

Porson's Law and Middle Comedy

Porson's law, that in tragedy a fifth-foot spondee is not normally divided between two words, is familiar to us from our schooldays. Two recent statements, however, by Snell and Wüst¹⁾ — whose contributions to the study of Greek metre and comedy respectively need no praise here — tell us that Porson's law applies also to Greek middle-comedy writers with the

2) Corp. Gloss. Lat. IV 404, 25 *adasia. ovis maior natu*, desgleichen Festus ed. Müller 12, Anm. 13: *Adasia* Isidorus in Glossis: *Adasia, ovis maior natu. Recentis partus* videtur significare recentem a partu.

1) E. Wüst, *Rheinisches Museum* XCIII (N. F.) 1950, 341; B. Snell, *Griechische Metrik* (Göttingen, 1955), 10 n. 2.

one exception of Alexis, and Kanz' dissertation²) of almost half a century ago is cited as the authority for this remarkable view.

But in his dissertation Kanz was not discussing the comic trimeter, and his conclusions were that Porson's law was generally observed by middle-comedy writers when using the trochaic tetrameter metre: i. e., that they avoided caesura before the beginning of the fourth trochaic metrum when the third ended with a spondee (— ∪ —). This conclusion is inferred from the alleged avoidance of this caesura by Antiphanes (fr. 171, v. 1³) excepted), Philetaerus (fr. 9, v. 6 excepted), Amphis (fr. 7 excepted), and all the other middle-comedy poets save Alexis, who breaks the rule frequently, along with Menander and Aristophanes. But even if these facts were correct, the conclusion would be unjustifiable; the number of trochaic tetrameters extant in middle comedy by the different writers is so few as to render any statistical arguments based on them valueless. For instance, Amphis' one exception is in a total of 3 verses extant, and Philetaerus' exception in a total of seven verses⁴). Furthermore, Kanz' facts are not correct; Antiphanes ignores the rule also at fr. 174, vv. 1 & 3, and fr. 205, v. 4⁵).

In short, there is very little evidence to support Kanz' thesis that middle-comedy poets in general observed Porson's law in their trochaic tetrameters⁶), and it would be reasonable consequently to suppose that they were no more bound by it than their forebears or successors. And in iambic trimeters, the position is exactly the same. A rough count of the first hundred trimeters or so of the three most important middle-comedy poets: Alexis, Antiphanes and Eubulus: reveals that Alexis ignored the law 23 times, Antiphanes nine times, and Eubulus six times; the relatively smaller numbers for the last two poets are readily explicable: they engage far more in these lines in tragic parody or paratragic bombast.

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2) J. Kanz, *De tetrametro trochaico* (Diss. Gießen, 1913), 70.

3) The fragments are cited in the numeration of T. Kock, *Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta*, vol. II (Leipzig, 1884).

4) Amphis: frs. 7 & 8; Philetaerus: fr. 9.

5) Fr. 174 derives from the "Homoioi", an undatable play, but the presence in this fragment of verses in dactylic metre suggests that the play belonged to the period of the μέση. Fr. 205 derives from the "Stratiotes", dated by Professor Webster (*Classical Quarterly* II (N. S.) 1952, 15 f.) to the 360's, because of a suspected reference in one of the fragments of that play to the luxury of Nicocles of Paphos, who died in 358. If Webster is right, this play also belongs to the middle-comedy period; otherwise (and there is no objective way of testing Webster's thesis) the play might possibly be the work of the younger Antiphanes, and so irrelevant to the present argument.

6) In fact, there is only one place that I have found where an author seems consciously to be adhering to Porson's canon: Anaxilas in a long passage of trochaic tetrameters (fr. 22: 31 verses), where there is no exception to the rule. The reason for this adherence I do not know; there appears to be no aping of tragic style. Perhaps the reason would be more apparent if we knew the fragment's context.