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The Use and Abuse of Poverty: Aristophanes, *Plutus* 415-610 and the Public Speeches of the Corinthian War

In his last comedy, the *Plutus*, dated to 388, Aristophanes put on stage the personified character of Poverty, Penia. During her confrontation with the protagonist Chremylus, Penia draws a distinction between herself (πενία) and destitution (πτωχεία). She says that they are as different as Dionysius I, tyrant of Syracuse, and Thrasybulus, the leader of the democratic restoration of 403 at Athens:

«Thrasybulus and Dionysius are one and the same according to you. No, my life is not like that and never will be. The beggar, whom you have depicted to us, never possesses anything. The poor man lives thriftily and attentive to his work; he has not got too much, but he does not lack what he really needs»¹. (Trans. E. O'Neill Jr.)

Out of metaphor, Penia says that poverty and destitution are as different as tyranny and democracy. These words appear to be somewhat surprising in a comedy that, very differently from Aristophanes' fifth-century comedies, does not refer at length to any character of contemporary politics and almost to no event of contemporary or recent history². But far more than the reference to historical characters, what is worth noting is Penia's praise of poverty and of the lifestyle of the poor that she delivers in several points at verses 415-610.

¹ Aristoph. *Plut.* 550-554: ὑμεῖς γ' οἴπερ καὶ Θρασυβούλῳ Διονύσιον εἶναι ὅμοιον. / ἀλλ' οὐχ οὐμὸς τοῦτο πέπονθεν βίος οὐ μὰ Δί', οὐδέ γε μέλλει. / πτωχοῦ μὲν γὰρ βίος, ὃν σὺ λέγεις, ζῆν ἐστὶν μηδὲν ἔχοντα. / τοῦ δὲ πένητος ζῆν φειδόμενον καὶ τοῖς ἔργοις πρὸς ἔχοντα, / περιγίγνεσθαι δ' αὐτῷ μηδὲν, μὴ μέντοι μηδ' ἐπιλείπειν. On the identification of the two characters, see *schol. Pl.* 550.

² Cf. FLASHAR 1967, 154-175. SFYROERAS 1995, 231-261 underlines the elements of continuity with the fifth-century Old Comedy. DILLON 1984 significantly characterises the play as «comedy in transition» in the subtitle of his book. For an analysis of the structure of the comedy, see ALBINI 1965, 427-442; on the specific characteristics of the chorus, see IMPERIO 2011, 97-159 and PAGNI 2013, 189-200.



The words of Penia have been interpreted in different ways, namely, as an ironic way to show the absurdity of Chremylus' project of eliminating poverty, or as an attempt at confusing Chremylus by means of a sophistic argument³. Nevertheless, there has been little interest so far in relating Penia's points to the broader context of the public discourse of poverty in the years of the Corinthian War, some glimpses of which can be reconstructed based on the public speeches delivered in Athens during the war⁴.

We need first to shortly recall here that the *Plutus* has been the subject of much discussion in modern scholarship, both with respect to the preceding comic tradition and in historical terms, as a text that bears witness to contemporary political issues. It is commonly acknowledged that both formal aspects and contents characterise it as a comedy of transition between the style of the Old Comedy and that of the Middle and New Comedy⁵. But there has been little agreement about how to interpret the contents of this play. The plot is fairly simple in comparison to Aristophanes' fifth-century comedies. Chremylus, like many of Aristophanes' comic heroes, is an Athenian farmer. He goes to Delphi to ask how his son can improve his situation. Apollo tells him to bring home the first person he meets on his way. This happens to be a blind old man, who turns out to be the god Plutus, Wealth. Zeus has blinded him and for this reason he cannot see how wealth is distributed among men. That explains why wealth is totally independent from individual virtue: just men may be poor, while greedy and morally corrupt individuals are often rich. Chremylus decides to bring the god to the sanctuary of Asclepius in order to restore his sight and thereby change the distribution of wealth in the *polis*. Before carrying out his project, however, he has to face the objections of Penia, who suddenly appears on stage as a horrific creature and tries to convince him to desist from his plan. Chremylus, however, sends her away and accompanies Plutus to Asclepius. The god recovers his sight; the good 'poor citizens' (including Chremylus) become rich, while the wealthy bad citizens (emblematically represented by a sycophant) become poor.

For a good part of the twentieth century, critics – and in particular German scholars – subscribed to the so-called ironic interpretation of the play⁶, based on

³ On the so-called ironic interpretation of the play, see n. 6 below. On Penia's words as a sophistic argument, see n.26-27 below.

⁴ KONSTAN-DILLON 1981, 371-394 pointed to the different, and often conflicting, ideas about poverty and wealth circulating in fourth-century Athens and interpreted the *Plutus* as an attempt to merge them together. But they do not provide examples of different uses of poverty in public discourse beyond Aristophanes.

⁵ See n.2 above.

⁶ SÜSS 1954, 115-159; NEWIGER 1957, 173-176; GELZER 1960; FLASHAR 1967, 154-175; HERTEL 1969; for discussion, see HEBERLEIN 1981, 27-49. SOMMERSTEIN 1984, 316 mentions the ironic interpretation in Wilamowitz's edition of *Lysistrata*; cf. MCGLEW 1997, 35 n.1.

the belief that Aristophanes intended to illustrate the absurdity of the utopias of economic and social egalitarianism circulating in his own day. Chremylus' plan of redistributing wealth – which Penia rather interprets as a plan for totally eliminating poverty – was certainly not a *unicum* in the political landscape of the early fourth century. We have several clues of the fact that such utopias were discussed in the circles of intellectuals in the 390s: in *Republic*, Plato explains how economic equality is achieved through the sharing of property among the warrior-citizens of the perfect city, the Kallipolis⁷. Only a few years before the *Plutus*, Aristophanes himself had put on the comic stage his *Ecclesiazusae*, in which Praxagora explains her plan of a city in which citizens share their property and no one is poor. Scholars have noted clear similarities between Praxagora's ideas and Plato's model⁸. Furthermore, utopian theories of social and economic equality circulated also in the Greek world outside Athens, as Aristotle shows in *Politics*, with reference to Phaleas of Chalcedon⁹.

