The pity of Paris: Cratinus' *Dionysalexandros*[*]

«The papyrus summary of *Dionysalexandros* (POxy 663) is one of the most valuable pieces of evidence for the study of Cratinus' art»[1]. From this precious document, we learn that in Cratinus' account of the beauty contest between the three goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, it was Dionysus, not Paris (Alexandros), who was the judge; Dionysus' award of the prize to Aphrodite was swiftly followed by his abduction of Helen and arrival with her at the land of Troy. The story continues as follows:

ἀκού(ει) δ(ὲ) με-
τ' ὀλίγον τοὺc Ἀχαιοὺc πυρ-
πολ]εῖν τὴν χώ(ραν) (καὶ) [
τὸν Ἀλέξαν[δ(ρον). τὴν μ(ὲν) οὖν Ἑλένη(ν)
εἰc τάλαρον ὡc τά[χιcτα
κρύψαc, ἑαυτὸν δ' εἰc κριὸ[ν
μ(ε)τ(α)cκευάcαc ὑπομένει
τὸ μέλλον. παραγενό-
μενοc δ' Ἀλέξανδ(ροc) κ(αὶ) φωρά-
cαc ἑκάτερο(ν) ἄγειν ἐπὶ τὰc
ναῦc πρ(οc)τάττει ὡc παραδώcων
τοῖc Ἀχαιοῖ(c). ὀκνούcηc δ(ὲ) τῆc
Ἑλένη(c) ταύτην μ(ὲν) οἰκτείραc
ὡc γυναῖχ' ἕξων ἐπικατέχ(ει),
τὸν δ(ὲ) Διόνυ(coν) ὡc παραδοθη-
cόμενο(ν) ἀποcτέλλει, cυν-
ακολουθ(οῦcι) δ' οἱ cάτυ(ροι) παρακαλοῦν-
τέc τε κ(αὶ) οὐκ ἂν προδώcειν
αὐτὸν φάcκοντεc. κωμωι-

[*] I am grateful to Jasper Donelan, Alan Sommerstein, and Henry Spelman for helpful comments; to Anna Zourgou for general discussion of Cratinus' play; and to the Leverhulme Trust for supporting the research which led to this article through the award of a Philip Leverhulme Prize.

[1] Bakola 2010, 81. For a plate of the papyrus see *ibid.* pl. 3, opposite p. 177. The papyrus is from the late second or early third century AD. The play itself is to be dated «either ca 430, or as early as 437/436 in the Samian War» (cf. Marshall 2014, 65); for the earlier date, see Storey 2006, 113-116, 2010, 192, 2014, 101 with n. 3, citing Thuc. I 115-117, Plut. *Per.* 25.

δεῖται δ’ ἐν τῶι δράματι Περικλῆς μάλα πιθανῶς δι’ ἐμφάσεως ὡς ἐπαγηοχὼς τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις τὸν πόλεμον. 45

«But he hears a little while later that the Greeks are ravaging the countryside <and looking for> Alexander. He hides Helen very quickly in a basket, and changing himself into a ram awaits developments. Alexander appears and detects each of them, and orders them to be taken to the ships, meaning to give them back to the Greeks. When Helen refuses, he takes pity on her and holds on to her, to keep her as his wife. Dionysus he sends off to be handed over. The satyrs go along with him, encouraging him and insisting that they will not betray him. In the play Pericles is very persuasively made fun of through innuendo for having brought the war on the Athenians»[2].

