

ARISTOPHANES' *KNIGHTS* 169–75 AND *BIRDS* 175–77

Dimitrios Kanellakis
University of Oxford

This note discusses the meaning of διαστρέφω in two Aristophanic passages. In *Knights* 169–75, the servant Demosthenes invites the Sausage-Seller to look far and wide at islands, harbours, and boats and then asks him to direct his right-eye sight towards Caria and his left-eye sight towards Carthage. The Sausage-Seller complains διαστραφήσομαι (175), which either means that he will twist his neck, or turn cross-eyed. Given the actual orientation of the theatre of Dionysus, if the actor is facing the audience when saying these lines, he is looking north. Therefore, Caria is on his right side and Carthage on his left, precisely as he is directed to turn each of his eyes. But if the actor has turned his back to the audience, looking south, then he is expected to look left with his right eye (at Caria) and look right with his left eye (at Carthage). Both options have their theatrical advantages, and hence are equally plausible. In the former option, the audience is invited to stare at the actor, trying to see through the holes of his mask. In the latter option, the actor can render his ‘visual chiasmus’ by crossing his hands above his head.¹ In *Birds* 175–77, the Hoopoe also exclaims διαστραφήσομαι, when Peisetairos asks him to inspect the place where the birds shall build a new city, looking down, then upwards, and then sideways; the Hoopoe can only see clouds and the sky.² Commentators have always cited *Knights* 169–75 and *Birds* 175–77 as comparanda, and Dunbar also points out their interpretative similarity: in both cases, the characters look at far-off areas which, it is

¹ Sommerstein 1981: *ad loc.* takes for granted that the actor faced the audience, on the assumption that the right eye must be looking right and the left eye must be looking left.

² The Hoopoe sees the clouds and the sky when he looks *upward*, because the dramatic space is still the ground level. It is not clear when the transition to the clouds happens, but this is certainly after 264 (κέχηνά γ' ἐς τὸν οὐρανὸν βλέπων) and before 817–18 (ἐντευθενὶ | ἐκ τῶν νεφελῶν καὶ τῶν μετεώρων χωρίων). On the fluidity of dramatic space in Aristophanes, see Lowe 2006; Bowie 2011.

alleged, are about to become their empire.³ Yet the verb διαστραφήσομαι merits further attention.⁴

The two possible interpretations mentioned above are those given by the scholia on the respective passages (and subsequently by modern commentators and translators). The only other instance of the verb in extant Aristophanes, however, has generated some dispute. In *Acharnians* 15–16, Dikaiopolis complains:

τῆτες δ' ἀπέθανον καὶ διεστράφην ἰδὼν
ὅτε δὴ παρέκλυσε Χαῖρις ἐπὶ τὸν ὄρθιον.

But just this year I died on the rack when I saw Chaeris
creeping on to play the Orthian tune. (tr. Henderson 1998)

In light of *Knights* and *Birds*, διεστράφην has been translated as ‘I got a squint’ or ‘I cracked my neck’.⁵ On the other hand, a number of scholars translate it as ‘I was tortured’ – in a metaphorical sense of course, in the way that ἀπέθανον is a metaphor for boredom.⁶ For them, the torture implied is strangulation.⁷ This popular reading, however, seems to ignore three facts, which rather clearly promote the meaning of strabismus. First, lines 17–18, which come just after the lines we are discussing, explicitly speak of eye-pain (due to shampoo); consequently, 15–16 are probably speaking of eye-pain too. Second, we must not ignore the *reason* why Dikaiopolis experiences this symptom; that is, a performance by the musician Chairis. Van Leeuwen has aptly noted the verbal contrast between παρέκλυσε and ὄρθιον, which portrays Chairis as bending over and singing at a high pitch.⁸ In terms of comic logic, this is for the audience a good reason for Chairis to develop a squint.⁹ Third, the wider context (*Acharnians* 1–32) repeatedly speaks of visual experiences: ἰδὼν (5); τὰς ὀφρῦς (18); ἀποβλέπων (32); and of course the very ἰδὼν which complements διεστράφην. Dikaiopolis complains about what he *sees* in the theatre or *does not see* in the assembly (i.e. the Athenians, 20). The context also repeatedly speaks of self-initiated physical reactions (with the climax of 30–31), rather than of tortures imposed by others. Last

³ Dunbar 1995:*ad loc.* The text and translation of *Knights* are taken from Henderson 1998, of *Birds* from Henderson 2000.

⁴ For an overview of the visual terminology in Aristophanes, see Jay-Robert 2016.