That Aristophanes did not believe in the potential success of such plans and that he rather aimed at showing their weaknesses seems to be fairly clear. According to supporters of the ironic interpretation of the *Plutus*, the irony consists in representing a project that is clearly doomed to failure as apparently successful¹⁰. The devastating effects of the utopia of a city without poverty, in fact, are shown in various parts of the play and, above all, they emerge from the *agôn* between the protagonist Chremylus and Penia, on which I will return later¹¹.

⁷ On the awareness that poverty poses a problem for the city, see Plato's proposal to eliminate poverty and wealth both in the model of perfect city in *Republic* (Pl. *Resp.* 421e-422a) and in the Cretan city of *Laws* (Pl. *Leg.* 744d). For the prohibition of begging, see Pl. *Leg.* 936b-c; cf. *Resp.* 552d.

⁸ See Aristoph. *Ecc.* 590-615. Aristophanes is unlikely to have invented the entire content of Praxagora's proposal. Scholars have long debated the relationship between this comedy and Book 5 of Plato's *Republic*; for an overview of the debate with bibliography, see TORDOFF 2007, 242-263. Following Aristotle's statement that the state described by Plato – and in particular the community of wives, children and property – had no equivalent in earlier and contemporary political and philosophical thought (*Pol.* 1266a 31-36; 1274b 9-10), TORDOFF 2007, 243-44 (with n. 8) argues that Praxagora's political idea might refer to a working draft of *Republic*. There is today no consensus on this. For a recent discussion of the relation between *Ecclesiazusae* and *Republic*, see CANFORA 2014, 165-232. For an exhaustive commentary on Book 5 of Plato's *Republic*, see VEGETTI 2001.

⁹ Aristotle (*Pol.* 1266a 39-1266b 5) mentions the lawgiver Phaleas of Chalcedon, presumably an older contemporary of Plato, who proposed his own solution to the problem of wealth disparity in the *polis* by means of regulations about dowries. On Phaleas' thought, see LANA 1950, 265-276; on Aristotle's criticism on Phaleas' theory, see BALOT 2001, 32-44. In general on Greek utopian thought, see BERTELLI 1976; DAWSON 1992; BICHLER-ROLLINGER 2007 and 2008; specifically on utopias in Greek comedy, see FARIOLI 2001.

¹⁰ Thus NEWIGER 1957, 173 mentions an «ironisch-gebrochene Art der Darstellung».

¹¹ In Aristophanes' *Plutus*, as in *Ecclesiazusae*, the *agôn*, though it is metrically distinct from the other scenes, does not have the formal arrangement of Aristophanes' fifth-century *agônes*. On



Since the early 1980s, however, a new interpretation of the comedy has been advanced by those who believe the play does not offer a satire on contemporary political ideas, but rather an insight into contemporary debate about poverty in the city and an imaginary escape from the *status quo*, namely, from the degrading condition of the Athenian *dêmos* during the years of the Corinthian War¹². Though it is unlikely Aristophanes believed such world would be possible, he offered his audience at least the temporary relief of imagining a different city and, at the same time, he encouraged reflection on the current situation. As is apparent, these two interpretations (i.e. the ironic interpretation and the interpretation relating the play to contemporary debate) should not be understood as alternatives or antithetical. Aristophanes might well have made a satire on utopian ideas while at the same time pointing out the critical situation of the city and the widening of economic inequalities among citizens.

Nonetheless, there is a third way, complementary to the previous ones, in which we can interpret this comedy, and specifically Penia's reflection on poverty. If we read the *Plutus* in the context of the Athenian public scene of the late 390s and early 380s, it is apparent that one of the aim of Penia's speech is to warn the audience against the misuse of arguments and ideas about poverty and the poor in public discourse. In this article, I argue that Penia's praise of poverty, and her clarification about who the poor in the city are, should be read also in terms of reaction to the public rhetoric of the late 390s and 380s.

Penia and Ptôcheia: an Important Distinction on the Comic Stage

But let us start from the *Plutus* itself. Both Wealth and Poverty act as personified characters on stage. The personification of Plutus – or rather his deification – was not an invention of Aristophanes, as Plutus appears already in

this, see recently FARMER 2016, 219 n. 53. On the *agôn* in *Plutus*, see also KONSTAN 1981, 371; BOWIE 1993, 290f. On the chorus in this comedy, see IMPERIO 2011, 97-159 and PAGNI 2013, 189-200.

¹² KOSTAN-DILLON 1981, 371-394; OLSON 1989, 193-199; OLSON 1990, 223-242; MCGLEW 1997, 35-53. For the belief that the *Plutus* reflects general optimism that Thrasybulus' campaign would bring wealth to Athens, see FÖRNERIS 2009, 10 with n. 24. On economy and society specifically in the fourth-century plays of Aristophanes, see SPIELVOGEL 2001. Recently, ORFANOS 2014, 213-222 has interpreted Penia's words as praise of poverty that should be identified with the viewpoint of the poor, who, according to Orfanos «avaient acquis le pouvoir à Athènes» (*ibid.*, 213) at the turn of the fourth century. I do not believe that Aristophanes intended to present Penia as the personification of one particular socio-economic group of the Athenian citizenry, nor is there any evidence for the increased involvement of the lower classes in politics in fourth-century Athens; on this, see CECCHET 2015, 133-138.



Hesiod's *Theogony*¹³, as the son of Demeter and Iason, and the Homeric *Hymn to Ceres* attests that he was worshiped in the Eleusinian Mysteries¹⁴. In Attic classical vase painting, he is usually represented as a boy often holding a cornucopia¹⁵. The fragmentary evidence shows that a vast background of comic pieces on the subject of wealth already existed since the mid fifth-century, starting from Cratinus' *Ploutoi*¹⁶. While Aristophanes' *Plutus* was probably not the first comedy in which Plutus appeared personified on stage, the personification of Penia appears to be an original invention of the playwright¹⁷. Paradoxically, both Penia and Plutus have one feature in common on Aristophanes' stage: they both are represented as beggars wearing tattered clothing¹⁸. In the case of Plutus, his costume seems to be connected with the mistreatment he suffered at the hands of Zeus, who made him blind and hence powerless. As for Penia, both her rags and physical appearance clearly evoke privation: she is the pale colour of creatures of the underworld, and, as Blepsidemus notes, she resembles one of the Erinyes¹⁹. Her presence on stage is completely unexpected: the other characters in the scene wonder about her identity, and Chremylus suggests that she might be a perfume or bread seller. The

¹³ Hes. *Th.* 969-974.

