

THE

# MACULATE MUSE

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OBSCENE LANGUAGE IN ATTIC COMEDY



JEFFREY HENDERSON

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*Jeffrey Henderson*

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*For Ann*

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## Preface

In 1971, when I began the dissertation that would become *The Maculate Muse*, scorn of the old taboos about human sexuality and its social expressions had become socially fashionable among many members of my generation, even a badge of cultural liberation. For me, an academic who had never thought that human sexuality should be a shameful secret and who had always been amused and fascinated by erotic art and literature, that era of “sexual revolution” seemed an opportune time to explore the sexual dimensions of my favorite classical artform. But there was little to build on: the sexual organization of the Athenian polis, and therefore the specifically Athenian meanings of its erotic art, were still largely unexplored subjects. Investigation of the whole system would have been beyond my capacity even if I had given myself more than one year to write a dissertation. But I wanted to start, and obscenity seemed to be the category that could most easily be defined and analyzed by a novice scholar and that would be most useful as philology. And I saw nothing improbable in Aristophanes’ claim (e.g., *Nu.* 518–62) that obscenity, like other features of his art, whether considered as poetry, as wit, or as characterization, should ideally be not merely enjoyably shocking but also creatively original, aesthetically dynamic, and even liberating. For me Aristophanes often attained this ideal, as have other major writers in forms both elevated (Shakespeare, Rabelais, Joyce) and proletarian (Charles Bukowski, William Burroughs).

At the time few of my colleagues felt the same way. Friends warned me that I was unlikely to get the dissertation published even if I did manage to find something worthwhile to say about comic obscenity, which they doubted. One professor was sympathetic but suggested I write the dissertation in Latin, while another angrily asked, “How could you do this to Aristophanes?” Fortunately, Zeph Stewart, my advisor, and later Edward Tripp, my editor at the Yale University Press, provided the support and



encouragement I needed to bring off the project. As it turned out, *The Maculate Muse* did manage to show that obscene language was a more central and interesting feature of Old Comedy than had been supposed, even in light of the groundbreaking work by K. J. Dover (in *Clouds*) and Jean Taillardat (in *Les Images d'Aristophane*). Since then, obscene language in comic and other Greek poetry has begun to be acknowledged by translators<sup>1</sup> and to receive the same kind of scholarly interest and attention as other kinds of language. And we now have Adams (1982) and Richlin (1983) on the Latin side.

Also, since then, new approaches to the study of sexuality,<sup>2</sup> which see it as a phenomenon central to every culture, though always in different ways, have begun to stimulate the interest of classicists, with some impressive results.<sup>3</sup> In addition, new cultural approaches to the study of gender and gender-roles have forced a reappraisal of our own discipline and its cultural dynamics. Here the Women's Classical Caucus has played a leading role, and the formation of a Gay/Lesbian Caucus has recently been announced. In light of these developments of the past twenty years I would certainly do some things differently were I writing the book now.

My use of psychoanalytic theory—the most powerful tool available in any study of the sexual and emotional dynamics of language and narrative—would be more sophisticated now, largely as a result of my association, since 1982, with Richard Caldwell.<sup>4</sup> My analysis of the aggressive and regressive dynamics of comic obscenity was adequate, but we still need a refined psychoanalytic study of comic plots and situations, especially in their mythopoeic dimensions<sup>5</sup>; such a study would further illuminate the dramatic codes at work in comic obscenity. Greater awareness of the role of comic drama as a social and political institution<sup>6</sup> sheds additional light on the power of comic obscenity to expose and degrade, and thus to play a role (analogous to but distinct from that played by lawcourts, *dokimasiai* and

1. Noteworthy are the translations that accompany Alan H. Sommerstein's edition of Aristophanes (Warminster and Chicago 1980—).

2. See the Introduction to Halperin/Winkler/Zeitlin (1990) for a survey. The University of Chicago Press recently announced the debut in 1990 of the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*.

3. I have added a selection of recent works on texts and material remains to the bibliography.

4. Classicists, when they know anything about psychoanalytic theory at all, do not so much reject as misunderstand it. I hope this situation will change now that Caldwell (1989, 1990) has provided lucid descriptions of the theory and examples of its application to myths and mythic language. For a feminist reappraisal of the psychoanalytic approach see du Bois (1988).

5. I should have made more extensive use of P. Rau, *Paratragodia* (Munich 1967), who often discusses comic usurpation of the erotic in tragedy. The extent to which a comic poet could mythologize in his own right is shown by H. Hofmann, *Mythos und Komödie. Untersuchungen zu den Vögeln des Ar.* (Hildesheim 1976).

