TWO PASSAGES IN THE BIRDS OF ARISTOPHANES

I. 434–6: ὁγε δὴ σὺ καὶ σὺ τὴν πανοπλίαν μὲν πάλιν
tαῦτην λαβόντε κρεμάσατον τιγάγαθη
eἰς τὸν ἰππὸν εἶσον πλησίον τοῦπιστάτου.

Here the Hoopoe orders two attendants to remove the improvised ‘weapons’ (cooking-pot, saucers and spit) and, perhaps not inappropriately, to ‘take them and hang them at the hearth indoors πλησίον τοῦπιστάτου’. Clearly this last object must be something we could expect to find in an Athenian kitchen, and three interpretations have traditionally been offered: (i) that it is a pot-stand; (ii) a clay figure of Hephaestus (as superintendent of the kitchen fire); and (iii) a wooden stand with pegs for hanging up utensils. Evidence can be adduced to support (i), and (ii) is prima facie possible. I should reject (iii) however, on the grounds that one does not hang something up near (but on) a peg.

In attempting to assess the relative merits of (i) and (ii) we may find help in Peace 729–32:


Here we have clear evidence for the pilfering of stage properties. Can it be that Aristophanes is making the same allusion in Birds? If so, the Hoopoe is instructing the attendants to hang the ‘weapons’ up ‘near the superintendent’, that is to say, near the stage manager who can then keep an eye on his props and protect them from light-fingered loiterers. The point is all the more pungent if, in the culinary context, ἐπιστάτης is Hephaestus the Superintendent.

1) I should like to thank Mr. K.H. Lee for much helpful criticism of this paper.
2) See the Souda, s.v. ἐπιστάτης.
3) See B.A. Sparkes, J.H.S. LXXXII (1962), 127, with footnote 56.
4) If, on the other hand, the reference is not to the ‘superintendent’,
II. 904–954: in particular the text of 953 where the mss. vary between πολύπορα and πολύσπορα. I wish to argue that, for reasons that revolve around an elaborate lisping pun, πολύσπορα is unquestionably the adjective which we should expect Aristophanes to put in the mouth of our frigid lyric poet.

The editors of both the OCT and Budé read πολύπορα, no doubt reasoning that πολύσπορα is inappropriate in this context: it is certainly not immediately evident why the poet should refer to the fertility of the region, though he may reasonably enough allude to its extent

What he is most concerned with, however, is the icy coldness of the area and the consequent need for protective clothing. I believe that this latter point is best brought out by πολύσπορα.

For I suggest that our poet is portrayed as afflicted with a prominent lisp, a lisp of the 'Chinese' type now known as 'lambdacism', which manifests itself in the mispronunciation of 'r' as 'l'. That Aristophanes was not unaware of this form of speech impediment, or of the possibilities of its humorous exploitation, is evident from Wasps 44–45, where the pun turns on Alcibiades' τρανλότης:

\[\text{εἰτ}, \text{ Ἀλκαβιάδης εἶπε πρὸς με τρανλότης:} \]
\["οἶς; \text{Θέωλος τὴν κεφαλὴν κόλαχος ἔχει."} \]

It is also possible that Plato similarly exploits this well-known trademark of Alcibiades: in the Symposium

Alcibiades begins his encomium of Socrates by comparing him to τοῖς σιλήνοις τούτοις τοῖς ἐν τοῖς ἐγχολύφαις καθημένοις, and then proceeds, via a comparison with Marsyas, to liken the effect of Socrates' voice to that of the Sirens: βία ὁδὸν ὄσπερ ἀπὸ τῶν Σειρήνων ἐπισχὺμενος τὰ ὅτα οἴχομαι φεύγων. "The word Σειρήνων on Alcibiades' lips in this context involves either a very remarkable coincidence or else an amusing pun... When Alcibiades said (or was portrayed as saying) Σειρήνων he would pronounce it like enough to Σειληνῶν to suggest an amusing equivoque."
In our present passage Aristophanes more than prepares the audience for such a joke. Consider the superabundance of liquids from the moment of the poet’s entry: Νεφελοκοκκυγίαν ... κλήσον (904–5); μεληλίθοσσών (907), θεράτων ὁτηρός (909; 912–13); μέλη ... κύκλωσε τε πολλά καὶ καλά καὶ παροδένεια (917–19); πάλαι, πάλαι δή τίρῳ ἐγώ κληζω πόλιν (921) and so on. This accumulation of lambdacistic potential leads up to the punch-line: νυφόβολα πεδία πολύσποδα τ’ ἡλιθόν. The poet has come to beg for raiment and, unlike the recipient of Hiero’s favours9), he has not been dismissed ἀκλεῖς. He wins both σπολάς and χιτών, and, as he departs, praises the plains of Cloudcuckoo-town: he has found them not only chilly and νυφόβολα, but πολύσπολα10), ‘rich in jerkins’!

A close inspection of his parting words – there is at least one liquid in virtually every word – reveals how cleverly Aristophanes rams home his lambdacistic point:

κλήσον, ὥ χορσόδροσε, τὰν τρομερών, κονεοάν
νυφόβολα πεδία πολύσποδα τ’ ἡλιθόν. Ἁλαλαί.

One may perhaps be forgiven – especially in view of the date of the play11) in relation to the exploits of Alcibiades in the Sicilian Expedition – for suspecting that, at the very least, Aristophanes intended us to call to mind the somewhat eccentric στρατηγός. Is it just conceivable that the lyric poet is Alcibiades?12)

Monash University, Australia

Alan S. Henry

9) Pindar, fr. 94 (Bowra).
10) Certainly in itself a vox nihil of unacceptable formation, but surely admissible in the guise of a pun on πολύσποδα. As for the metre, 951 seems best taken as a dochmiac dimeter in which the first element of the second metron scans long:

\[ \text{αλαλαί} \text{ (accepting Bentley’s emendation) is extra metrum. (950 is dactylo-epitrite of the form e-Dd\textsuperscript{a}).} \]

11) Produced at the City Dionysia of 414, and presumably therefore written in 415.

12) This is not, of course, to maintain that the Birds is a ‘political’ play: it is simply another sample of Aristophanes’ fondness for making fun of a noticeable characteristic of a prominent citizen.