Despite the extensive discussion that this *hypothesis* has received since its publication in 1904, one vital word has gone almost completely without comment: οἰκτείρας, “having pitied”, referring to the emotion that causes Paris to retain possession of Helen despite his initial desire to give her back. This word is surprisingly elusive in summaries of the papyrus’s content. Already in the *editio princeps*, it slips out of the plot *précis*, which omits any reference to why Paris decided to keep hold of Helen: «Alexander himself now comes on the stage, and detects the lovers; the denouement is that Helen remains with him as his wife, while Dionysus is sent off in disgrace» (Grenfell-Hunt 1904, 71). Scholars who do refer to this key moment in the story tend to focus not on Paris but on Helen. So according to Croiset (1904, 303), «la belle étrangère suppliait si bien et elle était si séduisante dans ses supplications, que Pâris finissait par se laisser émouvoir et se décidait à la garder comme sa femme, quoi qu’il en pût résulter». Yet the papyrus *hypothesis* mentions only unwillingness; there is nothing about supplication, let alone seduction[3]. Such wiles rightly find no place in Bakola’s summary, yet she nevertheless foregrounds Helen’s agency, with Paris the object of active verbs or the subject of passive ones: «Helen objects and finally convinces Paris to keep her as his wife […]; the execution of Paris’ order is interrupted because of Helen’s objection […]; the new scene, with Helen resisting and Paris being finally persuaded to keep her as his wife» (Bakola 2010, 88, 86, 87 n. 17). Olson’s account of the drama accurately describes Helen as reluctant rather than persuasive or seductive; nevertheless, in his reference to the key moment of decision her agency remains paramount, and Paris’ attitude goes unmentioned: «the implication would seem to be that Paris expected Helen to want to return to Sparta and Menelaus, but that she was reluctant

[2] Text and translation by Storey 2011, 289, 291; the text is virtually the same as that offered by Kassel-Austin 1983, 140.

[3] Croiset indeed emends ὀκνούσης in the *hypothesis* to ἱκετευούσης (p. 303 n. 1), a suggestion with nothing to recommend it.

to do so and took advantage of his good nature, leading to an otherwise avoidable war» (Olson 2007, 90, on ll. 34-36 of the *hypothesis*).

A brief account of the plot by Storey (2010, 191) does not refer to the moment when Helen is returned: «Kratinos took the familiar story of the Judgement of Paris on Mount Ida, substituting Dionysos for Paris for the judgement and its consequences, including both Helen and the wrath of the Greeks. Paris himself appears, and the story of Paris, Helen, and the Trojan War continues in its traditional form». This short summary is fair enough until we reach the final phrase. For it is only by neglecting the word οἰκτείρας that we can assert that there is anything traditional about the form of the tale adopted by Cratinus in his drama.

The traditional characterisation of Paris, portraying him as a man excessively devoted to the pleasures of lust, scarcely requires illustration. Such a portrayal is as old as the *Iliad* (III 373-382), where he is rescued from certain death at the hands of Menelaus only through the intervention of Aphrodite, who transports him from the battlefield to his bedroom; when his brother Hector finds him handling his armour, he tells him to go out to fight again because the Trojans are dying in a war that he has caused[4]. His culpability for the war is repeatedly emphasised. Helen tells Hector that he suffers toil thanks both to herself and to Paris' folly[5]; a narrative passage towards the end of the poem uses the same expression, when giving the sole reference in the poem to the Judgment of Paris[6]. Paris' ships, the ships that conveyed Helen to Troy, are called "the beginners of evil", a striking phrase that would be imitated by Herodotus[7]. Paris even bribed one of the Trojans, Antimachus, to speak against a proposal to restore Helen to the Greeks (*Il.* XI 122-125). So his choice of Aphrodite in the Judgment, his adultery with Helen, his journey with Helen from Sparta to Troy, and his determination to retain her after his arrival there are all seen as causes of the disastrous war which has afflicted his people.

In Cratinus' *Dionysalexandros*, by contrast, it is Dionysus, not Paris, who makes the fatal choice in the Judgment. And when Paris himself appears, he is the opposite of the Paris familiar from the *Iliad*. He perceives the injury done to the Greeks, and wishes to make amends by handing over both Dionysus and Helen to them; he accomplishes the former, but nevertheless holds on to Helen. Yet he retains her not out of lust, but out of pity, showing compassion for her; this is

---

[4] *Il.* VI 327-329 λαοὶ μὲν φθινύθουσι περὶ πτόλιν αἰπύ τε τεῖχος / μαρνάμενοι· σέο δ' εἵνεκ' ἀϋτή τε πτόλεμός τε / ἄστυ τόδ' ἀμφιδέδηε.

[5] *Il.* VI 355f. δᾶερ, ἐπεί σε μάλιστα πόνος φρένας ἀμφιβέβηκεν / εἵνεκ' ἐμεῖο κυνὸς καὶ Ἀλεξάνδρου ἕνεκ' ἄτης. For ἄτη in Homer, see Cairns 2012.

