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Παρρησία and Comedy, a Nonsense Link in the Classical Period

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Xavier Riu

1. Introduction

- ¹ The very first time I gave a lecture abroad this was in Trieste back in 1998, invited by Ezio Pellizer, about the function and place of insulting language in ancient society. The title was “Insulti, contesto ed occasione, oppure che cosa fa di un insulto un insulto?”. Since the study of *aiskhrologia*, insults and *parolacce* has always interested Ezio, in various ways, starting from his “Morfologia della poesia giambica arcaica” in 1981, for this occasion I would like to follow up on this subject, to which I have kept coming back from time to time along the years, both in relation to comedy and, more recently, to the reception of invective and the genres of invective in ancient society. One of the conclusions of my research has been that the reception of this kind of language saw a marked evolution in Greek history, and that there was in archaic and classical Greece a clear differentiation, a real dividing line between the use of the language of invective in poetry and in daily life. Now I propose to discuss another aspect of this problem, namely the difference between παρρησία and the insulting language of comedy.¹

2. Ancient and modern views of comic license

- ² The expression *comic parrhesia* is very common in the scholarly literature, and the notion that the word παρρησία in ancient Greek may denote comedy's freedom of speech is almost commonplace, both in scholarship about freedom of speech or frankness and about comedy or generally about invective.² However, the word *parrhesia* hardly occurs in the classical era in relation to comedy or even poetry. In all the extant Greek literature of the classical period, only one passage connects *parrhesia* with

comedy, Isocrates, *De pace* 14. In order to describe what to him is the unbearable state of the Athenian democracy, Isocrates says that there is no *parrhesia*, “except here in the Assembly for those who are foolish and do not care about you, or in the theater for the comic poets”. We will comment on it later, but the simple fact that this is the only occurrence of such a connection should make it suspect and justifies a re-examination of the evidence.

- 3 All the studies that somehow deal with comic *parrhesia* in fact rely either on late texts or on the connection of both comedy and *parrhesia* with insult or slander. And in the latter case it is the modern studies rather than their sources which make the connection between comedy and *parrhesia* through the use of insulting language. Take for instance the introduction to the very interesting book on free speech in antiquity by Sluiter and Rosen:³ “Since frankness may also involve a certain lack of consideration for societal niceties, it also becomes associated with an uncouth manner—this is how we find it as a form of comic *ponêria*. ‘Calling a spade a spade’ is part of the concept of *parrhêsia*.”
- 4 “Calling a spade a spade” is indeed part of the concept of *parrhesia*. However, the authors’ two sources to connect *parrhesia* with comedy do not allow such a connection. One of them ([Demetr.] *De elocutione* 229) connects it with “the outspokenness of friendship” rather than comedy. The other (Lucian’s *Quomodo hist. conscr.* 41), apart from the fact that it is very late, only says that a comic poet uses the proverb “calling a fig a fig and a trough a trough”. The proverb conveys the notion of *parrhesia*, but if Lucian intends a connection between *parrhesia* and the genre of comedy at all, this is done in a very indirect and flimsy way. Moreover, even though ‘calling a spade a spade’ is part of the concept of *parrhêsia*, it is not necessarily part of comedy. In comedy, it is perfectly at home to call a spade a cloud, a prostitute, a politician, or a bird (whatever indeed). This is so because the idiom “calling a spade a spade” means speaking bluntly, but also frankly; it conveys the notion that one says what one believes to be the truth. This is the meaning of *parrhesia*, as several studies have made clear, starting particularly from Foucault (1983). Instead, there is nothing in the ancient references to comedy, at least in the classical period, to support the notion that comedy tells the truth or what the author believes to be the truth.
- 5 The confusion of comic license with *parrhesia* betrays what, in my view, is a confusion about the Greek views on the genre in the classical period: contrary to common modern practice, there is no indication that Athenians of the classical period saw comic speech as an expression of *parrhesia*, and interpreting comedy in this way does real damage to the interpretation of the function and import of comedy in classical Athens. While comedy refers very often to itself and to its own capacity to speak freely, to openly say whatever the comic poet or the characters deem appropriate against or for whatever or whomever, it never uses the word παρησία in this context. This fact suggests by itself that *parrhesia* is not the right word to denote the comic language.⁴ It is true that, as usual, we have a small percentage of the old comic production, but we do have many references to its capacity to speak freely, and the fact that such a capacity is never expressed by this word is telling in itself. There is only one occurrence of the word in Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae* 541, where it denotes the political freedom of speech which is the preserve of the citizens. This is the most common meaning we find in contemporary texts—subverted in this case because they are women citizens rather than men, whereas women did not have the right of free speech in real Athens:

MNH. Εἰ γὰρ οὔσης
παρησίας κάξον λέγειν ὅσαι πάρεσμεν ἀσταί...

Don't we have the right to speak freely, we citizen women who are present
at this gathering?