6. See the essays in Winkler/Zeitlin (1990).

*euthynai*) in the corporate surveillance of sexual behavior.<sup>7</sup> In this field, incorporation of the evidence of erotic art—more ubiquitous in classical Greece than in any other society except Japan—is a desideratum, but (in my case at least) would require collaboration with an expert iconographer.<sup>8</sup>

The accomplishments of recent gay and feminist scholarship have alerted us to the degree to which Attic comedy expressed, and helped to enforce, the norms of an exclusively androcentric and in certain ways homophobic public regime. But at the same time there was an “other” Athens—the spheres of home and cult, the world of “detached” *apragmones*, foreigners and slaves—that was more traditional and inclusive, whose principles and protocols were often at variance with those of the official polis, and whose rival claims could be (uniquely) expressed, even championed, at the comic festivals. More attention should be paid to such points of social and ideological conflict, lest we end up fabricating yet another oversimple picture of a complex society, replacing the Athens that could be held up as an ideal for men by an Athens that can play sinister “other” to a gay or feminist ideal. If *The Maculate Muse* seems in retrospect to reproduce the vocabulary and assumptions of the androcentric and homophobic sides of Attic comedy too uncritically, then it remains to be seen to what degree these may in fact have been subversive (as would befit Dionysos and the negative and deflationary biases of his festive comedy); whether in the end there is any more benign and less degrading way to make public humor out of sex; and whether indeed erotic art or literature can ever do without guilt, taboo, violence, conflict, and degradation and still be erotic.<sup>9</sup> The study of sexuality still needs to investigate not merely the behavior of people in groups and in relation to institutions like marriage, but also their behavior in sex. For philologists, critics, and historians obscenity, being a way to express sexuality that every society tries to define and then suppress in its own ways, is of particular value.

These are some of the questions that would inform *The Maculate Muse* were I (re)writing it today. But on balance it seems best simply to reprint the original text, adding a new preface and some necessary *addenda*, *corrigenda*, and *retractanda*. Historical interest and cost-efficiency aside, the book remains a basic starting-point, and is offered again in hopes of contributing to the ongoing investigation of an aspect of Greek culture that continues to fascinate in new ways.

7. See Winkler (1990) 45–70.

8. Various approaches can be found in Bérard et al. (1990), Boardman (1978), Bowie/Christenson (1970), Hofmann (1978), Johns (1982), Keuls (1985), Marcadé (1965), Sutton (1981; forthcoming), Taplin (1988).

9. In this connection it is worth mentioning the feminist debate over the social and political aspects of pornography and the desirability of its censorship: see Ellis et al. (1986) and, from the classicist's point of view, Richlin (forthcoming), Introduction.

In another way 1991 is an opportune time for re-release, in view of what seems to be a national reversion to sexual conservatism (I would say intolerance), as witnessed, for example, by this chilling notice to humanists from our government:

None of the funds authorized to be appropriated for the...National Endowment for the Humanities may be used to promote, disseminate, or produce materials which in the judgment of the...National Endowment for the Humanities may be considered obscene, including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.<sup>10</sup>

One can only hope that the art of classical Greece, which frequently depicts each one of these banned subjects, will be among the materials judged “serious” even when we are studying Old Comedy. At any rate, to reissue *The Maculate Muse* in such a climate gives me an agreeable feeling of rebelliousness reminiscent of my student days.

I am grateful to my editor, Rachel Toor, for suggesting this new edition and for her many helpful suggestions, and to the reviewers and friends (Amy Richlin and John J. Winkler particularly) who over the years have alerted me to the book’s strengths and weaknesses.

May 1990

J. H.

10. Sent to all applicants for funding as of November 1989. For a Greek word to describe this kind of censorship I can’t help but recall Aristophanes’ coinage (*Eg.* 878) *προκοιτηρεῖν* [make surveillance of assholes], applied by the Sausage Seller to Kleon, who had boasted of “putting a stop to homosexual fornication”.

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## Introduction

Obscene humor has always been something of an embarrassment to writers on ancient comedy, from Aristotle, Plutarch, and Longinus to scholars of the present day. Everyone knows that Aristophanes and his fellow comic poets included in their works a great abundance of obscene words, allusions, double entendres and visual bawdiness, but to this day there has been no study that attempts comprehensively to elucidate, evaluate, or even to discuss the nature and function of sexual and scatological language in Attic Comedy. Occasionally an article will appear explaining an obscene word or passage. The older commentaries, when they take note of obscenities at all, usually follow the scholiast's laconic and often inaccurate definitions.

The work of modern scholiasts, like J. Taillardat's *Les Images d'Aristophane* (Paris, 1962) and C. Charitonides' ΑΠΟΡΡΗΤΑ (Thessaloniki, 1935), are merely reference lists, and quite incomplete ones at that, which paraphrase the scholia and tell us nothing about the function of obscene language in the comedies. The attempts to acknowledge and understand comic obscenity in such treatments of individual plays as Dover's commentary on *Clouds*, MacDowell's on *Wasps*, Ussher's on *Ecclesiazusae*, and Wit-Tak's book on *Lysistrata*<sup>1</sup> suffer from the absence of any comprehensive study of obscenity in all the remains of Attic Comedy. The same can be said for the well-meaning but inadequate treatment of the subject in the standard reference works and in books of literary criticism, like those of Cedric Whitman, *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964)

1. *Lysistrata: Vrede, Vrouw, en Obsceniteit bij Aristophanes* (Groningen, 1967). This book makes some valuable observations, although the author's reliance on modern sociological and psychological theories at the expense of philological accuracy gravely mars her conclusions: see P. Rau's trenchant critique in *Gnomon* 40 (1968): 568 ff. Miss Wit-Tak's sequel, "Obscenity in the *Thesm.* and *Eccl.* of Aristophanes," *Mnem.* 21 (1968): 4 ff., suffers from the same methodological imperfections.

and, most recently, K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1972).

