

Comic Inflation in the Marketplace¹

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The New Comedy was sometimes considered in Hellenistic times to have reflected the world as it was: ὁ Μένανδρε καὶ βίε, πότερος ἄρ' ὑμῶν πότερον ἀπεμιμήσατο; asked Aristophanes of Byzantium.² Modern critics have had reservations on the matter,³ and surely no economist would consider the stage a first-class source for information on prices in the Athenian marketplace. Such, however, is the nature of ancient economic history, that we must take whatever we can get in the way of information; and since a number of prices do occur in the fragments of Athenian Comedy, it may be worthwhile to address the question of what relationship, if any, they bear to the prices in what was once the real world.

As throughout the Greek economic record, the problem is that we rarely have two sets of documents even roughly comparable: where comedy gives us prices, epigraphy fails, and vice versa. It happens, however, that there is one area in which we are more fortunate, and that is in the fish market. Athenaeus, in his literary cookbook the *Deipnosophists*, devotes a whole book to the subject of fish; and as is common when comedy gets into the market place,

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the Society for the Promotion of the Classical Studies in Israel, May 22, 1986.
- 2 Quoted by Syrianus in his commentary to Hermogenes (2. 23 Rabe), T 32 in Koerte's edition of Menander's fragments, II (Teubner, Leipzig, 1959).
- 3 Thus, for example, F.H. Sandbach in *OCD*² s.v. *Menander*: "The plots... often have features traditional on the stage but unusual in real life: foundling children, kidnapped daughters, and scheming slaves cannot have been the experience of many Greek households". On the other hand, Sandbach himself, in A.W. Gomme and F.H. Sandbach, *Menander: A Commentary* (Oxford, 1973), 21–8, defends and explains Menander's "fidelity" to life.

there are a number of prices mentioned. We have no comparable prices, it is true, from the fish market at Athens; but recent decades have uncovered for us an interesting inscription from Acraephia in Boeotia, which is, in a sense, the Rosetta stone of fish.

The inscription itself was discovered in two parts, the bottom stone having been found by M.P. Guillon and published in '36⁴ by Michel Feyel, and the top stone having been found by Christian Llinas and published by François Salviat and Claude Vatin in '71.⁵ It is a list of fish and prices, presumably maximum prices, listed by species in alphabetical order. The prices are apparently per mina — an Aeginetan mina, with which we will have been dealing here, was some 630 grams⁶ (about a pound and a third for the Anglo-Saxon world) — and they are generally quoted in χαλκοῖ, copper coins of which twelve made up an Aeginetan obol. The highest price in the list is just over an obol and a half — barely a quarter of a drachma. The prices of Acraephia can rarely be matched directly with comic prices, but there are a few points of comparison.

Fragment 15 of Alexis⁷ shows us an unnamed character adding up a bill for a customer. There are five *chalkoi* worth of smoked fish (ὄμοστάρχιος), seven of mussel (μῦς), and an obol for sea-urchins (ἐχῖνοι). Broiled fish (ὄπτος ἰχθύς) cost a drachma, and a conger-eel (γόγγρος) ten obols. The first three prices in this list are within the limits of the Acraephian marketplace. If we consider that sea-urchins may have been something of a delicacy⁸ and conger-eels certainly were⁹, and that the inclusion of broiled fish suggests that we are dealing with a restaurant bill and not a bill from the fresh fish market, the prices do not seem at all out of line; but since we have no quantities for the bill — even if they were a restaurant bill, we do not know how many people ate — we cannot really make a very meaningful comparison.

4 Michel Feyel, 'Nouvelles inscriptions d'Acraiphia,' *BCH* 60 (1936), pp. 27–36.

5 François Salviat and Claude Vatin, *Inscriptions de Grèce Centrale* (éditions de Boccard, Paris, 1971), 95–109. On the correct reading of the prices in this inscription see now my 'Small Change in Boeotia', *ZPE* 69 (1987) 293–6; to reject the conclusions there would not materially affect the argument of this paper.

