

HUMOUR, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND
EMBASSY: HERODOTUS, *HISTORIES*
3.17–25 AND ARISTOPHANES,
ACHARNIANS 61–133*

Mark C. Mash

Abstract: This paper explores connections between historiography and Old Comedy by analysing two prominent embassy scenes: first, Herodotus’ depiction of the visit of the ‘Fish Eaters’, chosen emissaries of the Persians, to the court of the Ethiopian king (3.17–25), and second, the scene from Aristophanes, *Acharnians* (61–133) in which Dicaeopolis meets the Athenian ambassadors who have returned from Persia, bringing a Persian ambassador with them. Both the historian and the comic poet employ ethnic humour, the manipulation of stereotypes, deceptive ambassadors, and the theme of food and wine to create the themes and characters of these meetings, and the paper argues that the two scenes evince significant affinities.

In his account of the Fish Eaters’ embassy to the Ethiopian King (3.17–25), Herodotus presents one of the most memorable scenes in the *Histories*. As Mabel Lang has noted, the Fish Eaters’ scene is unique for its length and multitude of speeches—fourteen indirectly quoted and two directly quoted—that signal its importance in the larger work.¹ Indeed, Herodotus not only dramatises the

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¹ Lang (1984) 143. For a recent treatment devoted to the Fish Eaters’ episode from the perspective of its connection to Hippocratic writers and Homer, see Irwin (2014).

interaction between the Persians—through their intermediaries the Fish Eaters—and the Ethiopian king, but also provides narrative motivation for Cambyses' ill-fated march to Ethiopia and subsequent madness. Moreover, the scene has larger thematic significance, for Herodotus offers one of the most prominent negative portrayals of the Persian *nomos* of imperial expansion, a central theme of his work. Thus, on these grounds alone, this scene deserves closer examination.

Yet the style of the passage is as interesting as its substance. To be sure, humour, through the voice of the Ethiopian king directed at Cambyses and the Persians, adds another layer to the text. In his perceptive remarks on this scene, James Romm rightly notes the parallels between the outcome of the larger story and those of tragic drama, but argues that the Ethiopian king's diatribe lies 'at its center' and 'partakes more of satire than of tragedy'. Romm further acknowledges the central role of ethnography in the scene when he qualifies the Ethiopian king's diatribe as '*ethnologic* satire, in that its point is to show the master races of the world humbled in the eyes of indifferent aliens'.² As we will see, Herodotus incorporates purposeful derision of the Persian *nomos* of imperial expansion, the manipulation of stereotypes, deceptive ambassadors, the theme of food and wine, and even a punchline joke.

The variety of comic devices found in the Fish Eaters' embassy scene is indicative of the *Histories* at large. In addition to the opening tongue-in-cheek women-snatching explanation for the conflict between the East and West that sets the tone for the work (1.1–5.2),³ we find such types of humour as derision and witty retorts that highlight speakers' *sophiê* (e.g., 1.153, 3.46, 4.36.2, 6.50, 6.67.1–3, 8.111.2–3, 8.125.1–26.1); humorous deception, where humour and danger are often linked (e.g., 1.60, 2.121, 2.172–3, 3.17–25,

² Romm (1992) 59.

³ To be sure, Herodotus signals that the truths he is interested in are not always what we might expect. Cf. Marincola (2007) 60–7 and Baragwanath (2008) 55–81.

5.18–22);⁴ didactic humour, a type of oblique humour wise advisors use to make their advice more palatable to monarchs (e.g., 1.27.1–5, 1.30–3, 1.71.2–4, 1.88–9, 3.29.1–2, 5.49–51, 7.101–5); and memorialising humour associated with monuments, battles, and political conflicts (e.g., 1.187, 6.126–9, 7.208–10, 7.226, 8.24–5).⁵ Of course the formal comedies of the fifth century also exploited many types of humour, and this suggests a question about the relationship between historiography and Old Comedy.

Scholars have long detected Aristophanic parodies of Herodotus, most notably *Acharnians* 524–9 ~ *Histories* 1.1–5.2, and *Birds* 1124–62 ~ *Histories* 1.179.⁶ The similar patterning in the explanations presented for the start of wars has drawn most scholars to regard *Acharnians* 524–9 as a parody of Herodotus.⁷ Christopher Pelling has argued from a different perspective that Herodotus in *Histories* 1.1–5.2 and Aristophanes in *Acharnians* 524–9 were working in parallel:

... we should see not so much Aristophanes parodying Herodotus, but rather Herodotus and Aristophanes as *doing the same thing* here. Both are ‘parodying’ popular mentality—provided, once again, we do not take ‘parody’ too crudely as a sheer deflating technique, but rather as a provision of a model to build on and refer to.⁸

While I agree with the majority view that Aristophanes is parodying Herodotus’ opening,⁹ Pelling’s formulation that

⁴ See Lateiner (1977) and Dewald (2006), who discuss this variety of humour.

⁵ See Mash (2010) for further discussion.

⁶ In the case of *Birds* 1124–62, scholars tend to agree that Aristophanes’ parody displays specific Herodotean verbal echoes. See Nesselrath (2014) 59–60 for a helpful explication.

⁷ A few scholars are not convinced of this parody, including Fornara (1971) 28 and (1981) 153–5, and MacDowell (1983) 151.

⁸ Pelling (2000) 155.

⁹ While the mention of parody often goes unexplained, Nesselrath (2014) 56, following Perrotta (1926) 108, clarifies: ‘Herodotus strips his

both authors are ‘doing the same thing’ adds a helpful framework for discussing the complexity of the intertextual echoes. *Both* authors have incorporated humour into their accounts with their flippant explanations for the beginnings of major wars; it is not a case of the comic playwright Aristophanes transforming serious historical musings from Herodotus.

In a recent treatment of the passages in *Acharnians* and *Birds* noted above, Heinz-Günther Nesselrath convincingly argues that Aristophanes draws on lectures he attended in alluding in *Acharnians* to *Histories* 1.1–5.2, and then on a written version of the *Histories* later in *Birds*. Yet while Nesselrath regards the connection to the *Histories* of the *Acharnians* passage as less certain than that of the passage from *Birds*, this opinion is grounded mainly on the issue of parody and overstates the case.¹⁰ For the few objectors to the possibility of any such allusion to Herodotus, it seems that *Acharnians*’ lack of explicit verbal signalling, in contrast to its treatment of Euripides,¹¹ indicates either no parody or no connection to the *Histories* at all. This paper considers the affinities between the works of the comic poet and historian, and in this regard the lines from *Acharnians* evince more noteworthy parallels than those from *Birds*. Nesselrath himself hypothesises that the ‘theme of [Herodotus] opening chapters [was] well-suited to a public lecture’ and that ‘[s]uch a lecture might well be remembered for its humorous but also provocative content, and might therefore have been regarded by Aristophanes as well as something suitable to be reworked and integrated into a comedy’.¹² But we can say more than this. In a work as long as the *Histories*, four times the length of the *Iliad*,¹³ what

heroines of their mythical aura and debases them into more or less passive objects of their male abductors: Aristophanes tops this by replacing the princesses with prostitutes’.

