

# Marginalised Characters in Aristophanes' *Ploutos*

José Luis NAVARRO  
Univ. Autónoma Madrid

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## 1-What do we mean by marginalised person?

Maybe it is a certain problem to get a definition for a marginalised character. It is easy if you want to describe a marginalised person in our nowadays society. But theatre even if it reflects life is not exactly life. It is, no doubt, easy to identify a marginalised person in contemporary society; someone who has been left away from the community patterns; someone can be left aside because of economical, political, social or cultural reasons. The one who is left aside does not participate in communitary institutions, does not take part in them. Misery, poverty, lack of power, lack of human rights, lack of money are the authentic identity card of marginalised people ..

## 2-Who are marginalised characters in Greek theatre? Are these the same in tragedy and in comedy?

To give a definition for a marginalised character in theatre is not so simple. In theatre marginalised person does not mean automatically marginalised character. Quite often we use to identify marginalised characters with the so called secondary characters; servants, assistants, butlers, slaves, nurses and so on. As a matter of fact those characters do not move normally the main lines of the plot. That is right but sometimes their performance is completely basic in order to fix the plot and to achieve a proper development. Let us think for example of Phaedra's nurse in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. She is socially marginalised but even if she is a

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### **Marginalised Characters in Aristophanes' *Ploutos***

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secondary character she is not at all marginalised from a dramatic, theatrical point of view. She plays a dominant role in the development of the play. In tragedy-it is true- main characters use to be kings, queens, heroes, priests...mythical heroes anyway. Beside them servants, soldiers, nurses are labelled as common people.

I mean we use to translate concepts of nowadays life into drama and think of secondary characters as marginalised, opposed to primary characters who are even leaders into their own social environment. Obviously, soldiers, beggars, nurses, old men do not play normally a dominant role in tragedy. But drama is not only tragedy; it is also comedy. And in comedy social marginalised people can become, much more often than in tragedy, a powerful important character. There is ,so, a distinction; you can be marginalised in life but not in drama

### **3-Who are marginalised in Aristophanic comedy?**

That is exactly what happens in Aristophanic comedy. It is well known that a protagonist is usually a common farmer, a countryman even a sausage seller; humble people anyway ( <sup>1</sup> ).So in comedy marginalised persons in real life become powerful and react by leaving aside those who are powerful in everyday life too. This is the way Aristophanic comedy works. Let us remember the example of Trygaios in Aristophanes *Peace*:a winegrower without any intellectual knowledge, contemned in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C..No school, no money,...but a lot of energy enough to ride a winged beetle and to climb up to Olympos in order to bring back Eirene to Greece.

This marginalised illiterate fellow becomes the star character of the comedy. He is going to achieve a fascinating enterprise. Starting from the very hard reality of the destroyed land of Attica, he will fight a hard battle in the field of fantasy and will get a great victory to be immediately projected over Athenian people. As a result of his fantastic adventure those who were marginalised as himself, before his risky task was successfully

achieved, will become now exalted and honoured. Aristophanic Comedy ,however ,does not destroy really marginalisation; it keeps it instead .Those who were selfish, proud, powerful, will become now marginalised, poor and miserable. The victory of the left-aside will lead to the breaking of the ancient rules valid in the so called democratic society. Those people such as the trumpets-seller and the weapons-seller we find at Aristophanes´ *Peace*, victorious, rich and powerful in the past ,are now to be defeated and will have to find a new degraded place in the new society. They will be forced to occupy the position previously held by the so called comic hero. Aristophanic comedy usually means social changes, up-down changes. The playwright moves continuously from reality to phantasy and then back to reality that will be transformed and changed .

This is the pattern that fits into the so called comic hero the real star of all Aristophanic comedies. I will not discuss now if the comic hero is really a trickster, a kind of *πονηρος* as Whitman pretends<sup>(2)</sup> or a kind of *αλαζων* or an *ειρων* following Theophrastus´ *Characters*. No doubt when a comedy begins, the so called comic-hero is a marginalised one; a countryman ,a winegrower ,a poor man no rich at all, with a low social and cultural level. He is far away from all kinds of power in the city: neither the power of politics, nor the power of wealth; of course nor the power of religion either. Even so he is ready to face boaster politicians, apparently clever intellectuals, ambitious business men and, unscrupulous priests in order to defeat them and to change both; his and their position in society The comic hero pretends to change the situation, to bring either peace either justice either welfare to all the citizens of Greece.