¹⁴ Hom. *Cer.* 483-489.

¹⁵ See CLINTON 1992, 50 and his catalogue *ibid.*, 133-134. Plutus also appears as a naked boy in the fourth-century Great Eleusinian Relief (Athens National Museum 126, LIMC Plutus 13), in which he stands between Demeter and Kore, while in the late Hellenistic Lakrateides Relief (ca. 100 BC) he appears as a small boy wearing a tunic (Eleusis Museum 5079, LIMC Plutus 16). For the identification of Plutus in sculpture, see CLINTON 1992, 51-59 with bibliography. Aristophanes introduces a change to the traditional iconography: the Plutus he depicts on stage is a blind old man. This might not have been entirely his own invention: as early as the mid of the sixth century we find a reference to a blind Plutus in Hipponax fr. 36 West (v.1), and "blind Wealth" is described as the source of all evils in an early fifth-century drinking song of Timocreon of Rhodes (PMG 731 fr. 5.1); see SFYROERAS 1995, 234 and SOMMERSTEIN 2001, 7 with n. 28. For a recent discussion of representations of Plutus in Greek visual arts, see VILLANUEVA PUIG 2013, 91-96. For wealth in Greek classical historiography, see now BEARZOT 2016, 199-214.

¹⁶ Aristophanes produced a first version of the *Plutus* in 408; SOMMERSTEIN 2001, 28-33 with n. 113 notes that they were probably two versions of the same play rather than two different compositions: this is suggested by the fact that at least one ancient commentator on the text of 388 thought he was working on the text of 408. Archippus fr. 37-41 PCG probably produced an imitation of the play before 388; see EDMONDS 1957, I, 35-38; cf. HERTEL 1969, 39. On the tradition of *Plutus* in comedies before Aristophanes, see now BRAVI 2016, 271-280.

¹⁷ For the absence of representations of Penia in the visual arts, see recently VILLANUEVA PUIG 2013, 89-115.

¹⁸ On Penia's rags in *Plutus*, see GROTON 1990, 18-19.

¹⁹ Aristoph. *Plut.* 420f. SFYROERAS 1995, 243 has advanced the original (albeit not widely followed) interpretation of the *Plutus* as an allegory for the opposition of two literature genres: Tragedy, represented by the Erinyes Penia, and Comedy, represented by Plutus as an *alter ego* of Dionysus.



woman introduces herself as «Poverty, your housemate since years!»²⁰.

In the course of the *agôn*, Chremylus complains that the bad citizens in the *polis* are rich, while the honest good citizens are poor and die of hunger²¹. *Penia*'s reasoning is based on a false premise: she claims that, after *Plutus* recovers his sight, wealth will be distributed in equal parts among all. But this is not true, because, as is clear from the beginning, the problem is that the wicked are rich and the virtuous are poor: in Chremylus' intention, healing the god *Plutus* will reverse this situation. Poor people will continue to exist, but only the worst men will be poor²². Poverty makes an incorrect assumption, but Chremylus does not refute it. She therefore proceeds to make a strong argument: if poverty disappears, no one will work anymore, and this will bring about poverty again. So she speaks:

«Who would wish to hammer iron, build ships, sew, turn, cut up leather, bake bricks, bleach linen, tan hides, or break up the soil of the earth with the plough and garner the gifts of Demeter, if he could live in idleness and free from all this work?»²³.
(Trans. E. O'Neill Jr.)

Chremylus' reply that slaves will perform everyone's work shows that he has fallen into *Penia*'s rhetorical trap and he has given his antagonist an easy point to attack. It is evident that his stance is rapidly veering toward Praxagora's project of economic egalitarianism in the *Ecclesiazusae*, a society in which everybody is rich and menial occupations are performed by slaves. Chremylus thus falls victim to a *reductio ad absurdum*, despite his original plan²⁴.

It is at this point that *Penia* introduces a distinction between poverty and begging, noting that the life described by Chremylus is not that of a poor man but of a beggar, and that she has no part in it. Poverty, she explains, is absolutely different from destitution and it is necessary both to the well-being of individuals, as it makes men more active and physically fit, and to the *polis*, as it functions as a stimulus for trades and crafts²⁵. In other words, *penia* contributes to economic prosperity.

²⁰ Aristoph. *Plut.* 437. Trans. J. Henderson.

²¹ Aristoph. *Plut.* 500-504.

²² On the ambiguity of this utopia (i.e. equal distribution of wealth for all versus just distribution between wicked rich and honest poor), see KONSTAN-DILLON 1981, 371-394 and LÉVY 1997, 201-212.

²³ Aristoph. *Plut.* 510-516. On citizens engaged in activities of the non-agricultural sector, see HARRIS 2002, 67-99. On citizens involved in manufacture as a way to escape poverty, see recently TAYLOR 2016, 261-277.

²⁴ KONSTAN-DILLON 1981, 385: «Chremylus' problem, however, is that he has lost sight of his own position».

²⁵ For the distinction between *penia* and *ptôcheia*, see *Plut.* 550-554 (quoted above); for the praise of the poor as better than the wealthy, see *Plut.* 557-561. On the physical differences between the fat body of the rich and the fit body of the poor, cf. *Plat. Resp.* 556c-d.



Sommerstein has dismissed Penia's words on the importance of poverty, and her distinction between *penês* and *ptôchos* as a sophistic argument²⁶. Yet, this interpretation is not convincing, as already argued by Valente²⁷, since the status of beggars and the perception of destitution were clearly defined in the Athenian society well before the fourth century. Penia is certainly not inventing anything new. The physical outfit and moral characteristics of beggars were defined already as early as the *Odyssey*, in which we find the first literary representation of a beggar, namely Odysseus in disguise. Fifth-century tragedies and comedies contributed to defining this category as a very specific one, certainly well distinct from the ordinary poor, i.e. the wage labourers, craftsmen and small farmers. The distinction between *ptôchos* and *penês* was clear-cut in Greek language and culture²⁸. And not even the praise of the poor is an invention of Aristophanes, as positive portrayals of the poor abound in the literary record from the *Odyssey* to classical drama, well before the praise of poverty became a characteristic trait of Hellenistic philosophy, above all of Cynicism²⁹. The question that we should ask here, is why Aristophanes needed to remind Athenians about all this and why, while differentiating poverty from destitution, he needed to make it clear that *penia* is not a bad thing at all.

