

Α ΠΩΛΟΣ JOKE IN ARISTOPHANES? (Thesm. 1210–11)*

ὦ γράδι' ὡς καριεντο σοι το τυγάτριον
κού δύσκολ' ἄλλα πρᾶο.¹

1210

It has been noted in previous scholarship that the Scythian archer, after emerging on stage after his brief dalliance with a courtesan, apparently describes her at line 1211 as though she were a horse.² Why he should depict her in this way has not yet been explained, despite the remarkable contrast it forms with the girl's stated name Elaphion (lit. 'fawn') at line 1172. The following discussion will offer a solution to this discrepancy and suggest that we have here a joke that has previously gone unrecognised.

An underlying assumption of the Scythian's remark is the expectation that Elaphion would be difficult and adverse to his affections. Now post factum, as it were, he exclaims with pleasant surprise that she has proved quite the opposite. Why he should assume her to be disagreeable in the first place is not immediately clear. In any case, we need not infer that the Greeks considered prostitutes on the whole to be peevish and difficult, and that divergent behaviour was a rare exception.³ It may be the case, rather, that the Scythian's expectations have something to do with the intriguing horse imagery found at line 1211. Indeed, the suggestion of a distempered and unruly nature seems particularly designed to imply a young horse or πῶλος, an animal known – even proverbially so – for its spirited and difficult temperament. One might compare Aesch. PV 1009–1010: ὡς νεοζυγῆς / πῶλος βιάζει καὶ πρὸς ἡνίας μάχη, Eur. fr. 818c.3–4: εἰκὸς σφαδάζειν ἦν ἂν ὡς νεόζυγα / πῶλον χαλινὸν ἀρτίως δεδεγμένον, and Pl. Grg. 463e2 (with word play on the name

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1) An orthographic rendering of the Scythian's faulty Greek would read: ὦ γράδιον, ὡς καριέν σου τὸ τυγάτριον / κού δύσκολον ἄλλα πρᾶον.

2) See A. H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes: Thesmophoriazusae* (Warminster 1994) on 1211. For additional examples of these words used within an equine context see, for δύσκολος: Pl. Phdr. 246b4; Xen. Eq. 5.1,4; and for πρᾶος: Xen. Eq. 3.12, 9.10. For an especially striking parallel to the language of the present passage see above all the word play of Sokrates in his horse joke at the expense of 'Hippias' (Pl. Hp. mi. 364c–d): ὦ Ἰππία ... μοι πειρῶ πρᾶως τε καὶ εὐκόλως ἀποκρίνεσθαι. A further allusion to Elaphion as a horse seems to occur at 1174 where the reading ἀνακόλασον is inferred from the scholia (R has ἀνακόλασον). A comparison of καλπ- stems elsewhere indicates that they are typically used of horses, e.g. Plut. Alex. 6; Paus. 5.9.1; and possibly Aesch. fr. 144a (see also Pearson on Soph. fr. 1007).

3) As suggested by C. Austin and S. D. Olson, *Aristophanes: Thesmophoriazusae* (Oxford 2004) ad loc. But cf. Philem. fr. 3.13–16, Xenarch. fr. 4 and Timocl. fr. 24, where the prostitutes are anything but surly and uncooperative, which would argue against any such generalisation.

‘Polos’): Πῶλος δὲ ὄδε νέος ἐστὶ καὶ ὀξύς.⁴ The identification of Elaphion with a skittish and spirited πῶλος would therefore plausibly account for the Scythian’s surprise at her unexpectedly ‘tame’ and ‘favourable’⁵ behaviour towards him.

There still remains, however, the question why the Scythian describes her this way in the first place. We know from elsewhere that πῶλος could be used as a slang term for a prostitute, most notably Hsch. π 4500: πῶλος· ἐταίρα. πῶλους γὰρ αὐτάς ἔλεγον, οἷον Ἀφροδίτης. Examples of this meaning from later literature can be found at Eub. fr. 82.2: πῶλους Κύπριδος, POxy. 413.119–120, and at Plaut. Cist. 308 where we find the Latin equivalent *equolam*. Examples of this usage before 411 B. C. when *Thesmophoriazusae* was produced are not as clear cut, but we have several possible instances that point strongly to a familiarity with this usage in the latter half of the fifth century. In fact, the first attested use of πῶλος to denote a prostitute quite possibly occurs as early as the sixth century in the ‘Thracian filly’ (πῶλε Θρηκίη) poem of Anakreon (PMG 417). This interpretation of the poem has an even stronger claim if it was written with a symposiastic setting in mind, in which case it is likely addressed to one of the entertainers to be found there.⁶ Meineke suspects that Kratinos had used the word in this sense in his *Kleoboulinai* (fr.94): ἐστὶν ἄκμων καὶ σφῦρα νεανία εὐτρυχι πῶλω.⁷ In addition to these examples, we have a possible allusion to this sense of the word in a fragment from Euripides’ satyr play *Skiron* (fr. 675),⁸ while at Eur. Andr. 621 the word may have been purposely chosen to lend

4) Cf. the phrase πῶλος ὑπὸ ζυγοῦ at Soph. fr. **444.6; Eur. Or. 45; Bacch. 1056; Eub. fr. 75.6; and the epithets ἀδμής at Epicr. fr. 8.4 and ἀδάμαστος at Xen. Eq. 1.1.