Normally in his long way leading to the final victory the comic hero faces and meets several characters. Some of them will face him in the land of fantasy: some of them in the field of reality <sup>(3)</sup>. I will like to concentrate in this particular point. The initially marginalised comic hero- a countryman, a farmer, a sausage seller and so on-will face, after having got a change in society, all those people who were boaster and triumphant in

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## Marginalised Characters in Aristophanes' *Ploutos*

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the previous stage. These people will not accept the new situation nor the new leadership of the comic hero. They will become, so, new marginalised characters becoming the hero instead a dominant character .

### 4-Who are marginalised in Aristophanes *Ploutos*?

Let us move now into the last play produced by Aristophanes:*Ploutos*.

A common man ,a farmer, Chremylos, pretends his son to live a better life than his own life. He realises that honesty is not in correspondence with wealth. He moves together with his own slave Carion to the Delphian oracle. In order to get his aim he must follow the first man he will meet when leaving the temple. This first man will be a blind one whose identity will not be immediately unveiled :the semi-god Ploutos. He was blinded by Zeus in order to avoid he could favorise honest people. So Ploutos himself is an ignorant; he will give all the privileges to the corrupted, nasty lazy people and will refuse to give money to those who are really honest and hard-worker men. It is necessary so, to restore him the sight; he must recover sight and then to see properly again. Then Ploutos will be able to distinguish and consequently to distribute justice by rewarding the honest and by punishing the dishonest. Chremylos and Carion decide to take Ploutos to the sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidauros in order to be healed. When they both are about to carry him to the temple, a very original character will appear trying to avoid it. This is no any other but Penía, Poverty. She faces Chremylos and gets engaged with him in a memorable *agôn* .This is much more than a simple quarrel or a simple discussion. We shall be back to this very point later because this is the very crucial point of our paper. Anyway Penía is defeated, and both ,the master and the slave, make Ploutos lay inside Asklepios` temple. After a very comic description by Carion, the fact will be that Ploutos will recover sight and then he will be able to distinguish. He will rearrange now the Greek society. That means in fact that Chremylos and Carion-up to then contempted and marginalised-

will become victorious omnipotent leaders; some other people instead-in this particular case a sycophant ,an old whore woman, a priest and even an Olympic god, Hermes, they all dominant, important, rich and powerful before- will lose all their privileges and will become marginalised.

This is so the portrait gallery of marginalised to be found in Aristophanes. We shall examine now them in detail.

### **a-Sycophant**

We shall not discuss now about the exact meaning of the word itself. This is a non-specific- name character the same as all the others excepting Hermes. Sycophants appear in several previous comedies by Aristophanes. For example *Birds*. This one offers the widest portrait of a new marginalised people that will never have a place in the new city Pisthetairos has just created in the world of birds: *Nephelokokyía*. There we find up to 15 characters waiting at a ridiculous queue to enter into the new city. No place will be given to them.

In *Birds* Sycophant will appear at verse 140 and will leave at verse 1470. Along those sixty verses the Sycophant shows how dishonest he is. In Athens he was powerful; in *Nefelokokkugia* he will be nothing. In Athens he was frightening common people by extortionating them. He was involved in quarrels and judicial affairs. Now he is looking for wings allowing him to continue all his immoral dishonest activities. Pisthetairos pulls his leg first and then rejects him from the new city.

We previously found the same character at *Acharnians*. This is a quite shorter appearance from verse 818 up to 830. He pretends to take to trial a man from Megara who is selling little porks at the peaceful market Dikaiopolis has arranged for his colleagues and citizens, sharing with them the values of peace.

It seems to be a non important scene but in fact the Sycophant is defeated by Dikaiopolis who will blame all the sycophants existing in Athens : They are a plague!

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## Marginalised Characters in Aristophanes' *Ploutos*

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The Sycophant we meet in *Ploutos* is opposed not exactly to the comic hero as in *Acharnians* or *Birds* but to another non-specific character, a Δίκαιος Άνηρ, a *Just Man* a man of honesty and justice. Both are quarrelling . The Sycophant has just become marginalised..He has just lost his job. Into the new frame created by the comic hero there is no place for him. The just man instead, previously left aside, will be now a dominant person.