Contributing to the natural disinclination of scholars to study Aristophanic obscenity is the notion that none of this material has any relevance to the actual meaning and value of the plays; it is usually assumed that the plays would be better without it. Scholars seem to feel that they may on the basis of that assumption safely ignore the obscenity, and the explanations they give for its presence in the plays in the first place are similar to those given in the case of other authors, Shakespeare being perhaps the closest parallel:<sup>2</sup> the obscenity, they say, must be traditional and thus, we must suppose, indispensable, an inheritance from lower forms of art such as the hypothetical Dorian or Megarian farces<sup>3</sup> or the cults; or it must have been an extra morsel tossed in on the principle *his plebecula gaudet*;<sup>4</sup> or the poet had to use every kind of humor available to him in order to win prizes or sweeten his moral messages.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, the obscenities are explained away through the popular notion that they were not really obscene at all, since the ancients were uninhibited children of nature who looked on all human functions without shame:<sup>6</sup> therefore there is no need for more discriminating people to discuss them, for their presence in the plays is merely the consequence of artful innocence.

But a thorough study of the evidence will reveal the incorrectness of such assumptions. The obscenity in Aristophanes is almost always integrally connected with the main themes of the plays; it is an important part of the stage action, the development of plots, and the characterization of personae, and can no more readily be excised from the plays than can any other major dramatic or poetic ingredients. Far from being merely an artist's concession to the rabble, the obscene jokes and allusions in ancient comedy often reach a level of sophistication equal to the cleverest allusions to poetry or philosophy, and are composed as much for *δεξιὸν θεαταί* as for the groundlings. We must keep in mind that the very spectacle of Attic Comedy was, at least until well into the fourth century, thoroughly

2. As Eric Partridge observes in his amusing book, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (London, 1968).

3. W. Schmid, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* (Munich, 1929-46), 1: 637, nn. 1, 2; 4: 8, n. 1, 22 ff.; P. Mazon, "La Farce dans Aristophane," *Rev. d'hist. du théâtre* 3 (1957): 7 ff.

4. See the discussion by Wit-Tak (n. 1, above), pp. 109 f.; M. Croiset, *Histoire de la littérature grecque*<sup>3</sup> (Paris, 1913), 3: 484, 606; W. Süss, *Aristophanes und die Nachwelt* (Leipzig, 1911), pp. 78 f.; F. Wright, *Feminism in Greek Literature from Homer to Aristotle* (London, 1923), pp. 150 f.; G. Murray, *Aristophanes* (Oxford, 1933), chap. 1; van Daele at Pl 703.

5. Schmid (n. 3, above), 4: 400 f.

6. See, for example, N. Dracoulides, *Psychanalyse d'Aristophane* (Paris, 1967), pp. 38 f.; H. M. Hyde, *A History of Pornography* (London, 1964), p. 10.

obscene: the male actors were grotesquely padded in the rump and belly and wore the phallus;<sup>7</sup> the female parts (even if played by men) usually involved nudity and much sexual byplay;<sup>8</sup> the dancing was often highly suggestive; the abusive, parodic, and satirical thrust of the comedies relied heavily on obscenity for its impact. In other words, the ethos of Attic Comedy, as well as the traditions it carried on, included obscenity in all its forms as an indispensable element.

It is the purpose of this study to offer as comprehensive a consideration of sexual and scatological language in Aristophanes and the other poets of Attic comedy as seems feasible in the present state of our knowledge.

The first three chapters, which are more or less theoretical, appraise the nature of obscenity as it appears in Attic Comedy and attempt to understand the historical, cultural, and literary factors which led to the elevation of obscene language to the prominent position it holds in the artistic repertoire of Aristophanes and his fellow comic poets. Since ancient critics and literary historians, all of them writing at a time when Old and Middle Comedy and public indecency in general were relics of the past, offer nothing worth discussing in this connection, our evidence in chapters 1-3 must be the remains of comedy itself, archaeological evidence, the cults, and obscene language as it appears in other contemporary literature.