¹⁰ Nesselrath (2014) 58.

¹¹ For further discussion of the *Telephus* parody, see Pelling (2000) 139–58.

¹² Nesselrath (2014) 58.

¹³ Baragwanath and Bakker (2010) 3.

section would be more memorable or likely to be recited than its very opening that establishes the historian's authority?

If such a strong connection exists between *Acharnians* 524–9 and *Histories* 1.1–5.2, it should not be surprising to find additional affinities. I do not here emphasise other scattered connections scholars have identified, including *Acharnians* 85–7 (the Persians baking whole oxen in ovens; cf. *Histories* 1.133.1), or *Acharnians* 92 (the King's Eye; cf. *Histories* 1.114.2).¹⁴ Rather I will focus on the Fish Eaters' embassy scene in *Histories* 3.17–25 and the opening embassy scene in *Acharnians* 61–133. Like the Fish Eaters' scene, the *Acharnians* embassy scene stands out for its larger significance. As Margaret Miller has noted, *Acharnians* 61–133 is 'one important and generally untapped fifth-century source' for the evidence it offers about the social context of a Persian embassy. What is more, Miller goes on to assert that the scene includes 'references to cultural oddities (travelling by carriage; unmixed wine; drinking and eating to excess as a test of manhood) [which] may satirise contemporary travel-writers like Herodotos'.¹⁵ Although Miller's only clarification is a footnote reference to Perrotta (1926), who identified a number of scattered 'parodies', not including the Fish Eaters' scene, I hope to show that her declaration is more true than she perhaps expected.

Before we turn to the texts, let us note one specific type of humour that appears in both Herodotus and Aristophanes. Humour that highlights ethnic or political identities is especially prevalent in each author's work. This variety of humour, commonly referred to as 'ethnic humour', makes use of stereotyping, mockery, and ethnocentrism:

¹⁴ See Nesselrath (2014) 54 n. 8 on other scattered parallels between the *Histories* and *Acharnians*.

¹⁵ Miller (1997) 109.

Ethnic humor mocks, caricatures, and generally makes fun of a specific group or its members by the virtue of their ethnic identity; or it portrays the superiority of one ethnic group over others. In addition, its thematic development must be based on factors that are the consequences of ethnicity, such as ethnocentrism, prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination.¹⁶

The appearance of ethnic humour in Herodotus and Aristophanes is not surprising given the historical period in which they were composing their works, for it is an expected anthropological phenomenon during times of war and massive social upheaval¹⁷—precisely the situation in which the Athens of Herodotus’ and Aristophanes’ day found itself due to the earlier Persian Wars, the intellectual revolution and rise of sophistry, and the ongoing Peloponnesian War. We should expect stereotyping of Persians to have intensified as a result of the extensive contact with Persians during the Persian Wars; stereotypes related to peoples from various city-states, especially Athens and Sparta, were already a well-established part of the culture in which both Herodotus and Aristophanes were composing their works.¹⁸

Given the prevalence of ethnic humour during wartime, it is no surprise that it often has an aggressive quality that mimics, in language, the conflicts between people and the differences between their *nomoi*. At the same time that ethnic humour draws attention to the identities of various peoples, it also often disparages, ridicules, and mocks.¹⁹ As

¹⁶ Apte (1985) 139–40. In addition to Apte (1985), see also Raskin (1985), MacHovec (1988), and Davies (1990) on the concept of ethnic humour.

¹⁷ Apte (1985) 132.

¹⁸ On the Greeks’ conception of themselves and others, see Pelling (1997), Harrison (2002), Isaac (2004), Shapiro (2009), and Skinner (2012).

¹⁹ In his comprehensive study on Greek laughter, Halliwell (2008) 12 n. 31 offers an important reminder that this agonistic type of humour was a natural part of Greek culture more generally. See also Halliwell (1991) 283 on the complementary concept of ‘consequential laughter’. Cf. Bergson (1911) and other aggression theorists, whose views of

we will see in the embassy scenes from the *Histories* and *Acharnians*, the concept of ethnic humour helps contextualise important characteristics of each.

I. Herodotus, *Histories* 3.17–25

The Fish Eaters, a tribe of Egyptians from Elephantine, make their sole appearance in the *Histories* as representatives of Cambyses and the Persians at the court of the Ethiopian king. They are sent to spy on the Ethiopians, their so-called Table of the Sun, and the current state of Ethiopian affairs. Cambyses uses these Fish Eaters instead of his own men, as Herodotus tells us, because they know the Ethiopian language.²⁰ Since the Fish Eaters represent the Persian king Cambyses, the Ethiopian king's reactions to them represent his responses to the imperial designs of the Persians and their king. The narrative tells us that Cambyses 'ordered them to say what was needed' (ἐντειλάμενός τε τὰ λέγειν χρῆν, 3.20.1) and to present five gifts to the Ethiopian king: a purple cloak, a golden collar worn around the neck, armlets, an alabaster of perfume, and a jar of palm wine (πορφύρεόν τε εἶμα καὶ χρύσεον στρεπτὸν περιαιχένιον καὶ ψέλια καὶ μύρου ἀλάβαστρον καὶ φοινικηίου οἴνου κάδον, 3.20.1).²¹ By itemising these gifts, Herodotus calls special attention to them and suggests their importance in the engagement that will follow.

While the Fish Eaters proclaim that Cambyses wants to be a guest-friend and ally, and that their purpose is to hold talks with the Ethiopians and to present gifts that the Persian king particularly enjoys using (3.21.1), the Ethiopian

humour often align well with ancient humour. For an overview of the major theories on aggression, release, and incongruity and their various proponents, see Raskin (1985), Parkin (1997), and Ritchie (2004).

²⁰ For more on interpreters in Herodotus, see Harrison (1998) 9–14. Munson (2005) 73–4 notes the rarity of interpreters in the *Histories*, all of whom, like the Fish Eaters, appear in connection with the Persian court.

²¹ See Flory (1987) 97–8 for parallels between this episode and the descriptions of Cyrus and Tomyris.

king immediately recognises that they are spies (*μαθὼν ὅτι κατόπται ἤκοιεν*, 3.21.2) and therefore concludes that their largesse is false. Herodotus gives further weight to the Ethiopian king's response not only by telling us in his authorial voice that the king knew the Fish Eaters were spies, but also by having the king declare so in direct speech. In his speech, the Ethiopian king makes three emphatic points: (1) the Persian king did not send gifts to win his friendship; (2) the Fish Eaters are lying and are really spies; and (3) the Persian king is not a just man (*οὔτε ἐκεῖνος ἀνὴρ ἐστι δίκαιος*, 3.21.2).