The Sycophant breaks into the stage at verse 850 with a typical tragic lamentation:

“ ομοιοι κακοδαιμων,ωσ απολωλα δειλαιος “. He will leave at verse 958.That means more than hundred verses all along which he is continuously complaining and dreaming of his former privileged life. The Just Man instead deals with him like a prosecutor at the Court. He does not stop asking him: ”which is your job?” he says . Terrible answer:”I know nothing but to accuse and to extortionate people”. (*Pl.* 919)This fellow indeed is not a silly one. He has learnt very very soon that he is lost.” Now I know that I am quite less, quite inferior than you are”( *Pl*, 944 ).As a matter of fact those are the last words this character says before leaving the stage .He has lost his previous dominant position. And he is quite aware of it. There is a full up down change in his life.

### **b-The Old Whore Woman**

A certain similar change occurs at the second marginalised character in *Ploutos*. I mean the so called *Graus* the Old Woman staying on the stage and having a discussion first with Chremylos ( *Pl*,951-1040) and later with a *Neanias* a Young Boy along verses 1042-1096.This old lady was a not very honest whore. Same as the Sycophant she complains “:My life is not life any more” “αβιοτον ειναι μοι πεποιηκε τον βιον. (*Pl*.969)Since *Ploutos* recovered his eyes she can not live any more. It sounds as the proper voice of someone who has just become marginalised. She is complaining evoking her previous way of life, when she was taking

money here and there ruling her prostitution business. The young boy was a poor beggar, had no money and used to call the old woman for help. Now it is just the opposite. The action carried out by Chremylos means an absolute change for the old lady; a change leading her to a marginal area.

### c-Hermes

The third marginalised character is to be found between verses 1110-1170. This is the god Hermes. No doubt the favourite of Aristophanes to make laugh at. He is the closest god to men. Humans feel he is informal, able to understand all the human problems and all the human miseries.

God Hermes plays a quite important role at *Peace*. (180-730). He will become co-operator with Trygaios in order to take Eirene away from the cave Polemos has jailed her. Maybe Hermes himself feels in a certain way marginalised within the group of the twelve Olympian. He is not powerful. He takes care of merchants and travellers. He is the messenger of Zeus. He has no initiatives. He is a *minor deus*. And he likes to be in touch with the human beings. In Aristophanes' *Peace* he occupies a central, important role helping Trygaios in his risky enterprise. The last one in the row of the Olympian feels himself left aside by them. When Trygaeos arrives to the Olympus, he feels, in a certain way, very happy. Two marginalised joint in order to achieve an important enterprise. Because of both, important changes will take place in Greece; the war will be over.

Aristophanes underlines two specific traces to make Hermes become ridiculous; first, he is always hungry; he is gluttonous. Second, he is greedy, money-lover. Any tasty food will seduce Hermes. Trygaios knows it and this is his first step to attract him: to offer him a piece of roast beef. On the other hand this humble deity feels very satisfied when some human being offers him gold or silver objects. Trygaios knows too and by doing so, he will easily get his cooperation.

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### Marginalised Characters in Aristophanes' *Ploutos*

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At *Ploutos*, Hermes performance is really pathetic. Seventy lines (1110-1170) are enough to realise how marginalisation leads to desperation. Zeus and all the Olympian are really cross with Carion and Chremylos. Once Ploutos has recovered his sight nobody takes care of the Gods: no sacrifices, no offerings, nor even prayers. Hermes risks of losing his job at Olympos. So he decides to apply for a post in the new transformed, abundant, rich human society.

Carion, the slave, is now extremely boaster and powerful. He cheats Hermes continuously. He continuously underlines both defaults the god indissimulately shows: he loves money, he is gluttonous. Now because of the new situation, there is nothing at Olympos. He asks ,so, for a piece of roast beef and a piece of toast bread( *Pl* , 1136-1140).The nice smell of the stewed meat to be offered at the big party prepared by Carion and Chremylos for the Athenians attracts him. But there is not enough. Hermes goes a step further. He says he is not ready to be back to Olympos. He wants to stay in the human city having any job. Always marginalised within the gods, he is ready to be the last one at the queue of the mortal rows. He has been clever enough to understand that the very last at this particular human queue will not be left aside any more. Zeus and the Olympian instead have been absolutely forgotten and contempted by the men of Greece.; to join them means to be over the Olympian themselves, in a higher position. Hermes is clever enough to realise it. He is a *ponerós*; he knows how to do. Being the last one at the mortal queue he will become the first at the immortal rows..Carion lets him join the citizens of Athens. He will be allowed to get into Chremylos` house where a big festive party is about to be held. Notice the permission is given to the god by the humblest one, Carion a slave. Hermes must wash himself and get disguised in order to look like a servant ( *Pl* , 1170) *ινα ευθεως διακονικος ειναι δοκης* .But anyway in that particular moment, to be a servant, as Carion himself is, means to be a king. Ancient marginalised are now the winners.