The subsequent chapters attempt to identify and discuss all the obscene terminology I have been able to find in the extant remains of Attic Comedy. In these sections, as in the introductory chapters, I have translated all Greek, not only to make the discussion available to those who are without Greek or who are not specialists in this field, but also because passages quoted from Attic comic poets (especially fragmentary passages) often

7. It is now generally agreed that the phallus was worn by male actors, except in cases like that of Cleisthenes in *Thesmophoriazusae*, where its absence adds to the humor. All the relevant arguments can be found in the following series of articles: W. Beare, "The Costume of the Actors in Attic Comedy," *CQ* 4 (1954): 64 ff.; "Aristophanic Costume Again," *CQ* 7 (1957): 184 f., with Webster's reply (p. 185); "Aristophanic Costume: A Last Word," *CQ* 9 (1959): 126; T. B. L. Webster, "South Italian Vases and Attic Drama," *CQ* 42 (1948): 15 ff.; "Attic Costume: A Reexamination," *Eph. Arch.* (1953/54): 192 ff.; J. F. Killeen, "The Comic Costume Controversy," *CQ* 21 (1971): 51 ff. See also R. Ussher's Introduction to his commentary on *Ecclesiazusae* (Oxford, 1972); T. Gelzer, "Aristophanes," *RE Suppl.* 12. 1515.44 ff.; A. Willems, *Aristophane* (Paris-Brussels, 1919), 3: 381 ff.

8. The costumes of women characters who were supposed to be naked probably included simulated sexual organs and pubic hair: e.g. V 1373 ff., P 891 ff., L 87 ff. On the question of nudity vs. costuming, see C. H. Whitman, *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), p. 311, n. 31; Willems (n. 7, above). For the question of nakedness in general, cf. Schmid (n. 3, above), 4: 23, n. 2, 286, n. 7. In Aristophanes, see Eq 1390 ff., V 1342 ff., 1373, P 886 f., Av 670, L 1114, T 1181 ff.



contain terminology and allusions which even the experienced scholar might find difficult. I hope that the translations will save every reader from the annoyance of frequent trips to *LSJ*.

In order that these chapters will have an interest and value beyond that of the usual glossary, I have arranged the terminological entries by numbered paragraphs in groups that can be read as independent essays on the various aspects of comic obscenity. A straight lexical approach would have made it impossible to do justice to the material: the terminology must be explained as it occurs in each individual context and in relation to typologically similar terminology; definitions alone would be neither accurate nor enlightening. Readers who wish to consult this book as a reference work may use the indexes, which have been designed for use as a glossary.

For readers who have little or no Greek but wish to make use of the Greek terminology, I suggest the key to transliteration given by K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, pp. xii ff.

In translating Greek obscenities I have regularly used the nearest English equivalents. I hope and trust that no one will be shocked by these words. In any case, the reader will soon perceive that it would be at least cumbersome, and often impossible, to explicate the Greek texts by means of clinical, euphemistic, or Latin terminology.

I would like to thank C. H. Whitman and A. Lowell Edmunds of Harvard, K. J. Dover of St. Andrews, Charles Segal of Brown University, and Edward Tripp and Barbara Folsom of the Yale University Press for their interest and helpful suggestions, and to express particular gratitude to Zeph Stewart of Harvard, not only for his patient and painstaking criticism of several drafts of this book, but for the friendship and encouragement he so freely extended to me during my four years in Cambridge. Whatever faults remain are entirely my own.

J.H.

*New Haven, Connecticut*  
*June 25, 1973*

## *Abbreviations*

Authors and works are abbreviated as in *LSJ*. The plays and fragments of Aristophanes are abbreviated according to the following list:

A *Acharnians*

Eq *Knights*

N *Clouds*

V *Wasps*

P *Peace*

Av *Birds*

L *Lysistrata*

T *Thesmophoriazusae*

R *Frogs*

E *Ecclesiazusae*

Pl *Plutus*

Fr *Fragment*

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*The Maculate Muse*

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## 1 *Obscene Language and the Development of Attic Comedy*

The plays of Aristophanes burst with jokes and buffoonery of all kinds: in the service of satire, abuse, parody, irony, and surrealist absurdity are countless plays on words, comic distortions of proper names, ludicrous and extravagant compounds, constant shifting between different proprieties of diction, verbal surprises, equivocations, deceptions. Although the physical action must have been fast-paced and colorful, it is primarily in his verbal pyrotechnics that the genius of Aristophanes (and the writers of Old and Middle Attic Comedy in general) resides.<sup>1</sup> The Athens of the middle fifth century was itself fascinated, even infatuated, with words and their power;<sup>2</sup> its citizens listened intently and with great sophistication to the clever speakers who mounted the *bema*; to be a polished and urbane orator and debater was a highly prized accomplishment; to be slow and clumsy with words meant second-class consideration.

Already the ground was being prepared for the great studies of rhetoric, dialectic, linguistics, and genre that would appear in a constant flow from the late fifth century on. Playwrights were required, no less than the public speakers, to be verbally entertaining, to use the great subtlety and flexibility of Attic Greek to its best advantage. The audiences at Aristophanes' plays were the same quick-witted public that attended the tragedies; they expected the same sophistication in both genres—more so, perhaps, from comic poets: in comedy there is no mythological grandeur and high emo-

1. For systematic discussions of Aristophanes' comic methods, see W. Starkie, *Acharnians*, pp. xxxviii ff., an analysis from the pseudo-Aristotelian *Tractatus Coislinianus* (in Kaibel, pp. 50 ff.; Cantarella, 1: 33 ff.); L. Grasberger, *Die griechischen Stichnamen* (Würzburg, 1883), pp. 11 ff.; C. Holzinger, *De Verborum Lusu apud Aristophanem* (Vienna, 1876); O. Froehde, *Beiträge zur Technik der alten attischen Komödie* (Leipzig, 1898).