- 6 There is more. Not only comedy never uses the word *parrhesia* to refer to its freedom of speech, but indeed, as we saw at the beginning, in all the extant Greek literature of the classical period, only one single passage connects παρησία with comedy. And there are other indications that the free speech of comedy was not equated to *parrhesia* in classical Greece. All of them are *e silentio*, but in this case they are quite significant, since there could hardly have been a text disavowing the connection explicitly. To me the most telling case is Plato's. Since Plato is quite hostile to both *parrhesia* and drama, he would hardly have missed the opportunity to connect them, had there been the slenderest grounds to do so, i.e. had they been somehow connected in Greek thought. He never did so, which is a non-minor sign that indeed such a link did not exist. And another significant case is the Old Oligarch. Even though he does not employ the word *parrhesia*, he is very interested in the notion of free speaking, both in the Assembly and in the relation between social groups (slaves vs freemen, foreign residents vs citizens), and is the only text in the classical period (apart from comedy itself) to mention comedy in connection with the sociopolitical strife. Free speaking is in this text ἔαν λέγειν ἔξῃς (1.6, paralleled with βουλευεῖν) and ἰσηγορία (1.12); what the comic poets do is termed κωμωδεῖν and κακῶς λέγειν (2.18). Again, even though he is very hostile to both uses of speech, he never confuses them. According to him, both have some significance on the political scene, but nothing allows us to suggest that he conceives of them as something similar or that what the comic poets say has to do with ἰσηγορία or with free speech among equals.

3. Uses of the word '*parrhesia*' in Isocrates and elsewhere

- 7 Since in Isocrates we find the only connection of *parrhesia* with comedy, we will study the uses of the word in this author, in comparison to other fifth- and fourth-century texts, in order to evaluate the import of such a connection in its context. The treatment of *parrhesia* in Isocrates is precise and finely nuanced. There are 17 occurrences of either the noun or the verb in his oeuvre, and its meaning and appreciation shifts more or less in every context. In principle, speaking with *parrhesia* means saying something openly, often including the nuance 'frankly', either in public or in private. We find this uncontroversial use in several cases:
- 8 In *Ad Demonicum* 34, this is contrasted with saying something to a friend in a more concealed way:

περὶ ὃν ἂν αἰσχύνῃ παρησιάζασθαι, βούλῃ δέ τισι τῶν φίλων ἀνακοινώσασθαι, χρῶ τοῖς λόγοις ὡς περὶ ἀλλοτρίου τοῦ πράγματος· οὕτω γὰρ τὴν ἐκείνων τε γνῶσιν αἰσθήσει, καὶ σεαυτὸν οὐ καταφανῇ ποιήσεις.

When there is anything of which you are ashamed **to speak openly**, but about which you wish to confer with some of your friends, speak as though it were another's affair; thus you will get at their opinion, and will not betray your own case. [Transl. Norlin]

- 9 In *Busiris* 1 it means speaking frankly and openly, but in private:

τὴν μὲν ἐπιείκειαν τὴν σὴν, ὦ Πολύκρατες, καὶ τὴν τοῦ βίου μεταβολὴν παρ' ἄλλων πυνθανόμενος οἶδα· τῶν δὲ λόγων τινὰς ὧν γέγραφας, αὐτὸς ἀνεγνωκῶς ἥδιστα μὲν ἄν σοι περὶ ὅλης **ἐπαρησιασάμην** τῆς παιδείσεως περὶ ἣν ἠνάγκασαι διατρίβειν.

I have learned of your fairmindedness, Polycrates, and of the reversal in your life, through information from others; and having myself read certain of the discourses which you have written, I should have been greatly pleased **to discuss frankly** with you and fully the education with which you have been obliged to occupy yourself. [Transl. Van Hook]

- 10 In principle, *parrhesia* is a democratic right.⁵ The first occurrences of the word illustrate this meaning. In Euripides' *Ion* 670–75, *Hippolytus* 420–23, and *Phoenician Women* 387–91, it is *the* right which defines citizenship, as opposed to foreignness or to slavery.⁶ The very first occurrence of the word may be Democritus 226 D-K (if it is not spurious). Being a sentence without context, it is difficult to determine whether it refers to a political or to a private usage, but one keyword, ἐλευθερίη ('freedom'), makes it perfectly adequate for a political democratic reading: "*parrhesia* is intrinsic to freedom; the risk lies in discerning the right moment" (οἰκίηον ἐλευθερίας παρησίην, κίνδυνος δὲ ἡ τοῦ καιροῦ διάγνωσις).⁷

- 11 However, *parrhesia* is conceived of as a possibility also in non-democratic situations.⁸ There it is not a right or anything that goes with citizenship—indeed non-democratic states are conceived as having no rights—, but something that the sovereign can graciously concede or not. Euripides, *Bacchae* 668–71 is an example of this use: the Messenger asks king Pentheus whether he may speak with *parrhesia*, for otherwise he fears the king's 'too kingly' temper. Also in Euripides, *Electra* 1049–50 and 1055–56 it is the queen Clytemnestra who grants *parrhesia* to Electra; in this case she is also her mother, and Electra addresses her as 'mother', but nothing tells us that the notion of *parrhesia* was applicable in the relationship between parents and children.

ΚΛΥΤ. λέγ' εἴ τι χρήζεις κἀντίθεος παρησίαι,
ὅπως τέθνηκε σὸς πατὴρ ἐνδίκως.

Speak if you have need or reason. Refute me freely;
demonstrate how your father died without full justice.

[...]

ΗΛ. μέμνησο, μήτηρ, οὗς ἔλεξας ὑστάτους
λόγους, διδοῦσα πρὸς σέ μοι παρησίαν.