In his explanation for why the Persian king is not just (*δίκαιος*), the Ethiopian king reiterates his characterisation by saying 'if he were just, he would not desire a land other than his own, and he would not have led people who had done him no wrong into enslavement' (*εἰ γὰρ ἦν δίκαιος, οὔτ' ἂν ἐπεθύμησε χώρας ἄλλης ἢ τῆς ἑωυτοῦ, οὔτ' ἂν ἐς δουλοσύνην ἀνθρώπους ἤγε ὑπ' ὧν μηδὲν ἠδίκηται*, 3.21.2). With these words, the Ethiopian king reveals the Persian *nomoi* that he finds offensive and exposes the deceptions Cambyses had intended to keep hidden.

The Ethiopian king rejects not only the Persian gifts, but also the underlying attempt they represent to appropriate his empire. Yet unlike with the Fish Eaters' gifts, which are presented without explanation, he tells them to make explicit to Cambyses the meaning of his own gift. In this way, the Ethiopian king suggests that Cambyses is unable to understand the intended message of his present, an unstrung bow (3.21.2–3):

And now when you give this bow to Cambyses, say these words: 'The king of the Ethiopians gives advice to the king of the Persians. Whenever the Persians so readily draw this bow, so great in size, he should then march against the long-lived Ethiopians with a larger army than theirs. But until this time, he should thank the gods, who do not put it into the minds of the sons of the Ethiopians to take possession of a land other than their own!'

The Ethiopian king demonstrates his strong position in respect to Cambyses by using the ambassadors he had sent as if they were his own. He also mocks Cambyses by exchanging a single openly warlike gift, an unstrung bow, for Cambyses' train of deceptive and obsequious gifts.²² Just as Cambyses' gifts present a hidden truth, the Ethiopian king's gift also reveals a truth, for the bow suggests that the Persians are weak.²³ Moreover, the Ethiopian king uses the Fish Eaters' responses to his questions about the Persian items as an opportunity to mock Persian *nomoi* and the 'gifts' that embody the deceptive intent of the Fish Eaters' mission (3.22):

After he said these things and unstrung the bow, he handed it to those men who had come. Taking the purple cloak, he asked what it was and how it had been made. When the Fish Eaters said the truth about the dye of the purple fish, he said that the men were deceitful and their cloaks were deceitful. Second, he asked about the gold, the collar worn around the neck, and the armlets. When the Fish Eaters explained the decoration of it, the king, laughing and thinking they were shackles, said they had stronger shackles than these among his own people. Third, he asked about the perfume. When they spoke about its production and the custom of anointing, he said the same thing as he had about the cloak. But when he came to the wine and asked how it was made, he was delighted by the drink and asked what the king ate and how long a Persian man lived. They said he ate bread, explaining the growing of wheat, and that the longest span of life for a man was set at eighty years or less. In response to

²² Lateiner (1989) 29: 'The king of Ethiopia rejected Cambyses' gifts and returned to him a meaningful object, a stiff bow; only when the Persians could easily bend and string it, should they try to subdue independent Ethiopia'.

²³ At the same time, as Flory (1987) 98 argues, the bow 'symbolizes the Ethiopians' warlike strength'.

these things, the Ethiopian said he was not at all amazed that they live few years since they eat manure! For they would not be able to live even this many years if they had not recovered themselves with the drink, indicating the wine to the Fish Eaters. For in this respect, they themselves were beaten by the Persians.

The Ethiopian king methodically examines, asks about, and comments on each gift in the order Herodotus presented earlier in his narrative: the purple cloak, the golden neckband and armlets, the perfume, and the wine. In the Ethiopian king's questions and follow-up comments on the first four Persian gifts, we discover how obvious he finds the Persian trick. Every gift that is Persian in origin has a deceptive nature that reinforces the deceptive nature of the Persian mission via the Fish Eaters. The purple dye disguises the true colour of the fabric, the golden armlets and fetters feebly hide the connection between acceptance of Persian wealth and slavery, and the perfume disguises a person's natural scent.²⁴

The fifth and last item, the wine, shows most clearly the humorous delight the king feels in the *apodexis* of his own *sophiê*²⁵ as he has discovered the Persian deception and found a way to prove it symbolically through the very gifts that were meant to flatter him. Only the wine delights the king and, in turn, encourages him to inquire further about Cambyses' diet and Persian life expectancies.²⁶ The

²⁴ Flory (1987) 98 remarks that '[w]ith a mixture of naïveté, disdain, and shrewdness, the savage king calls the Persian jewellery 'fetters' (*πέδαλι*, 3.22.2), a doubly clever perception since the Persians are enslaved by luxury and the gifts are intended to lure the Ethiopians into slavery to Persia'. Dewald (1993) 58 suggests further that all the objects signify to the Ethiopian king enslavement to Persia, for he 'correctly interprets these tokens as marks of a Persian intent to enslave the Ethiopians'.

²⁵ Cf. Herodotus' *apodexis* of his own *sophiê* when he laughs at other mapmakers in 4.36.2.

²⁶ Romm (1992) 57 notes that Herodotus here follows a tradition, going back to Homer's *Odyssey*, where "'primitive" peoples are unable to resist the effects of wine, that most sublime of advancements wrought by

explanation for the Ethiopian king's question about Persian food at first sight seems to mark a logical progression: if Cambyses' drink is so good, perhaps his food could also be desirable.²⁷ But Herodotus reveals at the end of the passage that the question is actually the first part of a narrative joke. According to the king, it is obvious why the Persians do not live long—they eat manure! Thus, the food characteristic of Persian culture is declared inferior by the Ethiopian king, and, what is more, the Persians are superior to the Ethiopians only in regard to their drink, the wine. Herodotus suggests a final jab about the wine by his earlier description of it in 3.20 as *φοινικῆος*. That is, even though *φοινικῆος* is usually translated as 'palm', the adjective also strongly suggests 'Phoenician', a term that gestures to the stereotypically deceiving nature of Phoenicians that the Ethiopian king finds in the Persians' behaviour here. We might even say that the Ethiopian king perceives another deceptive aspect of the wine, for the Persians have appropriated a product from another culture for themselves and presented it as their own.