2. Cf. Grasberger (n. 1, above), pp. 11 ff.

tion to absorb the audience's attention, little opportunity to dilate upon a theme. The action must move quickly, and one joke must give way to another as soon as its brief impact disappears. While tragedy kept to a single, stylized verbal plane, a comedy that hoped for success had to draw on any and all resources of the language, from the highest to the most mundane and vulgar.

The sexual and excremental areas of human activity figure prominently in the comic material of early Attic Comedy; there is no type of joke or comic business, however sophisticated, which does not make use of them to provoke laughter. Alongside the constant use of unadorned obscenity—words like *πέος*, cock, *κύσθος*, cunt, and *πρωκτός*, ass-hole—is an even greater abundance of double meanings, both invented by the poet for the occasion or already common in Attic slang. These are important elements of Aristophanes' art and contribute just as much to the meaning of his plays as any other;<sup>3</sup> but before we attempt to identify and discuss the particular varieties and literary uses of obscene language in Attic Comedy, which is the task of the following chapters, we must first try to analyze the impact of obscenity in general on the spectator of Old Comedy. Why did obscene language figure so prominently in the plays? Where did it come from and why does it appear to be an exclusively Attic phenomenon? Why did it die out so quickly as an acceptable part of comic writing?

We must begin by clarifying our terms. By "obscenity" we mean verbal reference to areas of human activity or parts of the human body that are protected by certain taboos agreed upon by prevailing social custom and subject to emotional aversion or inhibition. These are in fact the sexual and excremental areas. In order to be obscene, such a reference must be made by an explicit expression that is itself subject to the same inhibitions as the thing it describes. Thus, to utter one of the numerous words, to be found in any language, which openly (noneuphemistically) describe the tabooed organs or actions is tantamount to exposing what should be hidden. Our ability to expose the forbidden by using words gives these words a kind of magical power. I shall return to this point soon.

The Greeks did not have a special term for this kind of language as distinguished from any language considered insulting or for any reason socially unacceptable. Our concept of the obscene derives from the Latin *obscenus*. It might be worthwhile to sketch briefly the difference between our ideas of obscenity and those of the Greeks.

*Obscenus*, whether originally from *caenum* (Priscian 9.54, followed by W.-Hofmann s.v. *caenum*), or *scaena* (Varro *LL* 7.96, *quare turpe ideo*

3. A full treatment of the dramatic and poetic uses of obscenity in Aristophanes will be given in chapter 3.

obscenum quod nisi in scaena palam dici non debet; see Ernout-Meillet), or *scaeuus* (Varro *LL* 7.97, followed by Thierfelder, p. 107 ff.),<sup>4</sup> clearly means filthy, repulsive, hateful, disgusting, offensive, and possessed of the power to stain and contaminate.<sup>5</sup> In the moral realm it meant exactly what most of us mean when we say *obscene*: filthy, indecent, offensive. Thus it could describe lewd pleasures (Cic. *ND* 1.40. 111), adultery (Ov. *Tr.* 2.212), pictures (Prop. 2.5.19, 6.27), verses (Prop. 1.16.10), gestures (Tac. *An.* 15.37, cf. Suet. *Calig.* 56), jokes (Cic. *Off.* 1.29.104), shameful things generally (Quint. 8.3.38, Cic. *Off.* 1.35.127, quodque facere non turpe est, modo occulte, id dicere obscenum est; cp. 1.35.128), even the genitals themselves (Ov. *M* 9.347; Mel. 3.7; Suet. *Calig.* 58). Obviously, the Roman word shared with ours the notion that words which describe tabooed sexual or excremental organs or functions are somehow dirty as well as shameful; the natural induction is that the organs and functions are themselves dirty and shameful. It is no secret that such a feeling was present in Roman culture, though perhaps not in the degree to which the stringent prohibitions of Puritanism and Victorianism have influenced modern feelings. Undoubtedly the term *obscenus* entered popular speech from its original use as an augural term meaning inauspicious, unfavorable, or evil-boding;<sup>6</sup> thus the idea of *res mali ominis* passes to the tabooed areas, which then become, along with the words which describe them, *obscena*.

