THE PLUTUS OF ARISTOPHANES

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The last two extant plays of Aristophanes, the Ecclesiazusae, produced in 392 BC, and the Plutus, produced in 388 BC, belong to the transitional period between Old and New Comedy. This view is based on the differences (external and internal) existing between these two plays and those written during the Peloponnesian War (431–404). The most important differences are (1) the omission of the parabasis, (2) the diminishing role of the chorus, (3) the modified structure of the agon, and (4) the movement away from political satire to social comedy, concentrating more on universal themes without any local colour. Although certain features typical of Old Comedy still persist, for instance (1) the technique of stating the problem and its proposed solution in the first part of the play, and looking at the effects or results of the remedial action in the second part, and (2) the continuation of themes concerning education, economy, and religion, these differences from Old Comedy have been criticised as constituting a decline or degeneration, especially as regards the vis comica. This negative criticism can be traced back to Wilamowitz who, in his edition of the Lysistrate, expressed the following judgement on the Ecclesiazusae: “Nun überschauen wir das Drama und der erste Eindruck wird sein, dass die alte Komödie zerfallen ist”. In spite of statements like those of Rogers (“But I am not one of those who can trace some decay in the wit and vigour of the poet himself”) and Webster (“I can see no sign of tiredness or age or failing powers”), the trend to discredit these last two plays has continued. But the ancient popularity of these plays, especially that of the Plutus, which was the most widely read of all the poet’s plays, has been justified in recent years by the studies of Albini, Flashar, and Maurach.

Following the suggestion of Newiger that Aristophanes has used irony as comical medium in his last plays, Flashar showed that the motif of irony of action, characters and events forms the real basis for an understanding of these plays: “Die Hauptgestalten und -aktionen sind von vornherein in ironischem Zwielicht angelegt, von dem die Entfaltung der Handlung durchgängig bestimmt ist”. This basic motif was characterized by Maurach as “demaskierende Charakterisierung”. To refute the view that the absence of certain features of Old Comedy implies a decay, Flashar and Maurach have shown that it was necessary to omit some of these features since they would have arrested the development of this comic motif of irony or exposure. It is in support of this new approach to the last plays of Aristophanes that I have undertaken this article on the meaning of the Plutus as a whole; but I shall suggest the motif to be one of Illusion versus Reality, as alternative to that of irony (Flashar) or unmasking characterization (Maurach).

In line with Old Comedy, as indicated above, we find in the Plutus the
technique of stating the problem in the first part, and presenting the 'solution' in the second part of the play. In the first part of the Plutus (1–770) the problem is formulated by Chremylus as follows: he is δίκαιος and δεσδεβής, yet poor, while the rich are πονηροί. Faced with this 'injustice' he went to the Delphic oracle to inquire of the god whether he should not therefore educate his son to be a bad man, thus ensuring that he would become rich. But Apollo merely advised him to take home with him the first man he would meet on leaving the temple. This happened to be a blind old man, who in the end very reluctantly revealed himself as Plutus, the god of wealth, blinded by Zeus so that he might no longer be able to distinguish good men from bad and thus reward only the good men. Indignant at this injustice committed by Zeus, Chremylus now puts into action his utopian plan, which he judges to be a perfect solution to the problem (489, 505/6). This utopian plan is nothing less than the reversal of the existing order: the poor should become rich, and the rich poor. To achieve this goal Plutus must be taken to the temple of Asclepius to have his eyesight restored by the god. With his sight restored he would be able to recognize the good and just men, i.e. the poor, and enrich them. But in the course of the first part of the play Chremylus expands his plan: not only the poor must become rich, but everyone! And lest the enriched 'poor' become evil again, Plutus will make everyone not only wealthy, but also good and god-fearing (496/7).

The aim of this paper is to show that the realisation of this plan will prove to be a mere illusion.

I have stated above that the results of a plan put into action in the first part of a play are set out in the second part. But it is also true, and this I hope to prove, that already in the first part there are clear indications anticipating the revelation in the second part of this plan as an illusion:

(a) In lines 107–109 Plutus clearly shows that the solution put forward by Chremylus is an illusion, for experience has taught him that it will result in a vicious circle:

107 “This they (the poor) all say; but once they have laid their hands on me, and are wealthy men,
108 their evil ways know no limit”.

(b) Commenting on the reason why Zeus blinded Plutus, viz. because he is jealous of good men (87–92), Chremylus at first objects to this behaviour of Zeus since he is, according to Chremylus, honoured only by the just and the good. His objection is proved to be false by his own statement in line 134: “And they (= the good men) straight out pray Zeus for wealth”. Not out of piety do good men honour Zeus, but out of greed and avarice. The poor 'good' are not so 'good' and 'just' after all!