The Ethiopian king's inquiry into Persian life expectancies mirrors the ethnographer's tendency to work through different categories, yet at the same time informs us about the disparaging tone of his questioning. He demonstrates what Romm calls a 'bemused frame of mind' when he uses the respondents' own answers as the bases for his mockery of the Persian gifts, which (aside from the wine) are mundane items in Ethiopian society. What is more, as Romm notes, the Persian gifts reveal the Persians' ethnocentrism, which to the Ethiopians 'appears laughably presumptuous; the conquerors of the known world are here reduced to liars, cheats, fools, and eaters of dung (i.e.,

higher civilizations'. At the same time, there is an 'implicit critique of Persian sophistication' since the same wine that the Ethiopian king praises for its positive impact on lifespans has the opposite effect on Cambyses (ibid. 57–8). For more on the connection of this scene to Homer, see Irwin (2014) 42–57.

²⁷ Irwin (2014) 32 n. 22 finds another reminder of the focus on cultural diet with the very name of the ambassadors, the Fish *Eaters*.

cereals raised from the manured earth)'.²⁸ When the Ethiopian king points out the Ethiopians' food and drink of boiled meat and milk, their restorative spring, fetters of gold, Table of the Sun, and transparent stone coffins, he further emphasises the superiority of Ethiopian *nomoi* over Persian *nomoi*: '[i]n each case the Ethiopians are seen to obtain from the environment around them the substances which the Persians can only get, ignobly, by manufacture or cultivation'.²⁹ In this way, just as he presents a single truth-bearing Ethiopian gift as superior to the numerous deceptive gifts of the Persians, the Ethiopian king presents the natural wonders of Ethiopia as superior to the manufactured Persian wonders that Cambyses offers as evidence of his superiority. Herodotus therefore uses this scene to indulge in ethnocentric humour by manipulating stereotypes of the Persians and Ethiopians.

There is also a connection between the Ethiopian king and the historian himself. As Matthew Christ has argued, both Herodotus and the Ethiopian king hold negative views of Persian expansionism and are intensely interested in the cultural markers of the Persians. The Ethiopian king, moreover, 'mirrors in his own humorous way the historian's ethnological interest in peoples' longevity, diet and *nomoi* (3.22.3-4)', and like the Ethiopian king, Herodotus 'concedes the superiority of certain Persian *nomoi* (1.136-137) and is also intrigued by the Persian use of wine (1.133)'.³⁰ After the Ethiopian king inquires about the gift of wine, we see how the roles of the Ethiopian king and the historian blur, for the punchline joke emphasises the desirability of Persian wine at the same time as it adds to the general ridicule of Cambyses and Persian *nomoi*.

Herodotus explores the consequences of the Ethiopian king's mockery of Cambyses at length. First, as soon as he hears the Fish Eaters' report, Cambyses hastily sets out against the Ethiopians. He abandons the expedition after a

²⁸ Romm (1992), quotations from 56 and 57 respectively.

²⁹ Romm (1992) 57.

³⁰ Christ (1994) 182.

lack of provisions drives his men to resort to cannibalism (3.25). Here the theme of food takes a gruesome turn when, after they have eaten all the pack animals, plants, and grass, and have reached the desert where no other food is available, the Persians finally consume one other.³¹ Next, we learn of Cambyses' increasingly erratic and murderous behaviour (3.25–34). Herodotus provides a number of plausible explanations for Cambyses' madness, including his megalomania, killing of the Apis bull (which the Egyptians claim as the cause for his madness in 3.30), and murder of his family members and fellow Persians. Yet when the historian finally presents his own opinion, it is noteworthy that he emphasises a different connection, that between his laughter and his madness. Not only does Cambyses laugh at the Egyptian *nomoi* connected with the Apis bull (3.29), but he also mocks the cult statue of Hephaestus and the statues of the Cabiri, which he subsequently burns (3.37). Indeed, it is because Cambyses laughs at religion and *nomoi* that Herodotus declares him mad (3.38.1–2):³²

Now it is entirely clear to me that Cambyses was greatly mad, for he would not otherwise have attempted to laugh at religion and customs. For if someone were to command all men to choose the finest customs of all, each one would choose his own customs once he had seen other people's. Therefore it is not likely that anyone other than a mad man would laugh at such things.

³¹ I would like to thank one of the anonymous readers for drawing my attention to the way the theme of food continues to be found in the aftermath of the Fish Eaters' scene.

³² Cf. Rood (2006) 299, who argues that a more obvious sign of Cambyses' madness is found when he burns Amasis' corpse, since at 3.16 Herodotus tells us that burning a corpse was impious both for Persians and Egyptians. We should not discount the role of humour in Herodotus' account, however, since Herodotus himself focuses explicitly on Cambyses' *laughter* at religious *nomoi* as an undeniable sign of his madness (3.38).

Herodotus' global criticism of laughter at other peoples' *nomoi*, so soon after the Fish Eaters' episode, invites us to reconsider the Ethiopian king's laughter at Persian *nomoi*. How is it that the Ethiopian king, unlike Cambyses, is able to avoid any ill effects of his laughter at *nomoi*? To be sure, the Ethiopian king laughs to discourage the Persians' blind imperialism, which serves no morally sound purpose.

In the Fish Eaters' embassy scene from Herodotus, we have seen the complex relationship between humour and ethnography. Herodotus manipulates stereotypes so that the primitive Ethiopians appear more sophisticated than the civilised Persians as they trump the manufactured Persian gifts with their own natural wonders. The Fish Eaters appear as would-be deceptive ambassadors of the Persian king, but are unable to deceive the wise Ethiopian king. The leitmotif of food, as emphasised by the grain-eating Persians using the fish-eating ambassadors to spy on the meat-eating Ethiopians, is also important. Moreover, there is wine, the only Persian gift that the Ethiopian king praises for its salubrious effects. Ironically, this same wine is later associated with the downfall of Cambyses, who is as unable to control his appetite for wine as he is his appetite for further empire.

As we turn to the embassy scene in Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 61–133, we will see a number of the same elements that Herodotus uses in the Fish Eaters' scene, and also the distinctively different ways that Aristophanes incorporates these elements.

II. Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 61–133

Near the beginning of *Acharnians*, as Dicaeopolis is hoping that Athens will make peace with Sparta, he encounters Athenian ambassadors, just arrived from Persia, along with 'Persian' ambassadors (61–133). In contrast to the scene from Herodotus, the setting is a public assembly in Athens where a number of individuals are introduced in rapid succession, rather than a private embassy with a king in a foreign land with only one party of visitors. Further, the

main character of the embassy scene is not a king, but a just everyman and private citizen, Dicaeopolis. Thus, the affinities to the Fish Eaters' scene are seen through the inversion of a number of key elements. There is a contrast of public vs. private, democratic vs. monarchical, and just vs. unjust that the comedy, in association with the Fish Eaters' scene, brings to mind. In the case of this last pairing, not only does the name of the play's hero Dicaeopolis ('Just City') resonate, but also the Ethiopian king's declaration that Cambyses was not a just man (*δίκαιος*).