The Greek words that come closest to being *voces propriae* for what we have described as obscenity are those which derive from the root \**aizd-*: *αἰδέομαι*, *αἰδώς*, *αἰδοῖος*, *αἰσχρός*, *αἰσχος*, *αἰσχύνομαι*, and so on. All seem to imply shame, fear, reverence, or ugliness.<sup>7</sup> Any activity, person, or thing which is shameful, ugly, fearful, or to be revered can be described by using one of these words; the valuation of sexual and excremental organs and functions is but one area of their utility. There seems to be no suggestion of filthiness or harmfulness, as there is in *obscenus* and *obscene*. The primary notion is that of shame and modesty. Thus in the Nausicaa episode

4. A. Thierfelder, "Obscaenus," *Navicula Chilonensis. Studia Philologica F. Jacoby Oblata* (Leiden, 1956), pp. 107 ff. For complete citations, see Kuhlmann in *ThLL* IX.2 s.v. *obscenus*.

5. Cf. Vergil *A.* 3.241, 262; 7.417; Pliny 10.29.44, etc. Of excrement itself, Sen. *Ep.* 8.1.20; of urine, Ov. *RAm* 437.

6. Cf. Vergil *A.* 12.876 (birds); *G.* 1.470; Suet. *Galba* 4 (dogs); Cic. *Dom.* 55.140 (omens); Hor. *Ep.* 5.98 (old woman); other citations in Thierfelder and Kuhlmann (n. 4, above).

7. Cf. the cognates *aistan* (Goth. = fear); Ger. *Ehre*; Lat. *aestimo*; Goth. *aiwiski* (= *αἰσχύνω*). See Frisk, Chantaine s.v. The fullest treatment of the concept is C. von Erffa, *ΑΙΔΩΣ, Philol. Supplbd.* 30 (1937). See also Th. Hopfner, *Das Sexualleben der Griechen und Römer* (Prague, 1938), pp 17 ff.



of the *Odyssey* the young maiden says she is afraid (*αἰδέτο*) to tell her father of her *θαλερόν γάμον* (6.66 f.) or to be seen accompanying Odysseus back to the city (6.273 f.). Similar is Odysseus' reaction to bathing with the young ladies (221 f.),

*αἰδέομαι γὰρ  
γυμνοῦσθαι κούρησιν ἐνπλοκάμοισι μετελθών*

[For I am ashamed to be naked among fair-haired young ladies.]

Compare the goddesses' unwillingness to look on Ares and Aphrodite (8.324) and Penelope's to be with the suitors alone (18.184). Someone who *is* willing to do these things is, of course, *ἀναιδής*: his actions are immodest, shameless, and therefore ugly and offensive, *αἰσχρός*.<sup>8</sup> The same rationale lies behind the use of *αἰδώς* to indicate the genitals,<sup>9</sup> as in *Il.* 2.262, 22.75. The more common *αἰδοῖος* seems to have meant something close to "worthy of respect."<sup>10</sup>

Two more specifically sexual passages are worth mentioning. In Pindar's *Ninth Pythian*, Apollo has come across the huntress-maiden, Cyrene, in the glens of Pelion and has conceived a strong passion to deflower her on the spot (36 f.). But the centaur Cheiron admonishes him that gods and men alike must have the modesty and restraint (*αἰδέοντ'*, 41) not to consummate a marriage in the light of day, that is, without the ceremonies proper to a wedding. These, as Pindar tells us (12), are properly carried out by the happy couple in Libya, where Aphrodite "cast a charming veil of modesty (*ἐρατὰν αἰδῶ*) over their sweet union" (we may compare this with Hera's admonition to Zeus at *Il.* 14.330 ff. about sleeping out on Ida). Similar is Herodotus' story of Candaules' wife (1.8 ff.). Candaules, king of Lydia, was so taken by his wife's beauty that he forced his trusty guard, Gyges, to sneak a look for himself and thus confirm his opinion. Gyges at first tried to refuse by pointing out that a woman sheds her modesty (*αἰδώς*) when she sheds her clothing, but was finally forced to comply. Unfortunately, the wife saw Gyges and determined that one or the other of her admirers must die; Herodotus points out that, among the Lydians, being seen naked brings great disgrace (*αἰσχύνῃν μεγάλην*, 10), even for a man. Both of these passages emphasize a peculiarly sexual meaning of *αἰδώς* and its cognates

8. Von Erffa (n. 7, above), pp. 19 ff.

9. Ibid., pp. 39 f.

10. This usage seems to be confined to Greek; as for the Latin equivalent, von Erffa, p. 40, rightly points out that "im Lateinischen begegnet die Bezeichnung 'pudenda' oder 'reverenda' erst spät und wohl im Anschluss ans Griechische" [In Latin the designation *pudenda* or *reverenda* appears for the first time only late, and indeed in imitation of Greek usage].

which harmonizes with all other spheres of the word's significance: namely, the notion of modesty, restraint, and a feeling of decency and secrecy surrounding what is private (but not "dirty," as we moderns might say). In the Pindar passage especially, one notices an important double-edged concept: *αἰδώς* denotes both the intimacy of sexual activity and an ethical impulse to restrain its exposure.

These Homeric examples may stand as valid for the entire classical period. The basic idea of shame and modesty, but without dirtiness, remained unchanged despite the sophistications made by poets and theorists. In Greek, the sexual and excremental realms were categorized as a subdivision of all those areas which must be treated with respect and modesty.