Public Accusations and the Poverty of the Dêmos in the Years of the Corinthian War

Examining extant speeches against generals, magistrates and public speakers in classical Athens, Knox estimates a high 'political casualty rate' and notes that «one cannot read far in Athenian history without coming across a politician whose career is interrupted or ended by disgrace, brought on by a penalty»³⁰. From the extant literary record, we see that accusations about the dishonest enrichment of public speakers and political leaders and the impoverishment of the *dêmos* were powerful weapons in the political contests that played out before the Assembly and Boule. Public oratory attests to a high number of accusations against generals, other magistrates (mainly ambassadors) and public speakers for rising from poverty to wealth at the expense of fellow citizens

²⁶ See SOMMERSTEIN 1984, 329. Recently, also FARMER 2016, 219.

²⁷ VALENTE 2011, 113-136.

²⁸ More thoroughly on this, see CECCHET 2015, chapters 1 and 2. For linguistic nuances of the terms *ptôchos* and *penês*, see COIN-LONGERAY 2014, 145-201.

²⁹ On the praise of poverty in Greek sources before Hellenistic philosophy, see DESMOND 2006.

³⁰ KNOX 1985, 134.

while making the people poor because of their irresponsible management of foreign affairs. The expressions “from poor to rich” (ἐκ πενήτων πλούσιοι and ἐκ πτωχῶν πλούσιοι) – applied to magistrates and politicians – and «from rich to poor» (ἐκ δ’ εὐπόρων ἄποροι) – applied to the Athenian citizens – occur in several public speeches from the 390s to the 340s³¹.

Indeed, we do not have a record of public and private oratory in the fifth century comparable to that of the fourth. Except for a few speeches by Lysias, Antiphon and Andocides and public orations attributed to generals and politicians by Herodotus and Thucydides, we know virtually nothing about fifth-century oratory. We thus cannot indicate a precise moment when accusations began to be made against generals for “rising from poverty to wealth” in Athens. Attacks are often made on the *nouveaux riches* in Old Comedy: we hear of *neoploutoponêroi* in Cratinus’ *Seriphioi* and the chorus of Titans in his *Ploutoi* allege that the “new rich” have made their fortunes dishonestly³². Cases in which generals were prosecuted and convicted for bribery and embezzlement are attested since the early phase of the Pentecontaetia, although there are fewer such cases before the Peloponnesian War than during and after it. Hansen’s 1975 study on *eisangelia*, in which he collected the evidence for public prosecutions between 492 and 322³³, attests two cases in which generals were accused of taking bribes and/or embezzlement before the Peloponnesian War and during its beginning, notably Cimon in 463/2 and Pericles in 430/29³⁴. We should also add the accusations against Miltiades in 489³⁵ and – though the evidence is not conclusive – the accusation of bribery against Callias in 449³⁶. Aristophanes’ fifth-century comedies give evidence that

³¹ See, for example, Lys. 27,9; 28,1-2; Isoc. 8,125; Dem. 3,29; 3,31; 8,66; 23,209; 62,53,3. For a collection and discussion of the evidence, see CECCHET 2015, 142-170. On allegations of bribery and humble origins made against Athenian politicians, see also OBER 1989, 233-238; on accusations of bribery in general, see TAYLOR 2001a, and 2001b.

³² The word *neoploutoponêroi* occurs in Cratinus’ *Seriphioi* fr. 223 PCG (cf. Aristoph. V. 1309: *neoploutos*); the comedy probably dates between 428 and 425; see EDMONDS 1957, 996. Cratinus’ *Ploutoi* was probably performed in 436 (a *terminus post quem* is the year 440, when Hagnon, mentioned in the play, was *stratêgos*). In fr. 171,49sq PCG the chorus nostalgically remembers the age of Cronos, while they lament the present age of Zeus because unjust men grow wealthy and rule undeservedly.

³³ HANSEN 1975, 59f. According to a law probably passed in the late fifth century (Hyp. 4,7-8), *eisangelia* could be made only in three specific cases: first, if anyone acting alone or in a conspiracy attempted to overthrow the democracy; second, if anyone betrayed the city; third, if a speaker in the Assembly received payment.

³⁴ Cimon was accused in 463/2 of taking bribes from King Alexander of Macedon (Plut. *Cim.* 14,2-3 = HANSEN 1975, catalogue no. 5); Pericles was accused of embezzlement (Plat. *Grg.* 515e-516a; cf. Plut. *Per.* 35 = HANSEN 1975, catalogue no. 6).

³⁵ Hdt. 6,136; see TAYLOR 2001a, table no. 3.

³⁶ Dem. 19,273-275; see TAYLOR 2001a, table no. 6. TAYLOR (*ibid.*) rightly notes that this story might be a fourth-century fabrication.



accusations against public authorities – especially generals – for profiting from the war were circulating in the mid-420s: notably, in *Acharnians*, Dicaeopolis accuses Lamachus of making money and using the war to improve his desperate financial straits³⁷. In *Wasps*, we have a reference to the accusation of bribery and embezzlement made by Cleon against the general Laches after his return from Sicily in 425³⁸. Thucydides records that the generals Eurymedon, Pythodorus and Sophocles, who led the expedition to Sicily in 424, were accused of taking bribes from the Sicilians³⁹. According to Xenophon, in 406 Erasinides, one of the generals at Arginusae, was accused by Archedemus of embezzling the proceeds of the Hellespont campaign⁴⁰.