In general terms, the play takes up the utopian ideal that is suggested by the Ethiopian king, a just man who minds his own business, in his rebuke of Cambyses. At first, Dicaeopolis' concern is for his city, but when no one listens to him, the play takes a fantastic turn as Dicaeopolis seeks his own private peace.³³ The resources that Dicaeopolis' deme once naturally produced—coal, vinegar, and olive oil—remind us of the resources the Ethiopian king's land produced—gold, restorative springs, and the Table of the Sun. In each environment, these resources are both mundane and fantastic depending on perspective. For the Ethiopian king, the goods his land produces trivialise those the Persians offer as gifts, and appear as wonders to the Fish Eater spies. To Dicaeopolis, the goods his deme produced formerly seemed mundane, but in the context of the war they have become markers of a better time, even a Golden Age, created by peace.³⁴ Moreover, Dicaeopolis considers the commercialisation of these goods by the city a negative development (*Ach.* 32–6) in a way that is reminiscent of the Ethiopian king, who considers the manufactured products of the Persians inferior to the natural resources of the Ethiopians.

³³ Cf. Ste. Croix (1972) 365: 'In the opening scene Dicaeopolis wants his *City* to negotiate for peace with Sparta and, when no one will listen to him, *does what the City ought to have done*, and successfully negotiates for a peace himself—of course it has now to be a private peace, in which he and his family alone share' (italics original).

³⁴ For further discussion of the Golden Age motif in *Ach.*, see Olson (2002) lii–liii.

Unlike the Ethiopian king, Dicaeopolis is compelled to deal not with Persian arrogance, but with the arrogance of ambassadors from his own city who have misused their position for self-enrichment in Persia. As Olson (1991) 200–3 has argued, the play highlights economic disparities associated with the war, and as such, the play targets those who exploit the war for their own gain. In the embassy scene, Aristophanes does not represent Persian wealth as something to disparage, but instead focuses squarely on the well-to-do Athenian ambassadors just arrived from the court of the King of Persia and *their* wealth by association (61–3). Aristophanes refers dismissively to the prominent and fabulously wealthy Persian king,³⁵ yet goes on to call out the Athenian ambassadors for their extravagant appearance. In this way, he manipulates the Persian stereotype by transferring it, in essence, to the Athenian ambassadors. And just as the Ethiopian king immediately perceives the truth about the Fish Eaters, so too does Dicaeopolis about the Athenian ambassadors:

Herald. Ambassadors from the King.

Dicaeopolis. From what king? I am tired of ambassadors and the peacocks and their bragging.

Dicaeopolis' subsequent comments on the Persian dress of the Athenian ambassadors (*βαβαιάξ, ὠκβάτανα, τοῦ σχήματος*, 64) make it possible for him to use the sort of ethnic humour usually targeted at foreigners (and used by the Ethiopian king), to target instead his own countrymen.

The Athenian ambassadors, like the Fish Eaters, further confirm their host's initial judgement with their own words. In each scene, moreover, the host's reactions to the ambassadors' words are negative. When the Athenian ambassadors to Persia ironically complain about the dire circumstances caused by their excessive two drachma per

³⁵ Cf. similar formulations in Herodotus, but where Persian kings ask who the Greeks are: Cyrus about the Lacedaemonians in 1.153, and Darius about the Athenians in 5.105. See also A. *Pers.* 230–45, where Atossa asks a number of questions about Athens, including its location.

diem (66) and the conditions of their luxurious travel (68–71), Dicaeopolis explicitly contrasts the ambassadors' situation to the poor conditions suffered by himself (72–3) and other Athenian farmers who had been compelled to take up residence within the long walls early in the Peloponnesian War. Beyond the perhaps uncomfortable comedy thus generated by his humorous account of the decadent behaviour of the ambassadors, Aristophanes also recalls the economic distress that afflicted many Athenians during the war. By highlighting the struggles created by war, Aristophanes not only wins his audience's favour but also makes more favourable the conditions for his promotion of peace.³⁶

Like Herodotus, Aristophanes suggests an ethnic stereotype of the Persians by focusing on their food and wine, wealth, and excess, but unlike Herodotus, he uses this stereotype to attack not the Persians but the Athenian ambassadors, showing, we might say, the Athenian ambassadors partaking of the gifts the Fish Eaters said the Persian king enjoyed using (3.21.1), and especially the wine. They report that they were forced to drink sweet unmixed wine (*ἄκρατον οἶνον ἡδύν*, 75) from crystal and golden drinking cups (*ἐξ ὑαλίνων ἐκπωμάτων καὶ χρυσίδων*, 74).³⁷ Dicaeopolis' subsequent invocation, in exasperation, of the ancient name of Athens (*ὦ Κραναὰ πόλις*, 75) both suggests a pun on the 'mixed' wine the rest of the Athenians have been

³⁶ Olson (2002) lii puts it well: 'Indeed, the most brilliant literary and social manoeuvre in the play is the way in which it allows an audience made up of average democrats, who collectively exercised absolute authority over the state and individually filled virtually all its offices, to affirm not only that "everyone in power is corrupt" but also that they are all personally victims, who bear no responsibility for the troubles they have got in recent years and who would have been much better off had they not been so stupid as to be taken in by those who claimed to be their friends'.

³⁷ Olson (2002) 94 here calls attention to Plato Com. F 127 and quotes Hdt. 9.80.1 on the Persian spoils of Plataia: 'gold mixing-bowls and libation bowls and other drinking vessels' (tr. Olson).

drinking³⁸ and recalls his idealisation of past times at the beginning of the play.

True to his name, Dicaeopolis is acutely aware of what is right for his city and is not afraid to call out the Athenian ambassadors who selfishly enrich themselves. In this way, he resembles the Ethiopian king in his morally-tinged ridicule of Persian excess. In response to Dicaeopolis' perception that they are mocking Athens (*τὸν κατάγελων τῶν πρέσβεων*, 76), the ambassadors defend themselves by blaming the Persian *nomoi* for mandating excessive consumption. They try to distance themselves from the Persians by referring to them as 'barbarians' (*οἱ βάρβαροι*, 77), alleging that Persians admire only those who can drink and eat excessively (*τοὺς πλεῖστα δυναμένους φαγεῖν τε καὶ πιεῖν*, 78). Although they try to hide behind the excuse of *nomos*, they are exposed for their selfish behaviour in a way reminiscent of the Persians whom the Ethiopian king criticises for their unquenchable desire for further empire. The exchange quickly deteriorates into two types of low humour, sexual—not found in the Fish Eaters' embassy scene—and scatological—which is. The ambassadors' mention of the Great King easing himself for eight months in the Golden Mountains (*ἐπὶ χρυσῶν ὀρέων*, 82) recalls both the Persian connection with gold and the scatological focus of the Ethiopian king's punchline joke.