⁵ Starkie 1909:*ad loc.*; Rogers 1924:*ad loc.*

⁶ Henderson 1998; Rennie 1909:*ad loc.*; Sommerstein 1980:*ad loc.*; Olson 2002:*ad loc.*

⁷ Cf. Kassel–Austin, *PCG*, vol. 8: *Adespota*, fr. 450.

⁸ Van Leeuwen 1901:*ad loc.*

⁹ Cf. *Frogs* 1378–410, where a non-physical action (singing lyrics) leads to a physical reaction (the sinking of the scales).

but not least, the torture of strangulation in particular can hardly be considered a good metaphor to describe the boredom of a spectator during a show. The only reasonable ‘torture’ would be that described in *Birds* 786–92: hunger and incontinence.

A fragment from Eupolis’ *Demoi*,¹⁰ where forms of διαστρέφειν appear three times in quick succession, has generated even more confusion about the meaning of the verb. The chorus report that Peisander and Theogenes have experienced whatever διαστρέφειν means, and curse Callias and Niceratus to have the same fate. ‘To be deceived/screwed/thrashed/tortured/neck-strangled’ are some of the interpretations scholars have proposed.¹¹ Especially the (homo)sexual interpretation of the word might seem tempting in light of ἀπολαύσομαι at *Birds* 177, but there is nothing there to suggest an affair between Peisetairos and the Hoopoe.

In general there is no reason to assume that the verb must have had the same meaning in Aristophanes as in Eupolis; linguistically, διαστρέφω can have as many meanings (see LSJ⁹) as all the possible combinations between the different meanings of στρέφω and the different nuances of δια-, and it remains a matter of context to specify which semantic combination is conveyed each time. Within Aristophanes’ use of the word, my reading of *Acharnians* 15–16 above, as well as a lost play by him which described Hermes as στρεψαῖος ... παρὰ τὸ διεστράφθαι τὰς ὄψεις (Kassel–Austin, PCG, vol. 3.2 fr. 126), suggests a squint rather than a neck-twist.

References

- Beta, S. 1994. ‘Pisandro e la tortura. Il verbo διαστρέφειν in Eupoli, fr. 99 K.A.’ *ZPE* 101:25–26.
- Bowie, A.M. 2011. ‘Aristophanes.’ In I. de Jong (ed.), *Space in Ancient Greek Literature*, 359–73. Leiden.
- Dunbar, N. (ed.) 1995. *Aristophanes: Birds*. Oxford.
- Henderson, J. 1991. *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*. New York and Oxford.
- Henderson, J. (ed. and tr.) 1998. *Aristophanes: Acharnians, Knights*. Cambridge, MA.
- Henderson, J. (ed. and tr.) 2000. *Aristophanes: Birds, Lysistrata, Women at the Thesmophoria*. Cambridge, MA.

¹⁰ Kassel–Austin, PCG vol. 5 fr. 99.1–14.

¹¹ Beta 1994:25–26; Storey 2003:144–45; Telò 2007:325–31; Olson 2017: *ad loc.* Henderson 1991:176, 180–81 says that στρέφειν and ἀποστρέφειν are unquestionably obscene but διαστρέφειν is dubious.

- Jay-Robert, G. 2016. 'Au spectacle avec Aristophane: regards échangés et métathéâtre.' *AC* 85:19–35.
- Lowe, N. 2006. 'Aristophanic spacecraft.' In L. Kozak and J. Rich (edd.), *Playing around Aristophanes: Essays in Celebration of the Completion of the Edition of the Comedies of Aristophanes by Alan Sommerstein*, 48–64. Oxford.
- Olson, S.D. (ed.) 2002. *Aristophanes: Acharnians*. Oxford.
- Olson, S.D. (ed.) 2017. *Eupolis: Testimonia and Aiges-Demoi (fr. 1–146)*. Heidelberg.
- Rennie, W. (ed.) 1909. *The Acharnians of Aristophanes*. London.
- Rogers, B.B. (ed. and tr.) 1924. *Aristophanes: Acharnians, Knights, Clouds, Wasps*. Cambridge, MA.
- Sommerstein, A.H. (ed. and tr.) 1980. *The Comedies of Aristophanes: Acharnians*. Warminster.
- Sommerstein, A.H. (ed. and tr.) 1981. *The Comedies of Aristophanes: Knights*. Warminster.
- Starkie, W.J.M. (ed. and tr.) 1909. *Aristophanes: Acharnians*. London.
- Storey, I.C. 2003. *Eupolis: Poet of Old Comedy*. Oxford.
- Telò, M. (ed.) 2007. *Eupolidis Demi*. Firenze.
- Van Leeuwen, J. (ed.) 1901. *Aristophanis Acharnenses*. Leiden.

dimitrios.kanellakis@queens.ox.ac.uk