After the Peloponnesian War, these kind of accusations seems to further increase and charges for illegal enrichment occur with almost obsessive frequency in public prosecutions. No fewer than fifteen Athenians between 403 and 386 were charged with embezzlement and bribes⁴¹. Still others were accused of profiting by appropriating other people's property after public confiscation. As far as the public scene in the years of the Corinthian War is concerned, two orations in particular deserve special attention, namely, Lysias' speeches *Against Epicrates* and *Against Ergocles*. In these orations, we read not only about accusations of bribery and illegal enrichment of public officials, but also we can see how such accusations were framed in terms of poverty and wealth. Further, Lysias' *Against the Retailers of Grain* contains a speech against a group of metics accused of manipulating grain prices and it gives us a clear idea of how public speakers evoked poverty as a dangerous threat for ordinary citizens during acute economic crisis.

Lysias 27: Against Epicrates

The *Against Epicrates* was delivered either before the Assembly as an *eisangelia* or before a court – this is difficult to determine since the hearers are addressed both as “men of Athens”, and “gentlemen of the jury”. It is probably to be dated between 392 and 387⁴². Epicrates was well-known on the public scene as

³⁷ Aristoph. *Ach.* 607–617.

³⁸ Aristoph. *V.* 240–242; See TAYLOR 2001a, table no. 8.

³⁹ Thuc. 4,65,3; see HANSEN 1975, catalogue no. 7, 8, 9.

⁴⁰ Xen. *Hell.* 1, 7, 2; see HANSEN 1975, catalogue no. 66.

⁴¹ TAYLOR 2001a, 59–60 (table no. 16–25), to which Aristophanes and Nicophemus in Lysias 19 should be added. Specifically on bribery at Athens, see KULESZA 1995 and TAYLOR 2001a and 2001b; on the terminology of bribery and how it overlaps with gift-giving in the Greek world, see HARVEY 1985, 76–117. In general on corruption in the ancient world, see SCHULLER 1982, *passim*.

⁴² TODD 2000, 282 suggests a date between 395 and 387. Epicrates was accused of taking bribes also in 395, but on that occasion he was acquitted, and it is unlikely that this speech refers to

he had served twice as an ambassador during the Corinthian War. We know from references internal to the speech and by some fragments of the fourth-century comedian Plato, that he was first publicly prosecuted for taking bribes, probably after his first embassy to the Persian King in Sardis in 394 or 393, but on this occasion he eventually was acquitted⁴³. In 392/1 he went to Sparta, again as an ambassador – together with Andocides the orator and two others, in order to negotiate the peace. He was accused of taking bribes also on this second embassy. Furthermore, we read in the *Hellenica Oxyrhynchia*, that, in the early 390s, Epicrates was in favour of a war against Sparta and that in 395 he had accepted bribes from Timocrates, the Persian envoy to Athens, in order to encourage Athenians to go to war⁴⁴. Indeed, we do not know whether this is true, as accusations of taking bribes were a recurring trend in those years. Lysias' 27 is the speech delivered by one of Epicrates' prosecutors probably after the embassy to Sparta. The prosecutor accuses Epicrates and his colleagues of having made themselves rich through the war, while being poor (*penêtes*) in peacetime. He pleads for death penalty and, in fact, Epicrates was condemned to death *in absentia*⁴⁵.

What interests us here is the rhetorical strategy deployed by the prosecutor, which is based mainly on stirring the people's anger on the claim that Epicrates and his colleagues had raised from poverty to wealth, while Athenian citizens were reduced to the condition of *penêtes*. We know from Demosthenes 19 that Epicrates had fought against the oligarchs in 403 and became a well-known citizen in Athens after the restoration of democracy⁴⁶. Lysias' reference to people rising from poverty to wealth, however, should not be associated with the protagonists of the democratic restoration of 403 but rather with the generals of the Corinthian War and the ambassadors that accompanied Epicrates on the two embassies.

The speech is built entirely on a set of rhetorical *topoi*, such as the image of the demagogue robbing the *dêmos* and its paradoxical reversal, that is, the demagogue using the *dêmos* as his own *misthophoros*⁴⁷. Central to the argument is the perverse dynamic of the demagogue's rise from poverty to wealth followed by the parallel and consequential decline of the *dêmos* from wealth to poverty. The orator describes this process as if it was a widespread phenomenon of which

that occasion. The *terminus post quem* of 392 is more likely, as it refers to the embassy to Sparta, in which Epicrates took part with Andocides and after which he was condemned.

⁴³ Lys. 27, 3-4; Pl. Com. Fr. 127-130 PCG. These fragments show that Epicrates and his embassy were subject of comic invectives.

⁴⁴ *Hell. Oxy.* 10, 2 Chambers and Paus. 3, 9, 8; see TAYLOR 2001a, table no. 18. *Pace* Taylor (*ibid.*), Xenophon says that the Athenians did not accept the Persian money on this occasion (Xen. *Hell.* 3, 5, 2).

⁴⁵ For the condemnation of Epicrates, see Dem. 19, 277-280 and Philoch. *FrGrHist* 328 F 149a.

⁴⁶ Dem. 19, 277.

⁴⁷ Lys. 27, 11.



Epicrates was merely one of many examples. However, there is no proof throughout the speech about the original poverty of Epicrates and of his colleagues. That the ambassadors sent to Sardis and Sparta were originally *penêtes*, is an obvious hyperbole for, as has often been noted, it is unlikely that ordinary Athenians were appointed ambassadors⁴⁸.

According to the speaker, the wealth of demagogues and public officials proves that the political machinery is dysfunctional. It should be the politicians who give their own property to the *dêmos*, not vice versa⁴⁹. The speaker claims that, at present, many *rhêtores* have profited from the war to the point of being able to undertake liturgies (*ibid.*). The language of this speech is rich in terms that recall the act of dishonest gain and robbery of the *dêmos*: thus at 27.3: κλέπτωσί τε καὶ καταδωροδοκῶσι ("rob and accept bribes"); 27.4: οἱ περὶ τῶν χρημάτων καὶ τῶν δώρων ("those who took care of money and bribes"); 27.6: τὰ ὑμέτερα κλέπτειν ("to steal your property"); and yet again at 27.11: οὗτοι κλέπτουσιν and τὰ ὑμέτερα κλεπτόντων ("they steal" and "they steal your property"). The speaker presents the case as if the Athenians knew of dozens of people like Epicrates who had profited from the war at the expenses of ordinary citizens. It is clear that the orator knew that such hyperbolic expressions would strike a chord in the audience.