#### **d-Priest of Zeus**

A priest of Zeus will appear at the end of the piece. He is the fourth marginalised character in *Ploutos*. He dies of hunger ( Pl ,1173).He complains in the same way Hermes did some lines ahead. Everybody is rich now; nobody needs the support and help of the Gods. This priest is seriously thinking of resigning and saying goodbye to Zeus forever. He no doubt would prefer to join Chremylos and his friends. He makes a continuous allusion to the previous situation-when Ploutos was still blind-and to the present one –when Ploutos is not blind any more-.The recovering of sight by Ploutos means to many people-remember the Sycophant, the old whore woman, Hermes, and this poor priest- to become forever an absolute marginalised one

If we analyse the moral values of all these marginalised characters, we will find them absolutely negative. They all are immoral; their behaviour is unacceptable. There is an absolute lack of moral values. Their moral code is, no doubt, condemnable. They have no virtues at all. All those fellows are no doubt πονηροι,πανουργοι,αδικοι,αχρηστοι .Moving according with their own moral code they became triumphant and winners. But once the comic hero has carried out successfully his very hard enterprise, their happiness is over; they will become marginalised as a punishment for their previous immoral behaviour.

#### **e-Penía (Poverty)**

Nothing to object to these four characters ,but there is still a fifth one missing. I mean Penía, Poverty, the only one who had no dominant place in the old city and the only one who will not find it either into the new one. She was already a marginalised one when Ploutos was blind and she will continue being so once Ploutos has recovered his eyes. She is ,in a certain way, a tragic character.

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### Marginalised Characters in Aristophanes' *Ploutos*

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Let us examine the dramatic context. Penía breaks into the stage in a quite violent way just when Chremylos together with Carion are about to take Ploutos to the sanctuary of Asklepios. That means Ploutos is still blind at that very moment. We are still in the so called old city; the boss and the slave are a couple of left aside men. They dream of becoming rich, important and powerful. Poverty, Penía is there in order to avoid it. To give back sight to Ploutos will be a disaster, she says The boss and the slave will laugh at her. They are completely dazzled by the idea of becoming rich immediately and so they are not ready to listen to the arguments of Penía. Penía, no doubt, is a character full of moral values. Here we are going to find the difference. Up to then only immoral characters were forced by the comic hero to become marginalised. This time, instead, the hero himself is going to make a mistake; he is going to leave aside a character full of moral values, full, most of all, of σωφροσύνη. Penía steps on the stage at verse 415. The *ergon* Chremylos and Carion are about to achieve is, according to her, something *ανοσιον, παρανομον*; it is against the *ευσεβεια*, the piety, against the law of the city. "No man has been so bold as to achieve such an impiety illegal action ( *Pl* ,416) . Blepsidemus, a friend of Chremylos tries to run away when listening to Penía. He is frightened. Chremylos decides to stay and to face her. Then a memorable *agôn* will start full of arguments from both sides. ( *Pl*,488-600 ) . Chremylos seems to be out of mind. Penía instead is calmed, full of patience and good sense. Chremylos wants wealth to be given to everybody; he pretends a new society made of wealthy men where everybody will have lots of money and will not have to work any more. No doubt he claims for an absolute utopia. Penía instead tries to demonstrate that his new city based on wealth and money will destroy the moral values of the Athenian citizens..She will demonstrate that Chremylos is wrong (*αμαρτοντα*) if he wants the just men to become rich. ( *Pl*. 475), *τους δικαιους ποιησειν πλουσιους*

Chremylos argues many men have become suddenly rich by dishonest means; many wise fair and just men, instead, are unfortunate and

spend life in misery. To give back sight to Ploutos will mean punishment for the first group and a reward for the second one.