Keep in mind, Mother, those last words you spoke,
giving me license to speak out freely against you. (Transl. Vermeule)

- 12 Also in the *Athenaion Politeia* 16.6 tolerance of *parrhesia* on the part of Peisistratus is a sign of the mildness of his tyranny. In Isocrates, this usage is found in *To Nicocles* (§ 3 and § 28). In this speech we are in a sort of middle ground between the political and the private usage. On the one hand, *parrhesia* is apparently applied here to private relations of friendship:

[2.3] εἰ δυνηθεῖν ὀρίσαι ποίων ἐπιτηδευμάτων ὀρεγόμενος καὶ τίνων ἀπεχόμενος ἄριστ' ἂν καὶ τὴν πόλιν καὶ τὴν βασιλείαν διοικήης. τοὺς μὲν γὰρ ἰδιώτας ἐστὶ πολλὰ τὰ παιδεύοντα, μάλιστα μὲν τὸ μὴ τρυφᾶν ἀλλ' ἀναγκάζεσθαι περὶ τοῦ βίου καθ' ἑκάστην τὴν ἡμέραν βουλευέσθαι, ἔπειθ' οἱ νόμοι καθ' οὓς ἕκαστοι

πολιτευόμενοι τυγχάνουσιν, ἔτι δ' ἡ παρησία καὶ τὸ φανερώς ἐξεῖναι τοῖς τε φίλοις ἐπιπλῆξαι καὶ τοῖς ἐχθροῖς ἐπιθέσθαι ταῖς ἀλλήλων ἀμαρτίαις πρὸς δὲ τούτοις καὶ τῶν ποιητῶν τινες τῶν προγεγενημένων ὑποθήκας ὡς χρὴ ζῆν καταλελοίπασιν· ὥστ' ἐξ ἀπάντων τούτων εἰκὸς αὐτοὺς βελτίους γίγνεσθαι. **τοῖς δὲ τυράννοις οὐδὲν ὑπάρχει τοιοῦτον**, ἀλλ' οὐς ἔδει παιδεύεσθαι μᾶλλον τῶν ἄλλων, ἐπειδὴν εἰς τὴν ἀρχὴν καταστῶσιν, ἀνουθέτητοι διατελοῦσιν· οἱ μὲν γὰρ πλεῖστοι τῶν ἀνθρώπων αὐτοῖς οὐ πλησιάζουσιν, οἱ δὲ συνόντες πρὸς χάριν ὀμιλοῦσι.

I could prescribe what pursuits you should aspire to and from what you should abstain in order to govern to the best advantage your state and kingdom. For when men are in private life, many things contribute to their education: first and foremost, the absence of luxury among them, and the necessity they are under to take thought each day for their livelihood; next, the laws by which in each case their civic life is governed; furthermore, **freedom of speech and the privilege which is openly granted to friends to rebuke and to enemies to attack each other's faults**; besides, a number of the poets of earlier times have left precepts which direct them how to live; so that, from all these influences, they may reasonably be expected to become better men. **Kings, however, have no such help**; on the contrary, they, who more than other men should be thoroughly trained, live all their lives, from the time when they are placed in authority, without admonition; for the great majority of people do not come in contact with them, and those who are of their society consort with them to gain their favor. (Transl. Norlin)

- 13 Here *parrhesia* is confined to the private life of individuals, which is obviously appropriate because Isocrates is addressing the speech to Nicocles, the son of Evagoras, king of Salamina in Cyprus. In that kind of society, as we said, there is no right to *parrhesia*. However, the political value of the notion is clear too, and more so in § 28, where he counsels the king to grant it to those who may give him good counsel:

[2.28] δίδου παρησίαν τοῖς εὖ φρονοῦσιν, ἵνα περὶ ὧν ἂν ἀμφιγνοῆς, ἔχῃς τοὺς συνδοκιμάσσοντας.

Grant freedom of speech to those who have good judgement, in order that when you are in doubt you may have friends who will help you to decide. (Transl. Norlin)

- 14 As we said, these are the conditions in a non-democratic state: it is the ruler who grants this privilege. Since democracy, at least as it is understood in the 5th century, will no longer exist in ancient Greece afterwards (or not much more than nominally), the meaning of this word will undergo very important changes, which constitute a great lesson in historical politics and historical semantics. We cannot trace them here,⁹ but the fuel of the change was no doubt the fact that this word had a potential for a private alongside a public use (something that for instance a more strictly political notion like ἰσηγορία did not have), and at the same time it could be used both in a strictly political and in a social meaning. Once there was no more use for it in real daily-life politics, it remained free, so to speak. It then underwent a change that in the end confined it almost exclusively to the sphere of private life and the relationship between friends. It retained of its old political usages only the capacity to designate a more or less benevolent attitude of the ruler or superior towards his or her subordinates, an attitude of tolerance with their frankness or sincerity.¹⁰

- 15 In the case of Isocrates, the democratic overtones of the word are seen in two other passages. The first, *Archidamos* 97:

ὥς ἔστιν ἐν τῶν αἰσχυρῶν πρότερον μὲν μηδὲ τὰς τῶν ἐλευθέρων ἰσηγορίας ἀνέχεσθαι, νῦν δὲ καὶ τὴν τῶν δούλων παρησίαν ὑπομένοντας φαίνεσθαι.

For it is disgraceful that we, who in former times would not allow even free men the right of equal speech, are now openly tolerating licence of speech on the part of slaves. (Transl. Norlin)

- 16 Here *parrhesia* is severely judged, a disgrace—as is to be expected in a Spartan context and from a Spartan king, in a text that puts emphasis on Spartan harshness. The text clearly links *parrhesia* with ἰσηγορία and clearly opposes it to Spartan custom, which is a way to link it to a democratic kind of society based on ἰσηγορία. At the same time, we see here how the political and the social aspects of the notion work together, and, more precisely, how the word παρησία starts to denote the social aspect of the strictly political notion that is ἰσηγορία.