Lysias 28: Against Ergocles

Lysias wrote another speech in which he recurs to the argument of the illegal enrichment of politicians and of the parallel impoverishing of the *dêmos*. This is the speech against the general Ergocles, a colleague and probably also a friend of Thrasybulus: Ergocles is accused of illegal enrichment in an *eisangelia* before the Assembly. Ergocles had sailed to the Hellespont and to the coast of Asia Minor with Thrasybulus in 389; on his return, he was indicted for embezzlement, bribery and abuse of power. The speech was written after the death of Thrasybulus, perhaps at some point between 389 or 387⁵⁰.

In the opening, the prosecutor claims that «it is clear that he [Ergocles] has betrayed cities, has committed offences against *proxenoi*, and against your citizens, and has gone from poverty to wealth at the expenses of your property»⁵¹. A correlation is drawn between profiteering generals and the impoverished people

⁴⁸ On the unlikelihood that poor citizens would be appointed ambassadors, see ADCOCK-MOSLEY 1975, 155f.

⁴⁹ Lys. 27,10.

⁵⁰ TODD 2000, 287.

⁵¹ Lys. 28,1: ἐκ πένητος ἐκ τῶν ὑμετέρων πλούσιος γεγενημένος.



to illustrate the impact of the war on the Athenian society, in particular with reference to a fundamental question: who had benefitted from it thus far? Hence the prosecutor asks the Athenians in the opening of the speech:

«Why should he [*Ergocles*] receive forgiveness, when you see that the once-large fleet these men commanded, is now reduced to a few ships and is breaking up because of a lack of money, and that these men, who were poor and needy when they sailed out, have so rapidly acquired the largest property of any of the citizens?»⁵² (Trans. S. Todd)

Thrasybulus' Hellespont campaign had been marred by unfortunate events, if we accept Diodorus' report of the loss of twenty-three ships in a storm⁵³. The speaker's words are calculated to stir up the people's anger by exploiting the widespread discontent over these recent events. The motif of the generals enriched through the war at the expenses of the simple soldiers and ship crews was indeed not a new one: among the many accusations that Dicaeopolis throws against Lamachus in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, there is also that of having always received a good pay, while normal soldiers serve for little or no pay⁵⁴. If we accept the possibility that *stratēgoi* were no longer paid in the fourth century⁵⁵, no such accusation could be made against Thrasybulus and Ergocles, but it was always possible to attack them polemically for profiting from booty and bribes. Plunder enabled them to make profits from which the *dēmos* in Athens was excluded and could not benefit. Thrasybulus was killed by the inhabitants of Aspendus precisely for plundering their coasts in 389, as Xenophon reports⁵⁶.

As in the prosecution of Epicrates, also in *Against Ergocles* Lysias uses the argument of poverty to signal a distorted dynamic of power: Ergocles and his colleagues privately profited from the campaign, while the people in Athens became poorer on account of the war taxes (*eisphorai*) they are forced to bear⁵⁷. In this case, the people who have impoverished (becoming *πενεστέρους*) are those liable to pay the *eisphora*, the war tax. This suggests they were certainly not the

⁵² Lys. 28,2. Text in brackets is mine.

⁵³ Diod. 14,94,3. The reliability of Diodorus' information about the twenty-three ships has often been questioned. See FORNIS 2009, 12 n. 33.

⁵⁴ Aristoph. *Ach.* 608-610 (Dicaeopolis attacks Lamachus): «But how come you're [*i.e. the generals*] all drawing pay somewhere or other, while none of these [*i.e. ordinary soldiers*] people ever does?» (Trans. J. Henderson, texts in brackets are mine).

⁵⁵ So HANSEN 1991, 240-242. Public pay was abolished with the oligarchic coup of 411 (see Thuc. 8,67,3; cf. [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 29,5). Hansen argues that pay was restored only for few kinds of magistrates in 403 and not for generals, although he admits that we have to rely extensively on arguments *ex silentio*. In general on the payment of Athenian public officials in the fourth century, see GABRIELSEN 1981.

⁵⁶ Xen. *Hell.* 4,8,30.

⁵⁷ Lys. 28,4: καὶ ὑμᾶς μὲν διὰ τὰς εἰσφορὰς πενεστέρους ἀποδείξειν.



lower strata of the Athenian citizenry⁵⁸. It is clear that the rhetoric poverty in this speech, as in the previous one, loosely addresses the different socio-economic groups that were gathered in the Assembly, including both ordinary citizens and *eisphora*-payers. As in the previous case, the prosecution was successful: Ergocles was sentenced to death, executed and his property confiscated⁵⁹.

Both *Against Epicrates* and *Against Ergocles* were delivered in crucial years of Athens' aspirations to regain her international prestige after the defeat of 404. It is indeed true that the Corinthian War and the Spartan blockade of the Black Sea grain supply in 387 had disastrous effects on the urban population of Athens⁶⁰. In 389, after the death of Thrasybulus, the critical condition of his fleet and the disappointment of the Propontis campaign, the people's eagerness for the war had seriously waned. A large number of Athenians were probably at their financial limits, although the reasons will have varied from group to group: the fiscal pressure of war taxes troubled *eisphora*-payers, while urban wage-labourers had to cope with fluctuating grain prices resulting from the instability of the situation in the northern Aegean. Strauss rightly notes that the high frequency of prosecutions for embezzlement and bribes in these years might be due both to the fact that fines and confiscations were a way to fill the heavily depleted public treasury and to the fact that Athenians were particularly sensitive to the misuse of public money during the period of severe fiscal pressure (mainly on account of war taxes) imposed by the Corinthian War – hence to deploy such arguments would grant easy success to orators⁶¹.