Contributing to this idea was the Greek conception of all passions and drives as inborn necessities of life against which one cannot struggle successfully. This was especially true of divine Eros:<sup>11</sup> examples are so abundant that citation is unnecessary. Indeed, one might say that the Athenians of the fifth century viewed sexuality in almost all of its manifestations as an essentially healthy and enjoyable fact of life. There is no indication of the kind of guilty, inhibited, and repressive feelings so characteristic of later societies in regard to this area of human life. The Athenians of this era may not have been uninhibited children of nature, but their inhibitions concerning human sexuality were certainly less muddled by complicated feelings of shame and guilt than our own. I shall return to this point in the following chapter.

*Φύσις* was, in fact, a not uncommon euphemism for the sexual organs (*LSJ* s.v. VII.2; see also O. Weinreich, *RhM* 77 [1928]: 112). We find mention of these "necessities of nature" with reference to the genitals in the comic poets: *τὰς τῆς φύσεως ἀνάγκας* (N 1075), *τὴν ἀναγκαίαν φύσιν* (Philem. 4.6), *φύσιν* (Anaxandr. 33.18, Alexis 240.8), *τὴν ἀναγκαίαν τύχην* (Amphis 20). When the sexual drives are regarded as natural urges to be viewed with the proper respect and guarded by modesty, there can be no place for the judgment implied by *obscenus*.<sup>12</sup>

The use of improper (noneuphemistic) words to describe these urges was no more obscene than the urges themselves: one must guard against saying them in public and in polite company not because they are dirty but because they stand for what one keeps to himself. One would no more say *πέος* at a dinner party than actually expose himself. But there was no *special* term to describe such language: to speak of anything out of place

11. The subject is well covered by H. Schreckenberg, *Ananke* (Munich, 1964), pp. 58 f.

12. See the illuminating discussion by E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1964), chap. 2, "From Shame-Culture to Guilt-Culture." Also excellent is K. Latte, "Schuld und Sünde in der griechischen Religion," *Arch. f. Rel.* 20 (1920-21): 254 ff.

was to speak shamelessly or insultingly (*αἰσχρολογεῖν*). Gentlemen did not speak of such things, but only of noble, or at any rate high-minded, matters (cf. Xen. *Lac.* 5.6). A common way of illustrating this was to say that, had our maker wanted us to flout our intimate parts, he would not have put them out of the way; therefore we ought to keep our language similarly concealing.<sup>13</sup>

By way of contrast, compare Cicero *Off.* 1.35.128: *latrocinari fraudare adulterare re turpe est, sed dicitur non obscene*, it is in fact base to deceive, to commit adultery, to pillage, but one may speak of these things without being obscene. To a Roman certain sexual and scatological expressions were themselves unclean, but if one used the proper language, talk of morally reprehensible matters was permitted. But a Greek would consider anything reprehensible to be *αἰσχρόν* and therefore an unfit topic for conversation. That is, the Greeks had no word that could make the distinction Cicero makes: *αἰσχρολογεῖν* (e.g. at Pl. *Rep.* 3.395e) has a much wider coverage, as well as a very different meaning, than *obscene*. A man who does not possess tact is characterized by qualities that put him outside the pale of proper society: *βδελυρία*, disgusting behavior (Thphr. *Ch.* 11.1 f.), *ἀγροικία*, rusticity (ibid., 4.4), *ἀπόνους*, tactlessness (ibid., = *μηδεμίαν αἰσχρὰν ἐργασίαν ἀποδοκιμάσαι*, the readiness to commit any shameful act).

This feeling of shame that comes from being exposed or listening to words that expose what should be covered up is crucial to our understanding of obscenity in Old Comedy, indeed for the understanding of obscenity throughout the history of Greek literature up to the end of Old (and some Middle) Comedy. For the obscenity used in this early literature is different in character, purpose, and social function from what was written later in Greece, and from obscenity as it appeared in Roman and subsequent literature.

To explain the difference it is necessary first to differentiate between pornography and obscenity.<sup>14</sup> Both may refer to the sexual and excremental (although true pornography seldom refers to the latter) but their motivation and effect are completely different. Pornography plays upon our sexual fantasies by constructing dream worlds in which our longings

13. The best description is Longinus 43.5 f.; the first appearance of the idea is Xen. *Mem.* 1.4.6. See D. Russell, *Longinus* (Oxford, 1964), ad loc. and A. Pease, "Caeli Enarrant," *HThRev* 34 (1941): 163 ff.