- 17 The second is *Areopagiticus* 20:

οἱ γὰρ κατ' ἐκεῖνον τὸν χρόνον τὴν πόλιν διοικοῦντες κατεστήσαντο πολιτείαν οὐκ ὀνόματι μὲν τῷ κοινοτάτῳ καὶ πρασιτάτῳ προσαγορευομένην, ἐπὶ δὲ τῶν πράξεων οὐ τοιαύτην τοῖς ἐντυχάνουσι φαινομένην, οὐδ' ἢ τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον ἐπαίδευε τοὺς πολίτας ὥσθ' ἡγεῖσθαι τὴν μὲν ἀκολασίαν δημοκρατίαν, τὴν δὲ παρανομίαν ἐλευθερίαν, τὴν δὲ **παρησίαν ἰσονομίαν**, τὴν δ' ἐξουσίαν τοῦ πάντα ποιεῖν εὐδαιμονίαν, ἀλλὰ μισοῦσα καὶ κολάζουσα τοὺς τοιούτους βελτίους καὶ σωφρονεστέρους ἅπαντας τοὺς πολίτας ἐποίησεν.

Those who governed the city in those days did not establish a constitution which only in name was the most populist and the most gentle, while proving to be quite the opposite to those who experienced it, nor one which educated the citizens to regard license as democracy, lawlessness as freedom, **free speech as equality under the law**, or freedom to do what you want as happiness but rather by hating and punishing such men, it made all the citizens better and more moderate. (Transl. Lee Too)

- 18 The *Areopagiticus* proposed some restrictions of democratic freedoms, *parrhesia* among them, which Isocrates had soon to retract. I borrow the precise words of Robert Wallace (2004, 229): “His next two texts, *On Peace* and *Antidosis*, retracted all of it, presumably because advocating a restricted democracy had caused him the trouble he feared. Some people ‘warned me that I even ran the risk, although giving you the very best advice, of being thought an enemy of the people and of seeking to turn the polis into an oligarchy’ (7.57, cf. 8.51, 95, 15.285).”

4. The problematic aspects of *parrhesia*

- 19 *Parrhesia* may have always been problematic, as is often surmised (in fact we don't know, as fifth-century texts do not clearly allow such a conclusion), but it was certainly (becoming?) problematic and even dangerous in the time of Isocrates and later.¹¹ This problematic aspect is certainly present in his speeches, in the passage that we have just seen. Also in *De bigis* 22:

λοιδοροῦσι δὲ λίαν ἀσελγῶς καὶ θρασέως καὶ τὸν ἄλλον βίον τὸν τοῦ πατρὸς, καὶ οὐκ αἰσχύνονται τοιαύτη παρησίᾳ χρώμενοι περὶ τοῦ τεθνεώτος, ἣν ἔδεισαν ἂν ποιήσασθαι περὶ ζῶντος.

But my father's private life they revile with excessive indecency and audacity, and they are not ashamed, now that he is dead, to use a license of speech concerning him which they would have feared to employ while he lived. (Transl. Norlin)

20 And also in *Busiris* 38–40:

ἀλλὰ γὰρ οὐδέν σοι τῆς ἀληθείας ἐμέλησεν, ἀλλὰ ταῖς τῶν ποιητῶν βλασφημίαις ἐπηκολούθησας, οἳ δεινότερα μὲν πεποιηκότας καὶ πεπονθότας ἀποφαίνουσι τοὺς ἐκ τῶν ἀθανάτων γεγονότας ἢ τοὺς ἐκ τῶν ἀνθρώπων τῶν ἀνοσιωτάτων, τοιούτους δὲ λόγους περὶ αὐτῶν τῶν θεῶν εἰρήκασιν, οἷους οὐδεὶς ἄν περὶ τῶν ἐχθρῶν εἰπεῖν τολμήσειεν.

[...]

Ὡστ', ἦν σωφρονῶμεν, οὐ μιμησόμεθα τοὺς λόγους τοὺς ἐκείνων, οὐδὲ περὶ μὲν τῆς πρὸς ἀλλήλους κακηγορίας νομοθετήσομεν, τῆς δ' εἰς τοὺς θεοὺς παρησίας ὀλιγωρήσομεν, ἀλλὰ φυλαξόμεθα καὶ νομιοῦμεν ὁμοίως ἀσεβεῖν τοὺς τε λέγοντας τὰ τοιαῦτα καὶ τοὺς πιστεύοντας αὐτοῖς.

But the fact is that you had no regard for the truth; on the contrary, you followed the calumnies of the poets, who declare that the offspring of the immortals have perpetrated as well as suffered things more atrocious than any perpetrated or suffered by the offspring of the most impious of mortals; aye, the poets have related about the gods themselves tales more outrageous than anyone would dare tell concerning their enemies.

[...]