⁵⁸ *Eisphorai* were collected mainly for military expenses. According to Thuc. 3,19,1, an *eisphora* of 200 talents was imposed in 428/7. The earliest evidence for the *eisphora* is the so-called Callias Decree of 434/3 (IG I³ 52). Metics were also liable to pay *eisphora* in addition to their *pro capite* tax (*metoikion*). On the financial threshold for liability to liturgies, see DAVIES 1971, xxiii–xxiv; 1981, 28; for arguments for a lower threshold, see GABRIELSEN 1994, 45–53. The threshold for liability for the *eisphora* was probably lower than that of military and festival liturgies, see LIDDEL 2007, 275 with n.196. For estimations of the number of *eisphora*-payers in the fourth century, see *ibid.*, 275 with n.195.

⁵⁹ Of the generals who returned from Thrasybulus' campaign and were called to the *euthynai*, it seems that Ergocles was the only one convicted; see FORNIS 2009, 15 n. 54 and FUNKE 1980, 158 n. 94.

⁶⁰ See Xen. *Hell.* 5,1,28. On famine and related crises in the ancient world, see GARNSEY 1988; specifically on Athenian grain supply in the classical period, see also GARNSEY 1985, 62–75 and MORENO 2007.

⁶¹ STRAUSS 1986, 70. He further notes that public authorities may have been actually tempted to take public funds in a situation of general economic hardship; however, I find this possibility less likely by virtue of the regular controls (*euthynai*) and of the constants threat of public prosecutions. PRITCHETT 1974, II, 132 interprets the frequency of accusations of bribery and embezzlement as evidence that the Athenian *dêmos* was particularly sensitive to such problems on account of its overall poverty in the fourth century. Similarly, DAVIES 1981, 66f. also attributes the frequent attacks against generals during the Corinthian War to the impoverishment of the *dêmos*.



By exploiting general discontent, public speakers could abstract and simplify the idea of poverty and impoverishment, playing with the belief that poverty is a set socio-economic condition that everyone experiences in the same way⁶². The idea that the Athenians had become *penêtes* in these two speeches was meant to appeal to *eisphora*-payers, to those who had to make a living with work and to those struggling to escape destitution. All these categories would have identified themselves as poor and reacted with anger towards those responsible for their “poverty.”

Lysias 22: Against the Retailers of Grain

One other public speech from the early 380s needs to be mentioned here. Lysias’ *Against the Retailers of Grain* bears witness to the critical situation of the grain supply to Athens in the final years of the Corinthian War. In this case, we have to deal with a speech that was in all probability delivered a couple of years after the staging of *Plutus*, and which shows clearly how accusations about illegal enrichment at the expense of the impoverished *dêmos* continued to dominate the rhetorical scene, as the economic crisis became more acute.

The oration dates to the period following the failure of Thrasybulus’ campaign and, as it seems from a reference to ongoing rumours on peace negotiations, it might fit a date early in 386, i.e. during the negotiations for the Peace of Antalcidas⁶³. As noted above, the blockade of the grain supply from the Black Sea by the Spartans aggravated the already fragile financial conditions in Athens⁶⁴. The historical background of this speech, therefore, is that of a highly tense scenario, in which the Athenian *dêmos* was all the more sensitive to public behaviours and crimes that could further affect the general state of emergency.

In this case, the defendants are not Athenian officials, they are a group of grain dealers, and the causal relation between the profiteering of the accused parties and the impoverishment of the *dêmos* is clearer than in the previous orations. The accusation of making money illegally concerns here the

⁶² The problem of defining poverty has long been acknowledged in the social sciences. For an overview of the scholarly debate, see RUGGERI LADERCHI *et al.* 2003, 243-274; GREEN 2007, 24-45 and, specifically with reference to the ancient world, CECCHET 2015, 13-42. On the use and misuse of poverty in Athenian forensic speeches, see also CECCHET 2013, 53-66; for portraits of the vulnerable (including the poor) in Attic rhetoric, see RUBINSTEIN 2013, 135-165.

⁶³ Lys. 22,14. See TODD 2000, 239 and 1993, 317-318; cf. EDWARDS-USHER 1985, 261 for a dating to 387. For a historical commentary on the speech, see also GALVAGNO 2008.

⁶⁴ See n. 60 above. That the situation at Athens was critical since the early 390s is attested to in Lys. 30,22.



manipulation of the price of grain, which caused direct damages to the consumers, the ordinary Athenians, compelled to buy grain at a higher price than the one permitted. The retailers, according to the prosecutor, knew well that, given the difficulties in supplying grain, people would buy it at any price⁶⁵. Athenian laws strictly forbade and punished such crimes: the mark-up was fixed at a maximum of one obol for each basket, and a board of *sitophylakes* was in charge of ensuring that such laws were respected.

The prosecutor (who acts, as it seems, as the representative of a group) accuses a group of metics, who are called up to the rostrum before the jury in order to identify themselves as resident aliens and grain retailers. In the procedure of interrogation of the defendants, the retailers admit to having bought more than the maximum quantity of grain permitted, but they also claim that they did so upon suggestion of the *sitophylakes* themselves – seemingly a weak attempt to transfer responsibility by means of an informal accusation against the public officials. The trial takes place in two different stages, i.e. first before the Boule, and second, before a dikastic court, which shows it was in all probability an *eisangelia*. The charge is that of having ‘bought together’ more than fifty baskets (*phormoi*) of grain. As Todd rightly notes, this is «clear in outline (they are accused of profiteering) but obscure in detail»⁶⁶, for it is unclear how exactly this profiteering was carried out, whether by means of operating as a cartel, or by hoarding the grain⁶⁷. But what emerges in full clarity is that the retailers had fixed and increased the price of grain, and that this had detrimental consequences, in particular on the urban population, which also included those Athenians who did not own land and had to buy necessary food.

The strategy of the orator rests on stirring up the people’s anger based precisely on their awareness of and bitterness regarding the financial damage they suffered. This time, differently from Lysias 27 and 28, the speaker more directly addresses the ordinary citizens and not – or not primarily – the *eisphora*-payers. Further, he notes that the defendants, who now try to keep their crimes secret to escape the death penalty, are the first ones to come forward and complain about

⁶⁵ Cf. Lys. 22,15.

⁶⁶ TODD 2000, 238.