[6] *Il.* XXIV 25-30 ἔνθ' ἄλλοις μὲν πᾶσιν ἐήνδανεν, οὐδέ ποθ' Ἥρῃ / οὐδὲ Ποσειδάων' οὐδὲ γλαυκώπιδι κούρῃ, / ἀλλ' ἔχον ὥς σφιν πρῶτον ἀπήχθετο Ἴλιος ἱρὴ / καὶ Πρίαμος καὶ λαὸς Ἀλεξάνδρου ἕνεκ' ἄτης, / ὃς νείκεσσε θεὰς ὅτε οἱ μέσσαυλον ἵκοντο, / τὴν δ' ἤνησ' ἥ οἱ πόρε μαχλοσύνην ἀλεγεινήν.

[7] *Il.* V 62f. ὃς καὶ Ἀλεξάνδρῳ τεκτήνατο νῆας ἐΐσας / ἀρχεκάκους, αἳ πᾶσι κακὸν Τρώεσσι γένοντο.

likely to be prompted by thought of the punishment that Helen would receive if she was restored to the Greeks, something that Helen may well have pointed out to him[8]. Such a feeling contrasts with the sexual passion and self-indulgence with which Paris is usually associated; here he takes account, not primarily of his own desires, but of the impact of his actions on another person.

In Cratinus' play, then, we see at work, albeit in a comic context, the same love of innovation and paradox in mythology that prompted Stesichorus to present Helen as a virtuous woman whose abduction, to which she did not consent, was foiled by the gods, who transported her to Egypt and gave the unknowing Paris an εἴδωλον in her place; this presentation was later taken up by Herodotus and Euripides[9]. Stesichorus turned Helen, that byword for female immorality, into a paragon of chastity; Cratinus turned the notoriously louche Paris into a man with a keen sense of justice and concern for the feelings of others. As Sommerstein notes, «[the play] has ingeniously reversed the traditional assumptions of the story: Paris and the Trojans are innocent of everything except taking pity on a woman in distress»[10]. It is not hard to see what this kind of mythological transformation could contribute to a comedy; part of the play's humour presumably derived from the unexpected presentation of Paris as a basically virtuous man.

Moreover, by giving pity such a prominent function within the plot of his drama, Cratinus employs a feature fundamental to many more serious works of archaic and classical Greek literature. In the *Odyssey*, the pity for Odysseus shown by the gods sets in motion his release from Calypso's island and his eventual return home (I 19). Near the start of the *Iliad*, compassion for mortal suffering prompts Hera to send Athena to intervene in the Greek camp to stop the plague, which results in the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon that brings the Greek cause to the brink of disaster (I 56). In the *Cypria* (fr. 1 West), from the epic cycle, Zeus begins the Trojan war because of his pity for the goddess Earth, who is oppressed by the weight of humanity. Stesichorus' *Sack of Troy* (fr. 100,18f. F.) begins with the goddess Athena showing pity to the menial servant Epeius, whose daily job it was to carry water for the Greek kings, by inspiring him to create the Wooden Horse, thus leading to the destruction of the city which had for so long frustrated the force of arms. In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, pity for his people leads Oedipus to investigate the killing of the Theban king Laius; that investigation culminates in the news that he owes his own life to the pity of a herdsman who long ago was ordered to expose him as a baby.

---

[8] «While it is not certain that Helen is a speaking role, her refusal (37) suggests that she did speak» (Marshall 2014, 66).

[9] See Davies-Finglass 2014, 305f.

[10] Cf. Wright 2007, 417: «the plot […] offers a radically revised version of the causes of the Trojan War. Paris is absolved from guilt (unusually, he appears as a sympathetic character), while Helen's own guilt is minimized».