(c) That Chremylus acts out of greed and not piety is also confirmed by his subsequent action: in his endeavour to convince Plutus that he must regain his sight, he reveals a lack of piety toward Zeus by stating that Plutus has more power than Zeus because the latter owes his wealth to Plutus; it is for
the sake of wealth that people sacrifice to Zeus (128–147); and of all things man may have too much, but no man ever has enough of wealth (188–193). Chremylus will therefore see to it that Plutus regain his sight even at the risk of his own life (216–217); Plutus must fill his house with wealth by fair means or foul (231–233), for he loves Plutus more than his wife or son (249–251).

(d) Chremylus' avarice is shared also by the chorus of poor peasants, who represent his 'good' friends: asked for their assistance in restoring his sight to Plutus, they leave no room for any doubt concerning their motive: shall they be pushed and hustled in the Assembly for three obols, and let Wealth himself be wrested from their grasp? (328–331)

(e) And finally, when confronted in the agon (415–626) by Penia, goddess of poverty, with the dilemma contained in the warning of Plutus that those who have come to know wealth become wicked, Chremylus proceeds blindly and recklessly with his plans: The goddess confronts him with a threefold argument, viz. (i) that all human development is due to her; (ii) that there is a physical relation between poverty and wealth, and health and sickness; (iii) that there is also an ethical relation between poverty/wealth and sophrosyne/hybris. But she is nevertheless driven off the stage with these words (600): "For you shall not persuade me, even if you do convince me", implying that her arguments are in fact convincing (though they will not be heeded).

I believe that these are sufficient indications to prove that Aristophanes is already anticipating his intention of showing in the second part of the play that the realisation of Chremylus' plan is an illusion.

We now come to the second part of the play, and to indicate how Aristophanes ironically reveals everything as an illusion, it is necessary to examine the final scenes in more detail. The results of the utopian plan of Chremylus in fact prove to be an illusion on several levels of human existence:

(a) The results seen as an illusion on the level of Chremylus' personal relations (771–801): Arriving home now a rich man, he has won the admiration of all his friends. But although it was his heart's desire that his poor 'good' friends should share in his wealth, he now finds them irksome, and seems to care little for them, thus confirming the warning of Plutus that those who get hold of him become miserly:

782 “Hang you, be off! The nuisance these friends are,
783 Emerging suddenly when fortune smiles.
784 Tcha! How they nudge your ribs, and punch your shins,
785 Displaying each some token of goodwill.
786 What man addressed me not? What aged group
787 Failed to enwreathe me in the market-place?"

(b) The result seen as an illusion on the level of civil and political life (823–958): We are confronted in this scene with two characters: firstly a just man (ὁ δίκαιος), now enriched and full of gratitude: he wishes to make an
offering to the god; and secondly, an informer, a man hated by the public, serving as an example of the δίκαιος ἄνδρ: he has lost all his money, but demands a share in this new wealth, since Plutus (according to Chremylus’ plan) is supposed to enrich everyone.

But how just is this δίκαιος ἄνδρ? He is so grateful to the god that he dedicates to him his worn-out τριβότον and his old ἐμβόδια! That Aristophanes intended this to be seen as an ironical illusion, is evident from the slave Cario’s sarcastic and mocking remark: “What charming presents to the god you bring” (849).\(^{12}\)

In the case of the informer, we have this same illusion: According to Chremylus’ theory, if the poor become rich, and the rich become poor, then in the latter case the poor must again become just, and consequently become rich again. But the informer in fact refuses to mend his ways: “Not if you gave me all Battus’s silphium, aye and Wealth to boot” (924/5).\(^{13}\)

As a consequence, he is stripped and then wrapped in the old garment of the ‘just’ man, an act which again points to the illusory gratitude of the ‘just’ man, for he has just dedicated this garment to the god!

(c) The result seen as an illusion on the erotic level (959–1096): This scene has puzzled scholars for many years, as is evident from Süss: \(^{14}\) “Der Sinn dieser Szene im Rahmen des Ganzen ist schwer zu klären”, and even Flashar feels it is complicated, but justly describes it as an “Inkonsequenz” ad absurdum.\(^{15}\)

On the stage is an old lady who has lost her young lover. He was once poor and was remunerated by her for his ‘services’. In accordance with Chremylus’ plan, he has become wealthy, and now ignores her. Together with Chremylus her lover now mocks her.

May we still speak of a motif of illusion in this instance? The answer is ‘yes’:

We have here in fact no ‘good’ and ‘just’ young man who was poor and consequently became rich. A close analysis of his character reveals that:

(i) he used to blackmail her and pretended that it was love (980–988, 990, 1023–4);
(ii) he used to beat her black and blue so jealous was he if someone would cast a glance at her (1013–1016);
(iii) and he now treats her in an undignified and impolite manner (see for instance 1050–51, etc.)