Penía replies his aim seems to be nice and reasonable but there is a serious risk: everybody would become so rich that nobody would like to work. To make your life without working is in a certain way *υβρις*. Life without effort, without work will be impossible. She claims so for the moral value of work and effort. Nobody will like to achieve any occupation, any craft. Penía at that point is able to mention up to eight different useful crafts:

( *Pl.* 511 ουτε τεχνην ουτε σοφιαν μελετωη ουδεις)

Chremylos replies the slaves would achieve those tasks, but Penía is clever enough to argue that it will be impossible to find slaves. The hero insists he will be able to buy them with lots of money, *αργυριον*, (*Pl.* 519) but Penía is ready to reply again that even the slaves sellers will become rich and will retire from such a hard risky business. And still more; if everybody becomes rich all the manual workers will disappear. They will forget their hard works and will live a life of dreams. Impossible then to lay in beautiful beds, to drink wine in luxury golden cups and so on. Chremylos insists in ignoring the new picture Penía describes and insists on a description of the kind of life suffered by the citizens of the lower social level in Attica; people without houses, without dresses, without money. That situation, Chremylos insists, must change and will change; poverty is inconvenient and nasty for everybody.

But Penía is still very clever and she makes a very subtle soft nuanced distinction. We must go to verse 548., the crucial point of the *agon*. "You do not have described my life but the life of beggars (*πτωχων*)". This is a subtle distinction; poverty versus misery; poors versus beggars. The beggar (*πτωχος*) has nothing (*μηδεν εχοντα*). The poor instead lives without luxury, administrating his money trying to have enough to live properly without lacking anything but without overspending anything (554,

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### Marginalised Characters in Aristophanes' *Ploutos*

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μηδεν περιγινεσθαι , μηδεν επιλειπειν) Absolutely updated words. This lady is definitely right. She is claiming for austerity. To change up down the social situation will mean lack of austerity, lack of effort, lack of work. That will not be positive. That is utopia.

The second part of the *agón* ( Pl. 563- 600 ) is presented by Penía as a contrast between σωφροσυνη and υβρις, δικαιοσυνη and αδικια. According to her , politicians are just or fair (δικαιοι) when they are poor (πενητες), but they become unjust, unfair( αδικοι) when they are rich(πλουτησαντες). Chremylos tries to understand. Penía is trying to persuade him(αναπειθειν) that it is better poverty than wealth. But as a matter of fact Chremylos is as stubborn as a mule and does not get persuaded at all. Penía must insist; Zeus himself hates wealth; he gives vegetable crowns to the winners at the Olympic Games( Pl. 580) instead of golden or silver ones. But not even this nor any other similar argument can persuade the stubborn Athenian illiterate man. Chremylos is absolutely dazed ; incredible words he says: (Pl.600)

ου γαρ πεισεις ουδ ην πεισης

you will not persuade me even if you would persuade me.

Then everything is lost for Penía. Her persuasion has failed. Her lovely, moral arguments full of seriousness and good sense have not been listened by Chremylos. But if we listen to them carefully we will immediately realise that Penía is right; her arguments are definitely right. Simply Penía cannot persuade the Athenian fool once it has become crazy. Penía is expelled from the stage ( Pl.604) and she is presumably beaten by the chorus. She is sent away from the new rich wealthy city for ever. Chremylos sends her to the same place where the Sycophant, the Old Whore, Hermes and the Priest will seat; the sit ,the chair of marginalised.

Chremylos and the Athenians are wrong. They are leaving aside a character who represents a lot of very serious solid moral values. (4)But the

fool has the power now. And the fool is now out of mind. Then Penía is going to suffer the so called *Cassandra and Laocoon syndrome*. The same as the daughter of Priamos ,the same as the priest of Poseidon, Penía will not be listened even if she is right.

### 5-Conclusion

To conclude. I think the case of Penía is a certain “hapax” in ancient comedy. All future marginalised people will appear at the second or mostly the third part of the plot. Penía instead appears at the first one, before the comic hero has achieved his task. However the most important difference is not ,of course, the moment she faces the comic hero but her moral behaviour. All marginalised characters show an absolute lack of moral values along their lives. They are powerful, ambitious, unscrupulous corrupted, immoral. Penía instead represents the values of moderation(σωφροσύνη) and justice (δικαιοσύνη) together with the values of effort(πόνος) and austerity(επαρκεία)And that is exactly the reason why she becomes absolutely ignored, contempted and finally marginalised. Same as *Cassandra*, same as *Laocoon* she faces a mad deaf fool.

Dear colleagues; do you think in the nowadays world, in the XXI century Aristophanic comedy is old fashioned? European countries should read more often these verses written twenty five centuries ago by Aristophanes. Then maybe the actual situation would have been and would be different. In this confused nowadays world we live, let us listen to Penía ;maybe it is worth it; maybe we must learn from her; maybe she is marginalised as *Cassandra and Laocoon* , but, no doubt, she is right.

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