Therefore if we are wise we shall not imitate their [the poets'] tales, nor while passing laws for the punishment of libels against each other, shall we disregard loose-tongued vilification of the gods; on the contrary, we shall be on our guard and consider equally guilty of impiety those who recite and those who believe such lies. (Transl. Van Hook)

- 21 Indeed we have evidence that at least in late antiquity these two speeches were singled out for this use of the word *parrhesia* that comes close to *slander*, as results from Harpocration p. 239, lines 1–2 Dindorf: Παρησίας ἀντὶ τοῦ βλασφημίας καὶ λοιδορίας Ἰσοκράτης Βουσίριδι [καὶ περὶ τοῦ ζεύγους].¹²

5. The comic poets' *parrhesia* in Isocrates

- 22 It is time now to discuss *De pace* 14, the passage in which apparently the language of comedy is designated by the word *parrhesia*. We have seen so far that in Isocrates *parrhesia* means generally saying something openly, either in public or in private, that its political value is often apparent, and we saw also its social value emerging at several points. Its firm democratic value is also apparent, both by itself and by contrast with its negative evaluation in non-democratic contexts (Sparta, Salamina in Cyprus). All these utilizations are in agreement with the general, most common uses in fifth-century Athens. On the other hand, we have just seen also that in a couple of passages it refers to insulting language, is negatively valued and is explicitly opposed to the truth; apparently in the same vein, *De pace* 14 seems to liken *parrhesia* to the language of comedy. Let's quote it at length (13–14):

ὅταν μὲν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἰδίων βουλευῇσθε, ζητεῖτε συμβούλους τοὺς ἄμεινον φρονοῦντας ὑμῶν αὐτῶν, ὅταν δ' ὑπὲρ τῆς πόλεως ἐκκλησιάζητε, τοῖς μὲν τοιούτοις ἀπιστεῖτε καὶ φθονεῖτε, τοὺς δὲ πονηροτάτους τῶν ἐπὶ τὸ βῆμα

παριόντων ἄσκεΐτε, καὶ νομίζετε δημοτικωτέρους εἶναι τοὺς μεθύοντας τῶν νηφόντων καὶ τοὺς νοῦν οὐκ ἔχοντας τῶν εὖ φρονούντων καὶ τοὺς τὰ τῆς πόλεως διανεμομένους τῶν ἐκ τῆς ἰδίας οὐσίας ὑμῖν λειτουργούντων. ὥστ' ἄξιον θαυμάζειν, εἴ τις ἐλπίζει τὴν πόλιν τοιούτοις συμβούλοις χρωμένην ἐπὶ τὸ βέλτιον ἐπιδώσειν. [14] Ἐγὼ δ' οἶδα μὲν ὅτι πρόσαντές ἐστιν ἐναντιοῦσθαι ταῖς ὑμετέραις διανοίαις, καὶ ὅτι δημοκρατίας οὔσης οὐκ ἔστι παρησία, πλὴν ἐνθάδε μὲν τοῖς ἀφρονεστάτοις καὶ μηδὲν ὑμῶν φροντίζουσιν, ἐν δὲ τῷ θεάτρῳ τοῖς κωμωδοδιδασκάλοις.

Whenever you deliberate about your private affairs, you look for advisors who are wiser than you are, but when you hold an assembly to talk about the city's affairs, you distrust and are jealous of those people and cultivate instead the worst of those who rise to speak. You think there is more goodwill toward the people among those who are drunk than among those who are sober, among the foolish more than among the wise, and among those who distribute the city's property more than among those who benefit the city at their own expense. It is amazing that anyone expects the city to prosper using advisors like that. [14] I know that it is dangerous to oppose your views and that even though we live in a democracy, there is still no freedom of speech, except here in the Assembly for those who are foolish and do not care about you, or in the theater for the comic poets. (Transl. Papillon)

- 23 However, most of the occurrences of the word in Isocrates refer to his own use of *parrhesia*. In four passages, it characterizes generally a good part of his own production (*Antidosis* 10), and his typical way of speaking (*Antidosis* 179, *Philip* 72, *Archidamus* 12); in two more, it characterizes globally one individual speech (*Antidosis* 43, where *parrhesia* and truth come together, as is often the case, and *Panathenaicus* 96).
- 24 Now, if Isocrates is fond of using *parrhesia* to characterize his own free speech, is it plausible that he can employ this word to designate the free speech of the comic poets and the slander of those who revile his father? No, it isn't. What can then be the end of the application of the word *parrhesia* to these kinds of insulting language? One response is offered by some passages in which a distinction between two kinds of *parrhesia* is suggested.¹³ One is in the *Panathenaicus* 218:

ταῦτα δ' αὐτοῦ διαλεχθέντος ἀπεδεξάμην μὲν, οὐχ ὥς διαλυόμενόν τι τῶν κατηγορημένων, ἀλλ' ὥς ἀποκρυπτόμενον τὸ πικρότατον τῶν τότε ῥηθέντων οὐκ ἀπαιδεύτως ἀλλὰ νοῦν ἔχόντως, καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπολελογημένον σωφρονέστερον ἢ τότε παρησιασάμενον.