Culinary wonders are prominent in this scene, just as they are in the Fish Eaters' scene with the Ethiopians' Table of the Sun. Yet if Aristophanes were wanting to highlight Persian culinary wonders, he would need to incorporate material from a part of the *Histories* other than the Fish Eaters' scene (where there is only the wine). In the Fish Eaters' scene, to be sure, Persian food is portrayed as a sort of anti-wonder. Here, on the other hand, the two Persian food-related wonders, oxen baked in pans and giant birds (86–9), are clearly meant to be impressive and awe-

³⁸ Olson (2002) 95 points out a pun here on the verb for 'mixing', *κεράννυμι*: 'while the Ambassadors have been happily drinking their wine neat, the rest of the Athenians have been dutifully diluting theirs'.

inducing. As noted earlier, some scholars have regarded the mention of oxen baked in pans as a parody of Herodotus 1.133.1, where he discusses the custom of wealthy Persians of serving whole animals—oxen, horses, camels, or donkeys—that are baked in ovens, on birthdays.³⁹ Indeed, Herodotus' interest in *thômata* (wonders) throughout his *Histories* and the specific detail about whole-baked animals in his ethnography of the Persians (whose *nomoi* are introduced in *Acharnians* with the entrance of the Athenian ambassadors from Persia) make a parody of Herodotus 1.133.1 very likely. Aristophanes reworks the information Herodotus presents in *Histories* 1.133.1 as part of a straightforward ethnography of the Persians in order to magnify the fabulous nature of Persian meal-preparation and thus ridicule the ambassadors who have handsomely benefitted from their official role while the people of Athens have been suffering from the war.

The ambassadors' mention of giant birds—three times the size of Cleonymus—underscores the intent of the derision, for the Persian culinary wonder is here explicitly linked to a crony of Cleon known for his gluttony.⁴⁰ Thus, if there was any doubt about how to interpret these *thômata*, Aristophanes removes it when he ties the wondrous giant birds to corrupt Athenian officials. In this way, Aristophanes uses the Persian wonders to encourage his audience to focus on the ambassadors' decadent behaviour. Whereas the identities of the Ethiopians and Persians are defined by their diet in the *Histories*, in this scene the Persian

³⁹ E.g. Starkie (1909) 30 and Wells (1923) 174. Olson (2002) liii cites Wells' reference to the whole-baked oxen (*Ach.* 85–6 ~ Hdt. 1.133.1) and conspicuously does not counter the possibility of an allusion to Herodotus, as he does the supposed connection to the King's Eye (*Ach.* 91–2 ~ Hdt. 1.114.2). In this way he seems to acknowledge at least some connection. See Olson (2002) 99 for examples of 'other creatures or substantial parts of creatures roasted whole, generally in contexts involving gustatory excess or exaggeration'. Nesselrath (2014) 56–7 is less dismissive of the possible reference to Hdt. 1.133.1 than of other scattered references to Herodotus that some scholars have identified. See Nesselrath (2014) 56–7 n. 8 for further bibliography.

⁴⁰ Henderson (1997) 27 n. 89.

wonders define the character of the Athenian ambassadors.

If Aristophanes here plays on a detail from Herodotus about Persian food—oxen baked whole—it is also likely that he took from the historian something about the Persians and their love for wine. Indeed, in addition to the positive portrayal of Persian wine in the Fish Eaters' scene, in the same section of the *Histories* where we learn about the custom of roasting whole animals, Herodotus observes the Persians' fondness for wine (οἴνω δὲ κάρτα προσκέαται, 1.133.3). He then expands on this statement by presenting an ethnographically interesting and surprising description of the ways Persians go about their decision-making process in alternately sober and drunken states (1.133.4).⁴¹ On the other hand, rather than adding Persian ethnographic curiosities, Aristophanes magnifies particular aspects of this Persian *nomos* to suit his comedic purposes of lampooning the ambassadors: the undiluted (ἄκρατον, 75) quality of the wine, as well as the excessively opulent vessels from which the Athenian ambassadors consume it.

Whereas the Fish Eaters' embassy scene consists primarily of an extended conversation between two parties, Aristophanes shifts our attention to a variety of characters, the last of whom are the King's Eye Pseudartabas and his accompanying eunuchs (91–122).⁴² In the portrayal of Pseudartabas, whom Chiasson rightly calls a 'caricature of a Persian magistrate',⁴³ we see how Aristophanes includes elements not found in Herodotus' Fish Eaters' scene. First, we have here an actual Persian,⁴⁴ who presents a message through the filter of a foreign language, whereas in

⁴¹ Dewald (1998) 608 (n. to 1.133) observes the similar behaviour of the Germans in Tac. *Germ.* 22.

⁴² On the complexities in this part of the embassy scene, see Chiasson (1984) 131–6.

⁴³ Chiasson (1984) 132.

⁴⁴ Although some scholars believe Pseudartabas is an actually an Athenian disguised as a Persian, Chiasson (1984) 133 makes a convincing case that this character was meant to be Persian. I am less convinced by Chiasson's argument (*ibid.* 134) that the eunuchs, too, were Persian.

Herodotus' embassy scene the Fish Eaters represent the Persians because they know the Ethiopian language. Second, while Herodotus does not draw our attention to the Fish Eaters' use of a foreign language, Aristophanes puts Pseudartabas' language on display. Moreover, Pseudartabas' laughable costume as a giant eye sets up the expectation that whatever he says will be ridiculous. Aristophanes challenges the audience's expectations, however, by making the object of laughter not the Persian Eye, who is unwaveringly clear in his pronouncement, but the Athenians (first Dicaeopolis, and then the ambassadors) who cannot understand the Persian Eye's speech. Pseudartabas' first utterance—*ἰαρταμὸν ἐξάρξαν ἀπισσόνα σάτρα*, 100—is apparent gibberish that Dicaeopolis cannot comprehend, though the ambassador interprets it to mean that the Great King will send gold.⁴⁵ When the ambassador tells the King's Eye to say the word 'gold' more loudly and clearly (*λέγε δὴ σὺ μείζον καὶ σαφῶς τὸ χρυσίον*, 103), Pseudartabas responds with another mock-Persian reply that both indicates that they will not get gold and also labels the ambassador as an effeminate Ionian (*οὐ λῆψι χρυσό χαννόπρωκτ' Ἴαοναῦ*, 104),⁴⁶ a type of sexualised ethnic insult not found in the Ethiopian king's diatribe.

