the *Tractatus* points out the difference between invective (λοιδορία) and comedy (*Tractatus Coislinianus*. 7). Still the explanation of this difference does not sound Aristotelian. For the author of *Tractatus Coislinianus* the difference stems from the manner of laughter. Laughter in invective is direct and open (ἀπαρακαλύπτως τὰ προσόντα κακὰ διέξεισιν *Tractatus Coislinianus*.7), but comic laughter just gives hints at faults (δεῖται τῆς καλουμένης ἐμφάσεως *Tractatus Coislinianus*. 7).

Application of tragedy characterization framework to comedy in some cases works quite well. Division of comedy into constituent elements (εἶδη *Tractatus Coislinianus*.10) and parts (μέρη *Tractatus Coislinianus*.17) echoes the *Poetics*. The constituent elements of comedy like those of tragedy are plot (μῦθος), character (ἦθος), thought (διάνοια), diction (λέξις), song (μέλος), spectacle (ὄψις). The author of the *Tractatus* is less successful with the parts of comedy, as they are different in tragedy and comedy. Thus the author of the *Tractatus* names prologue, choral element, episodes and exodus, which are inherent in tragedy, but makes no mention of such important comedy parts as παράβασις and ἀγών.

In a few cases the author of *Tractatus Coislinianus* makes modest statements on comedy which are constructed from analogy with the relevant Aristotelian conclusions on tragedy. The statement that the language of comedy is common (κοινή) and popular (δημώδης) is derived from

Aristotelian idea that comic characters are more ordinary than tragic characters. Similarly, the statements that comic plot is structured around laughable actions and that comic characters are buffoons, ironical men and boasters can be traced back to Aristotelian conclusions regarding the relevant aspects of tragedy.

Still the method of mechanical or slightly adjusted transfer of Aristotelian ideas on tragedy to the sphere of comedy oftentimes fails the author. Definition of comedy in the *Tractatus* is such a case. Without the Aristotelian definition of tragedy it is impossible to understand what the author of *Tractatus Coislinianus* is trying to say. Only some disjointed ideas can be deciphered, namely, that comedy is an imitation of a laughable action, that comedy has parts, that comedy has action, that it achieves catharsis of emotions through pleasure and laughter. The same relates to the statement that plot, diction and song can be found in all comedies, but thought, characters and spectacle – in some. Another striking example of the mechanical transfer method applied by the author of the *Tractate* is his comment on comic thought. The author of the *Tractatus* states that comic thought is of two kinds – opinion (γνώμη) and proof (πίστεις). Proof is subdivided into oaths, agreements, testimonies, ordeals, laws. Obviously the author, relying on the *Poetics* (1456a 34) to look for means of expressing thought in the *Rhetoric*, mechanically borrows this material without much consideration whether it can be applied to the subject under discussion or not.

The conclusion is that *Tractatus Coislinianus* as a source material for the study

of the ancient theory of comedy is of little importance. It provides almost no information that is not borrowed from the *Poetics*. In the few cases it does, the author has, with more or less success, remodeled Ar-

istotelian ideas on tragedy. Therefore Aristotle's *Poetics*, meager in regard to comedy as it is, still remains the major source material for the study of the ancient theory of comedy.

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ANTIĶINĒ KOMEDIJA: ŠALTINIŲ LIUDIJIMAI

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S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami pagrindiniai išlikę antikinių šaltinių liudijimai apie komedijos žanrinę specifiką – Aristotelio *Poetika* ir *Retorika* bei vienintelis išlikęs komedijai skirtas kūrinys, vadinamasis *Tractatus Coislinianus*. Autorė išvadose teigia, kad *Tractatus Coislinianus* negali būti laikomas savarankišku ir

reikšmingu informacijos apie komediją šaltiniu, nes jo autorius komedijos žanrą aprašo remdamasis Aristotelio tragedijos teorija. Visa neišlikusi Aristotelio *Poetika* vis dėlto yra pagrindinis, nors ir labai skurdus (dėl neišlikusios komedijai skirtos dalies) informacijos apie antikinės komedijos žanrą šaltinis.

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