These works present the tender and considerate emotion of pity as something that paradoxically leads to chaos and destruction: in the *Iliad*, the countless deaths caused by Achilles' withdrawal from the fighting; in the *Cypria*, the mass deaths on both sides of the Trojan War as a whole; in Stesichorus, the bloody sack of an ancient city; in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, the fall of a mighty king and able ruler[11]. The same pattern can be found in Cratinus, where Paris' decision to give way to his pity leads him to retain Helen, a disastrous choice which dooms his city; here the act of pity occurs at the end of a work, not at the beginning, as in these other texts, but nevertheless it looks forward to future misery. Cratinus' play was a comedy, of course, not a serious work like these others, and so profound reflections on the long-term consequences of emotion are perhaps unlikely to have featured. Nevertheless, pity itself is an unexpected emotion in a comedy, where people who experience suffering are more likely to be mocked or laughed at rather than to receive compassion[12], and we would be unwise to set too firm a limit to the ways in which Cratinus could have exploited such a twist. More generally, it is striking to see a pattern used so extensively by writers in higher genres employed by a comic poet, for whatever effect. It reminds us that the division between higher and lower genres is not impermeable, and just as epic and comedy can incorporate elements of the lower style, so comedy can incorporate elements of the higher[13].

When we have only the summary of an ancient work, we depend on the accuracy of the summariser, on which we often (as here) have no check; in such cases there is always a danger that our arguments are founded on data that is inaccurate or downright false. Nevertheless, in this case the version of the myth offered by the summary is so different from the usual presentation of Paris that we can be confident that it accurately reflects the play's content; for it is more likely that

---

[11] «There is a paradox in Stesichorus' reference to pity: this apparent act of kindness and generosity has far-reaching and terrible consequences. We might have expected anger, or jealousy, or some other violent emotion to lie behind the slaughter at Troy. Pity, by contrast, ought to inhibit, not to cause, the sacking of a city» (Finglass 2013, 13; for this fragment, see further Finglass 2015).

[12] The very verb οἰκτίρω is «common in tragedy […] but very rare in comedy outside of paratragedy» (Biles-Olson 2015, *ad* Ar. *V*. 556f.); «the serious expression of pity is alien to Old Comedy» (Henderson 1987, *ad* Ar. *Lys*. 959-961). One instance, at *V*. 975, comes from the defending counsel's speech for the accused dog Labes (cf. l. 967 ἐλέει, if the text is sound); but that episode is obviously a comic parody, whereas Helen is potentially a worthy recipient of Paris' compassion.

[13] Cf. Wright 2007, 431: «the comedians can be seen to have engaged creatively with the Trojan myth in particular, using it as a means of exploring social, intellectual and political problems in parallel with other contemporary writers of all types: in fact tragedy, comedy and history can be seen as mutually interdependent genres […]. The war both is and is not a joking matter, because comedy (whatever else it may be) never lets us forget that it is a *serious* genre». See further Nelson 2016, especially p. 247 on the use of tragedy by comic poets other than Aristophanes.

the writer of a *hypothesis* would wrongly assimilate an unusual aspect of a work to the account more familiar to him and his audience, than that he mistakenly introduced such a distinctive and original element to Cratinus' story. We cannot exclude the possibility that Paris was struck by Helen's beauty as well as pitying her – after all, the summary does say that he retained her "as his wife" – yet his lust must have been less prominent than his pity, since otherwise the writer of the hypothesis would scarcely have mentioned the latter rather than the former.

Paris' pity for Helen must also be taken into account in any discussion of the remark that concludes the *hypothesis*, that the play presented a satire of Pericles. A full discussion of this much-debated topic is beyond the scope of this note[14]; nevertheless, the reference to Paris' emotion has implications for the question of which character (if any) should be identified (to whatever degree) with Pericles. Some scholars have regarded Paris as the most likely vehicle for Cratinus' satire. So for Storey (2014, 102), «the last sentence [of the *hypothesis*] may just mean that at some point in the comedy there was a skillful allusion to Pericles and the war. In view of the play's title, should we not be looking at Alexander (Paris) for the source of this comment? By keeping Helen, he brings the Trojan War on his people»; whereas for Marshall (2014, 67), «somehow (perhaps through costuming or masking choices) Paris was equated with Pericles, as an individual who led a city into a wrongly intentioned war». The idea that Pericles started the Peloponnesian War because of his mistress Aspasia[15] renders a connexion between him and Paris, who himself brought war upon his people because of a woman, speciously attractive. But Cratinus' presentation of Paris as a man of unusual virtue tells against that hypothesis, and suggests that other scholars are right to see Dionysus rather than Paris as the character most likely to correspond, in full or in part, to Pericles[16]. Here is one more way, then, that the neglected pity of Paris can shed light on Cratinus' intriguing drama.