We are reminded here of a common pattern in each embassy scene: the attempt to control the language of the ambassadors. Herodotus tells us that the Persian king Cambyses ordered the Fish Eaters what to say (3.20.1), and the Fish Eaters recite their script dutifully. In the scene from *Acharnians*, the Athenian ambassador indicates that the Persian king has ordered Pseudartabas what to say (98–9), though it seems that the ambassador is trying to interpret

⁴⁵ For further discussion, see Davies (2002) 166, Colvin (1999) 288–9 and 294, and Chiasson (1984) 131–6.

⁴⁶ Olson (2002) 106 notes the derogatory tone of Ἴαοναῦ: 'according to Hdt. 1.143.3 not only the Athenians but many of the other Ionians disliked being called by the name. Ar., at any rate, uses 'Ionian' elsewhere only of a non-Athenian (*Pax* 46), and the word and its cognates seem to have strong overtones of cowardice, effeminacy, and the like in 5th- and 4th-c. literature'.

Pseudartabas' message to serve his own purposes: to convince Dicaeopolis that the Persian king will provide monetary support to Athens against Sparta. Pseudartabas provides an effective foil to the Fish Eaters in his refusal to play a passive role, whether he comically refuses to follow instructions from the Athenian ambassador or whether he surprises the ambassador by blurting out the truth.

While Dicaeopolis, like the Ethiopian king, perceives at once a truth the visiting ambassadors are trying to conceal, it takes him longer to determine the situation with Pseudartabas. It seems that the addition of a true foreigner, Pseudartabas, clouds Dicaeopolis' ability to detect deception. When the ambassador tries to reassure Dicaeopolis that Pseudartabas really means they will be getting gold from the Persian king, Dicaeopolis figures out a way to extract the truth: he threatens to beat him severely (*σε βάψω βάμμα Σαρδιανικόν*, 112).⁴⁷ The truth emerges from the simplest of questions and responses: (1) would they receive gold from the Persian king?—a nod of no, and (2) were the ambassadors deceiving him?—a nod of yes. Yet the clues that confirm the truth for Dicaeopolis are Greek and relate to *nomoi*, for he notices the attendant 'Persian' eunuchs' 'Greek' way of nodding (*Ἑλληνικόν γ' ἐπένευσαν ἄνδρες οὔτοιί*, 115) and discovers that the silent characters are actually two notorious Athenian eunuchs. Here it is not foreigners who work to deceive the host, as the Persians do in Fish Eaters' scene, but Dicaeopolis' fellow Athenians. Thus, while in both embassy scenes we find the use of deceptive ambassadors who are not able to deceive a wise host, the orientation of attack differs. To be sure, Aristophanes presents both Athenian and Persian

⁴⁷ Cf. comic tone of the Persian/Greek encounter in Hdt. 3.130.2, where Darius threatens to bring out whips and spikes, and suddenly the Greek Democedes admits that he knows about medicine, though he is not quite a doctor! One of the anonymous readers also points out to me that Dicaeopolis' threat here of *basanizein* indicates what was normally done to slaves, and therefore we witness inter-ethnic profiling, with the Persians identified as slaves of their king and treated as such by the freeborn Athenians.

ambassadors, but holds up only the corrupt Athenians for ridicule.

As in Herodotus' narrative, where the report of the Fish Eaters' encounter with the Ethiopian king and his mocking gift of the bow cause Cambyses to set out hastily for an ill-fated attack, the embassy scene in *Acharnians*, too, serves an important causal purpose in the play's development. Dicaeopolis' frustrations culminate at the end of the scene, when the herald announces that the Council invites the King's Eye to dine in the Prytaneum (123–5).⁴⁸ When this happens, Dicaeopolis loses both his patience and his hope for peace with Sparta. He asks Theorus to arrange a private peace for himself and his family, and thus we see how the embassy scene sets in motion the remainder of the play. Indeed, both Aristophanes and Herodotus use these embassy scenes to drive their narratives in significant ways, and in each text the host emerges victorious. Through the use of purposeful humour, the authors also draw our attention back to the embassy scenes long after they have concluded and thereby encourage our active reflection. As Jeffrey Henderson suggests, it is in the first part of *Acharnians* where the most serious thought is found:

Aristophanes invites the spectators to identify in fantasy with Dicaeopolis and thus indulge in some vicarious wish-fulfilment. For a while an escapist vision lets them forget the hardships of the war. But Aristophanes surely hoped that the urgings of the first part of the play—that the spectators re-examine the rationale for continued war and be more critical of their leaders—would not be forgotten when the spectators left the theater.⁴⁹

While the embassy scenes function in similar causal ways in each text, however, the subsequent narratives evolve in opposite directions: Herodotus uses the Fish Eaters' scene to

⁴⁸ Olson (2002) 111–12 notes that the Assembly as a whole and not the Council issued these sorts of invitations, a misrepresentation consistent with the anti-democratic tone of the scene.

⁴⁹ Henderson (1997) 21.

dramatise the tragedy of the mad Cambyses and those who suffered at his hands, while at the end of *Acharnians* Dicaeopolis merrily dances off stage with his own undiluted wine and dancing girls. Thus, we see how each author uses a similar type of scene for very different purposes.

In *Acharnians* there is a connection between Dicaeopolis and Aristophanes, just as there is a connection between the Ethiopian king and Herodotus in the *Histories*. In fact, as Ste. Croix stresses, ‘alone of Aristophanes’ characters of whom we know anything, [Dicaeopolis] is *carefully and explicitly identified by the poet with himself*, not merely once but in two separate passages: lines 377–82 and 497–503.⁵⁰ Underlying this connection between writer and character is a didactic intention that is made strikingly explicit, much more so than in Herodotus. Dicaeopolis says that ‘comedy, too, knows what is right/just’ (τὸ γὰρ δίκαιον οἶδε καὶ τραγωδία, 500) and even though he might make his audience uncomfortable, he will nevertheless be speaking justly (ἐγὼ δὲ λέξω δεινὰ μὲν δίκαια δέ, 501).⁵¹ Later, the chorus leader claims that the poet has rescued the people from being deceived by foreigners’ words (ξενικῶσι λόγοις, 634) and from falling victim to flattery, for previously ambassadors from other cities had only to call them ‘violet-crowned’ (ἰοστεφάνους) to deceive them (636–7). Here again, we are reminded of Dicaeopolis at the beginning of the play and his singular ability to detect the truth, and also of the Ethiopian king in the *Histories* in his inability to be deceived.⁵² By allowing their audiences to enjoy the

⁵⁰ Ste. Croix (1972) 363 (italics original). Cf. Olson (2002) 172–3.

⁵¹ Starkie (1909) 105 observes the significance of the connection between justice in this scene (500–1, 645, 655, 661) and the etymology of the speaker’s name in light of the charge of ἀδικία brought against Aristophanes the previous year.