⁶⁷ The exact meaning of the verbs *συνωνεῖσθαι* and *συνπράσσειν* (“buy together”) in the context of this speech is not clear, as it might refer both to the fact that retailers bought grain together as a group, operating thereby as a cartel, or to the fact that they bought altogether more than fifty baskets, thereby accumulating stock (hoarding). SEAGER 1966, 172-184 sees the law as a ban on hoarding, similarly EDWARDS-USHER 1985, 260; whereas FIGUEIRA 1986, 149-171 understands the law as a ban on cartels. For discussion of the legal background of the speech, see TODD 1993, 316-320 and, more briefly, 2000, 237-239. Further, it is unclear «whether the allegation is of exceeding the permitted markup or of fraudulently varying the price by claiming that each sale was from a separate stock» (*ibid.*, 238).



their poverty when it comes to levying the *eisphora*, that wealthy metics also had to pay⁶⁸. There is much more here than just an attempt to fuel hatred between wealthy and poor: Todd is right in noting that there is also a clear anti-metic rhetoric, which is indeed an interesting fact, since Lysias was himself a metic⁶⁹. Together with the accusation of illegal enrichment, the defendants are also accused of acting as enemies of the city: the orator says they enjoy any disaster that might happen to the *polis* precisely because they can sell grain at a higher price, and that they plot against the people as if they were enemies⁷⁰.

In this speech, it is clear that poverty is far more concrete a threat for the *dêmos* than the impoverishment evoked in the previous orations, which mainly referred to the war taxes imposed on the wealthy. In the attempt to forestall acquittal and mercy from the jurors, the speaker reminds them of the citizens who have died (clearly, of hunger) because of the fraudulent actions of the retailers. So the orator concludes his speech with a significant note: «If you convict them, you will be doing what is just, and you will buy grain more cheaply; if not, it will be more expensive»⁷¹. From this closure, «neatly combining the themes of justice and expediency»⁷², it is apparent that the orator addresses the wage workers and the landless far more than the *eisphora*-payers, who probably owned enough land to provide for the food requirements of their own household.

Conclusion: Aristophanes' Plutus in Context

So let us turn back to *Plutus*. It seems from the frequent references to the impoverishment of the Athenians in these speeches of Lysias that there was a great deal of debate about poverty in the years of the Corinthian War. Chremylus' complaint that the honest citizens of the city are poor, while *rhêtores* and politicians are rich, echoes these recurring arguments in Lysias' speeches 27 and 28. On the one hand, the stereotypical forms in which such arguments are presented in these speeches indicate that poverty was a common rhetorical *topos* and that it addressed not only "the poor", but also the upper and middle classes of the *eisphora*-payers; on the other hand, Lysias 22 shows that impoverishment was also evoked as a real threat for the lower strata, in the context of a food crisis related to war.

⁶⁸ Lys. 22,13.

⁶⁹ TODD 2000, 239. On the image of the grain dealers as enemies of the state, cf. also EDWARDS-USHER 1985, 260.

⁷⁰ Lys. 22,13-15.

⁷¹ Lys. 22,22.

⁷² EDWARDS-USHER 1985, 263.



In the light of this background of public speeches, in which speakers intentionally depicted Athenians as *penêtes*, applying this label indiscriminately to both ordinary citizens and *eisphora*-payers, Aristophanes probably considered it necessary to clarify what poverty is and who the *penêtes* are. Penia makes two points: first, she clarifies that she is a well distinct condition from destitution. Athenians may be *penêtes*, but they are not beggars. Second, she makes it clear that *penia* refers to those who engaged in work – she lists many other activities beyond agricultural work – and it is not a degrading condition; it provides an active and healthy life to individuals, and it grants the well-being of the city.

There is no cogent reason to believe Aristophanes is here reacting specifically to Lysias 27 or 28: more broadly, he is likely to react against the political climate and public discourse of those years of which these speeches provide relevant examples. The points Penia makes in *Plutus* are far more than merely a rhetorical conceit or a sophistic argument confined to the comic *agôn*: they are manifestly a message to the audience in the context of frequent appeals to the poverty of the people as something shameful and detrimental to the city. By putting the verses of Aristophanes in the context of the public speeches delivered in the years of the Corinthian War, we can understand the fundamental meaning of the *Plutus* in relation to contemporary public discourse, and see it as an attempt to warn Athenians about the risks of being carried away by the persuasive strength of appeals to poverty. Aristophanes invites his audience to appeal to rationality instead, and to regard poverty as it is: after all, it is their work as *penêtes* that grants to Athenians a way out of economic hardship.

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Abstract

In the comic *agôn* of Aristophanes' *Plutus*, the personified character of Penia argues that poverty, differently from destitution, is beneficial to the city and to its inhabitants. Her words have been traditionally interpreted as a sophistic argument, or as an attempt to show the absurdity of the protagonist's plan of eliminating poverty, or as a satire on utopian ideas. This paper argues that there is yet another way in which we can understand Penia's words. If we put this comedy in the context of the public orations delivered in the years of the Corinthian War, such as Lysias 22, 27 and 28, it is apparent that one of the aim of Penia's speech is to warn the audience about the frequent uses and "abuses" of arguments about the poverty of the *dêmos* in contemporary judicial and political oratory.

Keywords: poverty, Corinthian War, political utopia, Attic comedy, Attic oratory

Nell'agone del *Pluto* di Aristofane il personaggio della Povertà spiega che *Penia*, diversamente da *Ptôcheia*, è una condizione indispensabile per la prosperità economica e la salute della *polis* e dei cittadini. Questo elogio della povertà è stato generalmente interpretato come argomento sofistico, oppure come tentativo di mettere in evidenza il carattere assurdo del piano del protagonista, ovvero quello di eliminare la povertà; o, ancora, si è parlato di parodia delle utopie politiche circolanti nel primo IV secolo. In questo articolo si tenta di dimostrare che vi è un'ulteriore chiave di lettura del testo. Se si considerano questi versi alla luce delle orazioni degli anni della guerra corinzia, in particolare Lisia 22, 27, 28, risulta evidente che l'intento del discorso di Penia è quello di mettere in guardia il pubblico ateniese circa l'uso frequente, e spesso iperbolico, del topos della povertà del *dêmos* nell'oratoria giudiziaria e politica.

Parole chiave: povertà, guerra corinzia, pensiero utopico, commedia aristofanea, oratoria attica