Dept. of Classics PATRICK J. FINGLASS
University Park, GB – Nottingham NG7 2RD patrick.finglass@nottingham.ac.uk

Bibliographical abbreviations

Bakola 2010 = E. B., *Cratinus and the Art of Comedy*, Oxford-New York 2010.
Biles-Olson 2015 = Z.P. B.-S.D. O., *Aristophanes. Wasps*, Oxford 2015.

[14] For a recent, detailed discussion sceptical about the idea that any satire of Pericles was central to the drama, see Bakola 2010, 181-208.

[15] For this idea, attested in old comedy, cf. Olson 2002 *ad* Ar. *Ach.* 526f.

[16] Cf. the reference of McGlew 2002, 89 to «Cratinus' comic portrait of a lascivious, selfish, and secretive Pericles» (his p. 54 makes clear that he sees the Dionysus character as the representative of Pericles).

Cairns 2012 = D.L. C., *Atê in the Homeric poems*, in F. Cairns (ed.), «Papers of the Langford Latin Seminar», XV, Prenton 2012, 1-52.
Croiset 1904 = M. C., *Le Dionysalexandros de Cratinos*, «REG» XVII (1904) 297-310.
Davies-Finglass 2014 = *Stesichorus. The Poems*, ed. with intr., transl., and comm. by M. D.-P.J. F., Cambridge 2014.
Dobrov 2010 = G. D. (ed.), *Brill's Companion to the Study of Greek Comedy*, Leiden-Boston 2010.
Finglass 2013 = P.J. F., *How Stesichorus began his Sack of Troy*, «ZPE» CLXXXV (2013) 1-17.
Finglass 2015 = P.J. F., *Simias and Stesichorus*, «Eikasmós» XXVI (2015) 197-202.
Fontaine-Scafuro 2014 = M. F.-A.C. S. (edd.), *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, Oxford-New York 2014.
Grenfell-Hunt 1904 = B.P. G.-A.S. H., *663. Argument of Cratinus' Διονυσαλέξανδρος*, in *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, IV, London 1904, 69-72.
Henderson 1987 = J. H., *Aristophanes. Lysistrata*, Oxford 1987.
Kassel-Austin 1983 = R. K.-C. A., *Poetae Comici Graeci.*, IV. *Aristophon–Crobylus*, Berolini-Novi Eboraci 1983.
Kozak-Rich 2006 = L. K.-J. R. (edd.), *Playing Around Aristophanes*. «Essays in Celebration of the Completion of the Edition of the Comedies of Aristophanes by Alan Sommerstein», Oxford 2006.
Marshall 2014 = C.W. M., *The Structure and Performance of Euripides' Helen*, Cambridge 2014.
McGlew 2002 = J.F. McG., *Citizens on Stage. Comedy and Political Culture in the Athenian Democracy*, Ann Arbor 2002.
Nelson 2016 = S. N., *Aristophanes and his Tragic Muse. Comedy, Tragedy and the Polis in 5th Century Athens*, Leiden-Boston 2016.
Olson 2002 = S.D. O., *Aristophanes. Acharnians*, Oxford 2002.
Olson 2007 = S.D. O., *Broken Laughter. Select Fragments of Greek Comedy*, Oxford 2007.
Sommerstein 2002 = A.H. S., *Greek Drama and Dramatists*, London-New York 2002.
Storey 2006 = I.C. S., *On first looking into Kratinos' Dionysalexandros*, in Kozak-Rich 2006 [*q.v.*], 105-125.
Storey 2010 = I.C. S., *Origins and fifth-century comedy*, in Dobrov 2010 [*q.v.*], 179-225.
Storey 2011 = I.C. S., *Fragments of Old Comedy.*, I. *Alcaeus to Diocles*, Cambridge, Mass.-London 2011.
Storey 2014 = I.C. S., *The first poets of Old comedy*, in Fontaine-Scafuro 2014 [*q.v.*], 95-112.
Wright 2007 = M. W., *Comedy and the Trojan war*, «CQ» n.s. LVII (2007) 412-431.

Abstract

In Cratinus' *Dionysalexandros* Paris was minded to return Helen – who had been stolen not by him but by Dionysus – to the Greeks, but was inhibited by pity. This article explores the consequences of this emotion for the characterisation of Paris and the overall impact of the drama.