When he said this, I accepted it not because he had refuted any of my criticisms, but because he had covered over the most bitter part of what he had said, not crudely, but quite thoughtfully, and had defended himself on the other points, **more prudently than when he spoke frankly before**. (Transl. Papillon)

- 25 The other two are in the *Letter to Antipater*. In § 4, Diodotus "is extremely frank not in an inappropriate way but in a way that most reasonably gives evidence of his goodwill toward his friends" (πλείστην ἔχειν παρησίαν, οὐχ ἦν οὐ προσῆκεν, ἀλλὰ τὴν εἰκότως ἂν μέγιστον γιγνομένην σημεῖον τῆς εὐνοίας τῆς πρὸς τοὺς φίλους, transl. Papillon). In § 6, "those who speak openly in the interest of what is best" (τοὺς ἐπὶ τῷ βελτίστῳ παρησιαζομένους) are the reason that monarchies and constitutional governments alike are preserved; in the next sentence, these are identified with the people who tell the truth.¹⁴

- 26 We have then in the first passage an inappropriate and an appropriate way to practice *parrhesia*. The appropriate way shows goodwill towards one's friends, meaning that those who practice it want the best for their friends and try to be useful. And in the second passage, the useful *parrhesia* which makes governments of all kinds endure is equal to the truth.¹⁵ The two kinds of *parrhesia* have nothing to do with comic poetry. However, the distinction in the *Panathenaicus* is between a more judicious (σωφρονέστερον) and a parrhesiastic way of speaking, described as 'bitter' (πικρός). In the *Busiris*, those who are wise (ἦν σωφρονῶμεν) do not employ that *parrhesia* against the gods. In the *De pace* passage, the orators who enjoy *parrhesia* are ἄφρονεστάτοι, an antonym of σωφρονέστεροι, and do not care about the Athenians. As a consequence, what this passage means is that things are so wrong that there is no *parrhesia* except for those who do not know how to practice it and have no goodwill towards the Athenians, and for comedy. The form it takes is a sort of *impossibilium*, an ἄδύνατον asserting that things have reached the most extreme depravity. Something like: things are so bad that now the Athenians only pay attention to the most depraved of the orators, consider friends of the people those who are drunk rather than those who are sober, those who are witless rather than those who are wise, and those who dole out the public money rather than those who perform public services at their own expense; and what is now considered to be *parrhesia* is the speech of those who do not care about the Athenians and that of the comic poets. In the same move, he equates the "most foolish" orators with comedy, a simple way to denigrate them, not dissimilar to what Plato does in the *Apology* in likening the accusations against Socrates also to comedy.¹⁶

6. Conclusion

- 27 The function and import of comedy's free speech is hotly debated, but we do not need to enter this debate at the moment. What matters in the present context is that even though comedy is expected to represent and say things unacceptable in other contexts, something that Aristotle presents as a matter of law and custom (νόμος),¹⁷ this is not the same thing that the Athenians of the time dub *parrhesia*. This is not surprising. We cannot attempt now to explain why at length, but the main reason is clear, in my view. I have hinted at it at the outset. *Parrhesia* is not simply speaking shamelessly, nor even license to say whatever one pleases.¹⁸ One of the main components of the notion of *parrhesia*, as several studies on this concept have made clear, is truth—or better sincerity or candor, because what is said must not necessarily be true, but must be said in earnest thinking that it is the truth.¹⁹ Comedy does not meet this condition, it is full of ideas and statements that nobody, apart from maybe the comic character, can believe, like for instance that human beings will be better off if Zeus is overthrown. Thus, it does not qualify for *parrhesia*. In my view, this is another example of the clear difference drawn in the classical period between the use of language in daily life and in comedy.²⁰ Indeed I doubt very much that comedy in classical Athens may be said to practice free speech: comedians were not exactly free to choose what kind of language they used and what kind of things they presented on stage. To some extent they were, of course, but (to give an extreme and indeed impossible example) had a comedian presented a comedy composed wholly with the kind of language, characters and plots that go with tragedy, he would have surely failed—in fact he most probably would not have been allowed to even present it on stage. *Parrhesia* (and in general free speech)

does not pertain to comedy, it pertains to daily life (politics, social relations). In the classical period probably nobody could have confused the two. This is why there is no source that connects them except that single passage in Isocrates, where it is precisely this common knowledge what allows Isocrates to use this notion to describe a depraved situation in which *parrhesia* is likened to what the comic poets do.

- 28 One last consequence of this conclusion: avoiding the word *parrhesia* to name the comic use of language is not just a matter of applying the right name in Greek terms. The main problem with this confusion is rather that by identifying the coarse language that is proper to comedy with the political right of *parrhesia* and/or the social attitude of the good (or at least candid) counsellor or friend, we are giving comedy a role that it did not have, while at the same time distorting the notion of *parrhesia*, a very serious notion that has no role in comedy except that of being subverted (in *Thesm.* 541, the only occurrence of the word in extant old comedy, as we saw above) for the good reason that it is indeed a very important notion.

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NOTES

1. I wish to thank the two anonymous readers for some valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier draft. Also the colleagues in the research project PID2019-110908GB-I00, and

particularly Felix Jacome for a helpful discussion. And certainly Alberto Cecon, for his care and patience.