This proves:

(i) that the idea that the poor are just and good, is an illusion;
(ii) that when a man becomes rich according to his plan, he does not become good and just;
(iii) that not all the injured are benefited (1025–26), as the old lady herself complains.

The irony in all this is that Chremylus is blind to this obvious illusion!
The result seen as an illusion on the level of religion (1097-1207): In the first scene we have Cario and Hermes, who has come to announce Zeus' punishment of Chremylus, since no one is now sacrificing to him. Hermes is especially concerned about himself, and implores (!) Cario to engage him, for where most he prospers, there is his fatherland! He is even prepared to be Cario's assistant as "Hermes διόκονος".

In the second scene we have Chremylus and the priest of Zeus. The latter complains because he is hungry: he no longer has food at his disposal, for no one is sacrificing to Zeus any more. When the people were poor, they sacrificed abundantly, but now they no longer need Zeus, and avoid the temples, except when they want to use them as wayside toilets! (1182-84). The priest, however, follows the example of Hermes in the previous scene, and decides to 'defect' to the new Zeus, the Saviour (= Plutus), and help Chremylus in installing Plutus as such.

The final stage has now been reached: the procession to the Acropolis. The image of the old lady with the pots on her head has often been interpreted as 'weak', or has not been properly understood, whereas in fact it serves as the climax of the theme of illusion, and represents the reversal in fortune desired by Chremylus in a negative and absurd way. The procession consists of the priest, Plutus, Chremylus and his friends; what is still needed is the kanēphorē, a girl who carries the holy objects in such a procession. In real life a girl of noble birth was chosen for this office. For Chremylus the old lady will suffice, and she will receive in payment the privilege of her former lover's services that night. (1200-1201.) She agrees and the play is closed with Chremylus' remark in lines 1204-1207:

These pots are not like other pots at all.
In other pots the γραῦς is on the top,
but here the γραῦς is underneath the pots.

We have here a pun with γραῦς, signifying "not only an old woman, but also the scum which rises to the surface of boiled vegetables, soup, milk, and other ἔλφατα". The substitution of an old woman and prostitute for a girl of standing as kanēphorē, the distasteful character of the pun involved, and the fact that there is mention here of pots instead of a pot, create a picture of absurdity. It underlines the illusion of Chremylus' plan who wanted all men to become rich, and good, and just; they have in fact become rich and wicked. Flashar's interpretation, which is otherwise excellent, seems vague at this point. He writes: "So endet das Stück, indem der Dichter nicht nur den Verlauf dieses Zusammenseins in der Schwebe lässt, sondern den Zuschauer mit einer allgemeinen Ungewissheit darüber entlässt, ob und wie sich die Ausführung des kühnen Plans einer Neuverteilung des Besitzes in der Wirklichkeit bewährt". This remark is totally irrelevant to the meaning of the play. By indicating that such a "Neuverteilung" is in fact an illusion on all levels of life, Aristophanes (if we may conclude that he is expressing his
own view by means of a play) clearly indicates that the problem stated at the beginning still remains with us, but that the reversal planned by Chremylus is an illusion, for nothing can come of it; there is in fact no relation between virtue and wealth and poverty. A similar outcome may be seen at the conclusion of the Nubes, where Strepsiades gains nothing by burning down the Think-school of Socrates for he still has no solution as regards his creditors and the broken relation with his son. Von Scheliha justly observes in this connection: "Ein moralisch befriedigendes Ende widerstrebt dem Wesen der griechischen Komödie, ihre Ironie ist feiner und versteckter und überlässt vieles den Zuhörern." 20 More apt is Albini's short commentary on the final scene: "La fine della commedia è la fine del paradosso". 21

NOTES

3. T.B.L. Webster, Studies in Later Greek Comedy, Manchester 1953, 14.
8. See Flashar, op. cit. 410, note 19.
10. See Maurach, op. cit. 2: "Beginnen die späten Stücke nicht unter eine von Anfang bis zum Ende durchgeführte Grundidee zu treten, sodass die früher durchaus berechtigten, nun aber gar zu fremd im Stücke stehenden Formen wie Parabase und Agon, zu stören schienen und darum auch weichen mussten?"
11. Translation, Rogers, op. cit. 87 ff.
12. See J.D. Denniston, The Greek Particles, Oxford 1934, 128, on ye: 'The exclamation is sometimes sarcastic in tone'; and Maurach, op. cit. 9-10, justly calls him a hypocrite.
13. Translation by Rogers, op. cit. 105.
15. Flashar, op. cit. 426, 427.
17. Rogers, op. cit. 136.
20. Von Scheliha, op. cit. 162.
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