14. Perhaps the best study of the two as literary phenomena is E. Mertner and H. Mainusch, *Pornotopia: Das Obszöne und die Pornographie in der literarischen Landschaft* (Frankfurt am Main, 1970); see also P. Gorsen, *Das Prinzip Obszön. Kunst Pornographie und Gesellschaft* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg, 1969) and, from an author's standpoint, D. H. Lawrence, *Pornography and Obscenity* (London, 1929).

for sexual gratification are satisfied with no effort on our part. We are allowed to look at and enjoy the objects of our sexual desires; they are rendered passive and gratify us automatically. All the initiative, hazards, and responsibilities that must be faced in real life are bypassed. Thus pornography is introverted; its target is autoeroticism and private imaginings.<sup>15</sup> It goes without saying that pornography is best suited to books that can be read in private. It is difficult to imagine a pornographic play or social function in the style of Greek theater: the emotions aroused by pornographic actions or descriptions cannot be shared with others and cannot produce comedy.<sup>16</sup> Pornography demands a darkened theater or the privacy of an easychair. The pleasures it offers are the vicarious pleasures of sexual acts themselves.

Obscenity is by nature extroverted; that is why pornography usually avoids it, preferring the stimulating effects of suggestive language to the naked impact of obscene words.<sup>17</sup> The effect of obscenity is to break through social taboos rather than to escape them in fantasy.<sup>18</sup> Thus obscenity is most often used to insult someone; to emphasize what one is saying in the most forceful possible way; to make curses; to add power to comedy, jokes, ridicule, or satire.<sup>19</sup> Its efficacy in all these functions resides in its ability to uncover what is forbidden, and thus to shock, anger, or amuse. The pleasure afforded by obscenity lies in our enjoyment at exposing someone else or seeing someone else exposed without having to effect the exposure physically.

Very often this exposure is hostile and serves to degrade its object, but sometimes it is used only to excite amusement or pleasure in the audience by arousing their sexual feelings, for instance, by describing sexual intercourse with a young girl. The difference between the latter

15. Mertner and Mainusch (n. 14, above), p. 120.

16. Ibid., p. 40: "Ganz im Gegensatz zur Pornographie ist das Obszöne in der Lage, sich vom Bezirk des primitiv Sinnlichen zu befreien, ohne ihn zu verlassen. Im Bereich des Komischen ist das augenfällig. Es gibt den obszönen Witz, aber keinen pornographischen" [Obscenity, in complete contrast to pornography, is in the position of being able to free itself from the limited range of the primitively sensual without actually abandoning it. This is conspicuously true of the realm of the comic. There are obscene jokes, but no pornographic ones].

17. Ibid., p. 110. There *are* pornographic writings that make use of direct and non-euphemistic language in their descriptions, but the tendency in almost all cases is toward the avoidance of literalness or harshness of language. It was not until toward the end of the nineteenth century that pornographers began to include crass and obscene descriptions in their works, but even today the great majority aim for florid and oblique (even sentimental) language.

18. Ibid., pp. 88 f.

19. Ibid., pp. 185 f.

pleasure and pornographic pleasure is one of intention and tone: pornography seeks to arouse detailed fantasies that fulfill wishes the listener considers in some way forbidden, while the obscene allusion to sexuality in Old Comedy arouses only the amusement of a brief and uninhibited release of sexual feelings. There are no feelings of guilt and fear behind such a release because the acts described were not themselves considered dirty or illicit, but only, on all public occasions (save at comedies), private. This simple excitation of pleasurable feelings (or hostile ones) was, as we shall see, also characteristic of much of the obscenity found in the iambic poets and perhaps (although we cannot be certain) in the cults as well.

In Greek literature what can be called pornography did not make its appearance until well after the decline of Old Comedy, when the conception of love was becoming more romantic, more spiritualized, more capable of description in a way that emphasized pathological analysis and suggestive sensibility.<sup>20</sup> Since obscenity tends to unmask and destroy the fantasies pornography constructs, obscene language tends to disappear from the literary scene and is replaced by titillating euphemisms. The erotic intrigues of New Comedy and Hellenistic poetry (apart from the pornographic epigram) do not admit coarse, direct speech; tasteful nuance is more stimulating.

The obscenities in Old Comedy do not serve to stimulate extended or detailed sexual fantasies; they are meant to make us laugh. Thus not all of them have the character of unadorned obscenity or smut: most are retailed in the form of jokes, using all the technical properties available to any other kind of joke. The majority of these jokes are cast in the form of double entendre and allusion, a process that replaces an outright obscenity by something innocent but similar, but that in fact serves to emphasize the original obscenity in a comical way.

Naturally, not all such replacement mechanisms are comical: when Euripides (*Ph.* 18) or Sophocles (*OT* 1211) refer to a wife as *ἄλοξ*, furrow, we realize at once that this is a metaphor, and a grand one at that. The physical reference is unmistakable but we do not feel that it is obscene: the context, the respectable nature of agricultural terminology, and the remoteness of the image save it. The same is true of straightforward euphemisms like *συγγενέσθαι*, be with, or *τὸ μόριον*, the part, where the reference is clear but the language deliberately vague and abstract.

On the other hand, obscene double entendres derive their impact from the generally low or amusing points of comparison they employ: thus *χοῖ-*

20. The whole topic is definitively treated in part 1 of E. Rohde, *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer*<sup>3</sup> (Leipzig, 1914); see especially pp. 59 f.