5) The word χαρίεν here also evidently implies sexual favours, as often in comedy; see J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse* (New York / Oxford 21991) §251.

6) The setting of Anakreon’s poem and the identity of the Thracian girl are still the object of much debate among scholars (cf. G. O. Hutchinson, *Greek Lyric Poetry* [Oxford 2001] 280), and absolute certainty here is not possible. Nonetheless, it is certainly conceivable that during the subsequent reception of the poem, especially at symposia where courtesans and other such performers might be found, many a wit may have offered their own rendition of the song and duly understood the ‘Thracian filly’ in the sense described above regardless of what Anakreon’s original intention may have been. Conditions such as these may have helped to popularise this sense of the word in fifth century Athens.

7) A. Meineke, *Fragmenta Comicorum Graecorum*, II.1 (Berlin 1839) 69 no. 3. See also the interpretation of this fragment by D. Müller, *Handwerk und Sprache* (Meisenheim 1974) 141–142.

8) καὶ τὰς μὲν ἄξι, πῶλον ἦν δίδωσι ἕνα./ τὰς δέ, ξυνωρίδ’· αἱ δὲ καπὶ τεσσάρων / φοιτῶσιν ἵππων ἀργυρῶν. φιλοῦσι δέ / τὰς ἐξ Ἀθηνῶν παρθένους, ὅταν φέρη / πολλάς (τις). Here πῶλον is ostensibly a slang term for a Corinthian coin owing to the image of Pegasus stamped on one side (see Poll. 9.76). But we might also note of this passage – significantly set within a context of hiring courtesans – that the names of the various types of coin (i. e. ‘filly’, ‘yoked pair’, ‘horses’ and ‘virgins’) all appear to contain a double meaning by which they deliberately suggest their corresponding objects of purchase. See also N. Pechstein, *Euripides Satyrographos* (Stuttgart / Leipzig 1998) 231 who evidently suspects a similar word play in this fragment: “Sowohl πῶλος als auch παρθένος werden bisweilen selbst als erotische Metaphern gebraucht”. Here we might note further that ἵππος can also be

a derogatory undertone to the unflattering description of Hermione as the *πῶλος* of the unfaithful Helen (i. e. like mother like daughter).⁹

Taking both of these aspects of the word into account, it would seem that we have here a sly innuendo in which the Scythian light-heartedly alludes to Elaphion's implicit professional identity as a *πῶλος* (i. e. a prostitute). Here, however, he adds a playful twist, adopting an air of mock surprise that she did not behave as one would typically expect of such a creature if we understand *πῶλος* in the literal sense of the word, especially considering its proverbial reputation for unruliness.¹⁰

Sydney

Andrew Hartwig

used as a slang term for a prostitute (below, n. 9), while *παρθένους* appears to have literal implications, in this case attesting to the practice of 'defloration', which would also explain the higher cost (for a cultural parallel of this practice see R. H. van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China* [Leiden / Boston 2003] 182).

9) Horse imagery in general had certainly been used for some time to denote prostitutes, as we find in the description of Kypris untying her 'horses' (*ἵππους*) from the yoke at Anac. PMG 346 fr. 1.7–9, and in the herd of girls (i. e. Corinthian prostitutes) that graze in Aphrodite's meadow at Pind. fr. 122.17–18. Cf. also the slang use of *φορβός* at Soph. fr. 720 and Poll. 7.203; and Eur. fr. 675 with its various 'horse' metaphors to indicate both coins and courtesans (above, n. 8). The comic joke against Kallias as the son of 'Hippokinos' (or 'Hippobinos') at Ar. Ran. 428 may also be an obscene allusion to his hiring of courtesans for his symposia (cf. Max. Tyr. 14.7; Philostr. VS 2.25.3; Σ^{vet} Ar. Av. 286; Σ Lucian, Iupp. trag. 48). On horse imagery within a sexual context in general, see further Henderson (above, n. 5) §§84 and 277.

10) It might be objected here that a subtle word play of this kind is at odds with the Scythian's general character and that he is incapable of making such a joke. But comic characters are never models of consistency, and often betray such incongruities if the poet stands to gain comic mileage from it. Other apparent incongruities with the Scythian's character occur at 1102–1103, 1215, and especially 1114 where he adopts a tone of heavy irony in accordance with his function as 'straight man' to the patently deluded 'Perseus' who continues to address Inlaw as though he were female: *σκεπαι το κυστο· μη τι μικρο παινεται*; ('Look at his "pussy"! Perhaps it appears small in some way?' – the Scythian, it should be noted, utters this line as he points out the large leather phallus worn by Inlaw in order to emphasise the irony. For the same idiom with comparable sarcasm, see Aesch. PV 959–960). On discontinuity of character in Aristophanes in general, see the important discussion of M. S. Silk, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy* (Oxford 2000) 207 ff. If we wish to restrict the Scythian's ability to make witty jokes of this kind, one might suggest instead that we still have an allusion to Elaphion's professional identity as a *πῶλος*, only here the Scythian conflates this idea with the animal itself and had genuinely expected her to behave as such, thereby becoming the butt of the joke due to his literal minded stupidity.