2. Some examples: the classical and indispensable study on *parrhesia* by Giuseppe Scarpato (2001) takes it for granted, even in the absence of evidence: “*Il termine parrhesia ha quindi nel suo nascere valore politico e sfumatura polemica e, pur essendo documentato una volta sola in Aristofane, è l'insegna della commedia attica.*” Momigliano (1973, 258) is less clear in this respect, but he also mingles the various kinds of freedom of speech in the assembly, in the theatre and in ordinary life. The sensible and nuanced Halliwell, “Comic satire and freedom of speech” (Halliwell, 1991, 65–66) likens comic satire to *parrhesia*. This case is interesting in that, on the one hand, this identification is not necessary, nor brought about by his source (*Ath. Pol.*), which does not use the word; on the other hand, it does not impinge on the value of the paper or its conclusions, which remain one of the best treatments of the subject. On the side of the political studies, Ober (1998), does not use *parrhesia* in referring to comedy, but does understand all the same that comedy’s freedom of speech is the same kind of political freedom of speech allowed to the citizens; see e.g. p. 125: “His [Aristophanes’] audience and judges (the *demos* and its lotteried representatives) expected him to exercise an extreme form of the citizen’s privilege of free speech, to search out and to expose to public view things that were ordinarily hidden or tacitly ignored by the rest of the citizenry. The fact that Aristophanes had a long and successful career suggests that he fulfilled those expectations.” Rosen (2013) has it already in the title and suffers from this confusion all along. To what extent this confusion and the connection with comedy has taken root that Kierstead (2018), on no grounds whatsoever, asserts that *parrhesia* “appears to have emerged from the less restrained contexts of village festivals and cultic celebrations. It is an integral part of a long literary tradition of invective, normally iambic in meter and anti-tyrannical in spirit.” Such a connection between *parrhesia* and cultic celebrations or village festivals is never found in Greek sources and there are no grounds for such a hypothesis on the origin of the word or the concept.

3. Sluiter & Rosen (2004, 7).

4. It is not about comedy, but Theophrastus, *Characters* 28.6 suggests that calling slander ‘*parrhesia*’ is a misnomer. His slanderous man speaks ill about everybody, including the dead, “misnaming his slander *parrhesia*, democracy and freedom” (καὶ πλεῖστα περὶ τῶν φίλων καὶ οἰκείων κακὰ εἰπεῖν καὶ περὶ τῶν τετελευτηκότων κακῶς λέγειν, ἀποκαλῶν παρηρσίαν καὶ δημοκρατίαν καὶ ἐλευθερίαν).

5. For a discussion of the ancient and modern notion of ‘rights’, referring in particular to *parrhesia*, see Carter (2004). Even though he starts from the statement “To imply that free speech was considered a right by the Athenians is, I would suggest, a misconception”, what he means is that their conception of what is a right was different from ours: “Under modern democracies, freedoms are conceived of as negative rights, and these include a right to Freedom of Speech. The Athenians, on the other hand, while they conceived of political freedom in terms very close to a negative right, thought of free speech as something very different: a characteristic of citizens, an attribute, which was a sort of side effect of their political enfranchisement.” (Carter, 2004, 198) Also Konstan (2012) is reluctant to call *parrhesia* a right in the modern sense. This is surely correct, but we can still call it a right in the ancient sense, because it would certainly not be correct to suggest that there were no rights in the ancient world. Indeed, the 5th century occurrences of the word *parrhesia* make it clear that this notion serves to draw a dividing line between what a citizen can do and a non-citizen cannot do.

6. It has been proposed to interpret *parrhesia* in these passages not as a citizen’s right, but as an elite privilege (see Carter, 2004; Konstan, 2012). It is true, as Konstan has it, that in all three cases they are upper-class individuals, but in all cases too it is a matter of being or not being a free citizen, this is clearly spelled out, particularly in *Hippolytus* and *Ion*: *parrhesia* is directly dependent on citizenship, not on pertaining or not to the ruling class. In the case of Polyneices

it is simply not stated, but it does not seem probable to me, if *parrhesia* depends on social standing rather than citizenship, that, being a member of the upper class, he would not have the freedom to speak his mind in Argos. Relations of *xenia* among the aristocratic houses were strong enough to grant Polyneices a special position, not just that of a commoner. He would not be a citizen, though, whereas in Thebes he was: that is the difference.

7. I take the very exact translation “intrinsic to freedom” from Konstan (2012, 2).

8. The contrast between a democratic and a tyrannical situation in terms of free speech may be expressed with other words as well, and certainly antedates the first occurrences of the word *parrhesia*. In Aeschylus’ *Persians*, for instance, the word *parrhesia* does not occur, but the language is strongly reminiscent of this notion: once the Asian lands are released from Persian rule “for the royal power has perished utterly” (v. 590), οὐδ’ ἔτι γλώσσα βροτοῖσιν | ἐν φυλακαῖς λέλυται γὰρ | λαὸς ἐλεύθερα βάζειν, | ὥς ἐλύθη ζυγὸν ἄλκᾶς (“No longer will men keep a curb upon their tongues; for the people are set free to utter their thoughts at will, now that the yoke of power has been broken”, 591–94, transl. Smyth).

9. Some important treatments of the history of this notion are Momigliano (1973), Foucault (1983), Scarpato (2001).

10. This change is succinctly described in very exact words by Konstan (2016, 422), relying on Momigliano (1973): “The royal courts were hierarchical, and the freedom to speak about matters of policy was by no means guaranteed. The king might consult a council of his friends or advisors, but their liberty to express their views was a privilege, not a right, and there was always the risk that too much frankness might offend the ruler. In this context, candor required courage and flattery was often the safer, if not the nobler, course. In the words of Momigliano (p. 260), after the Athenian democracy yielded to autocracy, ‘*parrhesia* as a private virtue replaced *parrhesia* as a political right.’” This evolution is also one of the conclusions of Scarpato (2001).