⁵² Cf. Ste Croix (1972) 365: ‘One of the main functions of the introductory scene in the *Acharnians* (1–173), which occupies nearly an eighth of the play, is to establish Dicaeopolis as the one really sagacious man in Athens, who is shrewd enough to see through all deceptions, even when all those around him are being taken in: see especially lines 71–2, 79, 86–7, 105–7, 109 ff., 125–7, 135, 137, 161–3. The consistency of the portrait is remarkable.’

experiences of *not* being duped and *not* falling victim to flattery, Aristophanes and Herodotus set the proper stage to instruct their audiences. As Aristophanes asserts through the voice of his chorus leader, he provides frank instruction so that his audience will not be flattered, tempted, or deceived, but will find true happiness (*Ach.* 655–8, tr. Henderson (1997) 56):

But don't you ever let him go,
 for in his plays he'll say what's right.
 He says he'll give you good instruction,
 bringing you true happiness,
 and never flatter, never tempt you,
 never diddle you around,
 deceive or soften you with praise, but
 always say what's best for you.

With these words, Aristophanes offers guidance for understanding his aims more generally and also establishes his own authority in a way that recalls Herodotus in his proem. He does not say anything about his concern with *entertaining* his audience, which would be taken for granted in comedy. Rather, he explicitly pleads for his audience to look beyond its own amusement to reflect on the larger issues he is raising. Here we see a strong parallel to Herodotus, whose audiences surely would have expected and appreciated both instruction and entertainment.⁵³

When we consider the lingering effects of each of the embassy scenes, we notice how Herodotus and Aristophanes both encourage our active reflection on the issues they have raised, especially through their use of reversals of expectation and entertaining instruction. In this way, each invites his audience to ponder its own political realities, and thereby reminds us of a fundamental affinity of historiography and Old Comedy.

⁵³ Cf. Shimron (1989) 60.

III. Conclusion: Embassy Scenes in Herodotus and Aristophanes

A comparison of the embassy scenes in Herodotus' *Histories* (3.17–25) and Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (61–133) demonstrates a wide range of connections between the two. I have explored affinities that illuminate some of the broader relationships between historiography and Old Comedy of fifth-century Athens. More commonly noted have been connections between Herodotus and Aristophanes through parody: but parody represents only one way that Aristophanes could make use of Herodotus' work.

In *Acharnians*, there is not the same abundance of Herodotean verbal echoes as there is in *Birds* because, as Nesselrath has argued, Aristophanes was likely working from lectures he had heard rather than from a written text. Affinities to Herodotus in patterning are therefore even more likely in this particular play. Much like the opening section of the *Histories* that Aristophanes parodies in *Acharnians* 524–9, Herodotus' Fish Eaters' scene has humorous aspects that may have drawn Aristophanes' attention for the purpose of reworking in the same play.

In his essay on the malice of Herodotus, Plutarch provides a helpful catalogue of many of the *Histories*' most humour-laden and memorable passages. Despite writing much later than Herodotus, Plutarch offers us insight into an ancient audience's perception of Herodotus' humour.⁵⁴ In terms of specific connections between the *Histories* and *Acharnians*, it is noteworthy that Plutarch targets both Herodotus' opening (*Mal. Her.* 856F) and the Fish Eaters' scene (*Mal. Her.* 863D; tr. Bowen (1992) 57):

⁵⁴ van Lennep (1969) 123 observes the importance of Plutarch's essay for identifying humour in Herodotus. Cf. also Dewald (2006) 158: 'In some respects, Plutarch is a better reader of [Herodotus' humour] than many of Herodotus' modern commentators'. When we reflect on Plutarch's perception of the malice of Herodotus, whom he terms a 'barbophile' (*φιλοβάρβηρος*, *Mal. Her.* 12, 857A), we find that Plutarch equates it with *ethnic* attacks.

Why not adopt what Herodotus himself says (3.22) that the Ethiopian said about Persian perfume and purple clothes, that the myrrh was a pretence and the garments a pretence, and so say to him that his words are a pretence and his history a pretence, ‘all twisted, nothing sound, all back to front’?

Plutarch’s essay offers evidence about social memory because it reiterates portions of the *Histories*, like the Fish Eaters’ scene, that may have developed a life of their own apart from the larger text. These same scenes would likely have made ideal recitations that were known before the written version of the text was circulated. Also noteworthy in each instance—*Acharnians* 61–133 and 524–9—is Aristophanes’ compression of the Herodotean material, and the simplification of subject matter and narrative presentation, a technique not surprising for comedy. The webs of causation that result from the Fish Eaters’ report about the Ethiopian king and his gift of the bow are much too complex to work in comedy. We find instead a much more abbreviated scene in *Acharnians* that offers a simplified causal proposition: if Dicaeopolis cannot get his polis to seek peace, he has to seek his own *private* peace.

The anthropological concept of ethnic humour, which includes the use of stereotypes, caricature, and ethnocentrism, is relevant to the discussion of affinities between Herodotus and Aristophanes because this variety of humour would have been expected in fifth-century Athens, which had and was experiencing both war and social upheaval. Perhaps it is complete coincidence that Herodotus and Aristophanes both chose to include embassy scenes with elements in common, and ones that produce ethnic humour, and the presence of this type of humour is a phenomenon to be explained only by their shared cultural and intellectual milieu. Yet it is hard to dismiss the many other affinities between the two scenes. These include some prominent inversions: scene (private vs. public), type (monarchical vs. democratic), host (king vs. private citizen), and ambassadors (Persian ambassadors, via the Fish Eaters,

vs. Athenian ambassadors from Persia). There are also striking similarities: the focus on goods produced naturally vs. manufactured (Ethiopian vs. Persian in Herodotus) or commercialised (Dicaeopolis' deme before the war vs. Athens during war); the theme of food and wine; the hosts' ability immediately to perceive truths that the ambassadors try to conceal; the manipulation of stereotypes (in the Fish Eaters' scene, of uncivilised vs. civilised Ethiopians vs. Persians; in *Acharnians*, the transference of Persian *nomoi* onto the Athenian ambassadors for the purpose of derision); the connection between the Ethiopian king's declaration that Cambyses was not a 'just' (*dikaios*) man (3.21.2) and Aristophanes' featuring of a hero named Dicaeopolis; the strong connection between the host and author in each scene (Ethiopian king ~ Herodotus, Dicaeopolis ~ Aristophanes); and the causal significance of the embassy scenes in each work.

In addition to its humour, Herodotus' embassy scene would have also been particularly attractive to Aristophanes for reworking because of the current historical situation: the fact that both Athens and Sparta were seeking financial support from the Persian king would have made reference to all things Persian even more engaging. That Herodotus presented such an entertaining and thought-provoking embassy scene connected to Persia would have made it all the more ripe for the comic poet's own repurposing.

markcmash@gmail.com

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