11. Such dangerous aspects emerge with some frequency in the orators. E.g. Aeschines, *Against Timarchus* 172: “Nikodemos of Aphidna was killed violently by Aristarchos, poor man, who had both his eyes gouged out and his tongue cut out, the tongue with which he had addressed you freely (ἐπαρησιάζετο), trusting in your laws and in you.” (Transl. Fisher) This speech is also a good example of several other aspects of *parrhesia*: its connection with democracy, its relation to trust (i.e. trust on both sides: the recipient of *parrhesia* needs to trust the *parrhesiastes*, and the *parrhesiastes* needs to trust the addressee) and the fact that *parrhesia* was a debated issue in Aeschines’ day (see also Aeschin. 1.6, 173).

12. “Meaning calumnies, and abuse. Isocrates in *Busiris* [and *On the Team of Horses*]”. Abridged in the *Suda* pi 637.

13. The distinction is also found in other texts, as e.g. Euripides, *Orestes*, 902–905 (κάμαθεῖ παρησίᾳ), which does not mean that *parrhesia* is *amathes*, but that it can be practised in a way that is *amathes*. Cf. also Sluiter & Rosen (2004, 4): “*parrhêsia* may in and of itself be used as a simple descriptor, e.g. of a practice commonly associated with democracy, which may be evaluated as either a good or a bad thing depending on the views of the speaker.”

14. Ὡν ἔνεκα προσῆκε μὲν παρὰ πᾶσι τοῖς μονάρχοις πλέον φέρεσθαι τοὺς τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἀποφαινομένους τῶν ἅπαντα μὲν πρὸς χάριν, μηδὲν δὲ χάριτος ἄξιον λεγόντων (“For these reasons it is indeed fitting that in the courts of all monarchs those who declare the truth should be held in greater esteem than those who, though they aim to gratify in all they say, yet say naught that merits gratitude”, transl. Van Hook).

15. Also in *De bigis* 22 an allusion to two kinds of *parrhesia* may be discerned: τοιαύτη παρησία implies that there is another kind, the good one in this case (see Jufresa, 2017, 9).

16. See Riu (2013, 193–96).

17. Aristotle, *Politics* 1333b3–23. Cf. Riu (2012, 257–263); Boedeker (2016, 71, n. 72).

18. Cf. *supra*, n. 4, on Theophr. *Characters*.

19. This is an essential part of the concept which will not disappear in the aftermath. See for instance how David Konstan succinctly and very clearly explains why Plutarch, in his treatise on how to tell a flatterer from a friend deals with *parrhesia*: “[...] the reason is that frankness is the primary indicator of the openness and honesty characteristic of the friend as opposed to the dissimulation that marks the toady.” (Konstan, 1996, 7) A good 4th-century example of the fact that candor and truth are an essential part of *parrhesia* is Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1124b29–31: ἀναγκαῖον δὲ καὶ φανερομίσῃ εἶναι καὶ φανερόφιλον (τὸ γὰρ λανθάνειν φοβουμένου, καὶ ἀμελεῖν τῆς ἀληθείας μᾶλλον ἢ τῆς δόξης), καὶ λέγειν καὶ πράττειν φανερώς (παρησιαστῆς γὰρ διὰ τὸ καταφρονητικὸς εἶναι, καὶ ἀληθευτικός, πλὴν ὅσα μὴ δι’ εἰρωνείαν [εἰρωνεία δὲ] πρὸς τοὺς πολλοὺς) [“He [the *megalopsukhos*] necessarily hates and loves openly, for concealing these things is the mark of a fearful person, as is neglecting the truth rather than people’s opinion; and he speaks and acts openly (for he is candid because he is contemptuous, and he is truthful except when he is being ironic (yes, ironic) towards the many”)]. See the commentary on the text and interpretation in the Appendix to J. J. Mulhern (2004, 335–37), who highlights the contrast between *parrhesia* and irony. Aristotle indeed makes it clear that truth goes with *parrhesia* but not with *eironeia*, which is only expectable, because *eironeia* consists in somehow saying the opposite of what one believes to be the truth.

20. Cf. Riu (2012).

ABSTRACTS

The expression *comic parrhesia* is common in the scholarly literature, and the notion that the word παρησία in ancient Greek may denote comedy’s freedom of speech is almost commonplace, and taken for granted. This is the case across scholarship about freedom of speech or frankness, about comedy, and generally about invective. However, the word *parrhesia* rarely appears in the classical era in relation to comedy or even poetry. In all the extant Greek literature of the classical period, only one passage connects παρησία with comedy: Isocrates, *On the Peace* 14. This simple fact should render such a connection suspect, and it justifies a re-examination of the evidence.

L’expression *parrhèsia comique* est courante dans la bibliographie, et l’idée que le mot παρησία en grec ancien puisse dénoter la licence propre à la comédie est presque un lieu commun, présumée et considérée sans hésitation comme allant de soi. Il en est ainsi dans les études aussi bien à propos de la liberté de parole ou la franchise qu’à propos de la comédie ou globalement de l’invective. Pourtant, le mot *parrhèsia* ne se trouve presque pas à l’époque classique en rapport avec la comédie ou même avec la poésie. Dans toute la littérature de la période classique, il n’y a qu’un seul passage qui connecte la παρησία avec la comédie : Isocrate, *Sur la paix*, 14. Ce seul fait rend la connexion suspecte et justifie un réexamen des données.

INDEX

Mots-clés: parrhèsia, comédie, liberté de parole, Isocrate, réception

Keywords: parrhesia, comedy, freedom of speech, Isocrates, reception

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