6 *OCD*² s.v. *Weights*.

7 Ath. 6.224f. All fragments are given by Kock's numbering.

8 See Ath. 3.91 a-e.

9 In Archedicus fr. 3 (=Ath. 7. 294b), five drachmas are paid not even for the entire conger-eel, but only for the head and the "first pieces" (τὰ πρῶτα τεμάχια).

Alexis 187¹⁰ mentions “three times as many cuttlefish (σηπίας) for one drachma.” Something — presumably another variety of fish — sold for so-and-so many to the drachma, and a single cuttlefish cost a third of the price. Now, if the other (unnamed) fish sold for a drachma apiece, then the speaker would have said simply “and three cuttlefish for the same”; so we must presume that one could buy at least two of the unnamed fish for a drachma, and, accordingly, at least six cuttlefish — that is to say, a single cuttlefish cost at most one obol, and very likely a good deal less. A single cuttlefish is likely to be some twenty centimeters (nine to ten inches) long, and although I have not been able to get any reliable information as to weight — not every nation eats cuttlefish, so the local fish market is not informative — a mina for a single specimen does not seem unduly weighty. Although we have no price for cuttlefish in the Acraephia inscription, a price that is less than an obol would surely not seem unduly inflated.

Alexis 16¹¹ gives us an indication that not only tells us something of weight but can be compared directly with an Acraephian price. The speaker complains,

- 5 τούς δ' ἰχθυοπάλας τούς κάκιστ' ἀπολουμένους
 ἐπὰν ἴδω κάτω βλέποντας, τὰς δ' ὄφρῦς
 ἔχοντας ἐπάνω τῆς κορυφῆς, ἀποπνίγομαι.
 ἔὰν δ' ἐρωτήσης, “πόσου τοὺς κεστρέας
 πωλεῖς δὺ' ὄντας,” “δέκ' ὀβολῶν,” φησιν. “βαρὺ.
 10 ὀκτῶ λάβοις ἄν;” “εἶπερ ὠνεῖ τὸν ἕτερον.”
 “ὦ τάν, λαβὲ καὶ μὴ παῖζε.” “τοσουδί; παράτρεχε.”
 ταῦτ' οὐχὶ πικρότερ' ἐστὶν αὐτῆς τῆς χολῆς;

- 5 When I see the damned fishsellers
 Looking down, with their eyebrows
 Over the tops of their heads, I could choke.
 If you ask, ‘For how much will you sell these
 Two grey mullets?’ they tell you, ‘Ten obols.’ ‘Heavy!
 10 Maybe you would take eight?’ ‘If you buy the other one.’¹²
 ‘Buddy, take it and don’t play games.’ ‘At that price? Scram.’
 Isn’t that bitterer than gall itself?

10 Ath. 7.324b.

11 *Ibid.* 6.224f.

12 The implication — for those who do not read journal articles with the same sense of humor that they bring to the theatre — is that he is willing to take eight obols for a single fish, not both.

Two grey mullets for ten obols is βαρύ; what would it be in Acraephia? The calculation is not too difficult: the *Encyclopedia Britannica*¹³ informs me that “Grey mullets, at least some of the species, grow to a weight of 10 to 12 lb; but the fish which usually come into the market rarely exceed half that weight.” Judging from the customer’s reaction to the price, Alexis’ fish may be taken as expensive, and hence weighty, specimens. Let us presume, then, a weight of five to six pounds, which would be about four minae per mullet, or eight minae for the pair. The price of grey mullets in Acraephia depended on their weight: the per-mina price for fish weighing more than a mina was, apparently, more than an obol, whereas the smaller ones went for ten *chalkoi*. If the two mullets weighed, as we estimated, eight minae or so, then the argument in Alexis’ imaginary Athens matches perfectly the Acraephian prices: the fishmonger asked for an obol and a quarter per mina, the customer offered an obol. We could not have asked for a better fit.

Diphilus 66¹⁴ complains of another fishmongers’ trick — the double standard. They charge ten obols for a bass, but neglect to specify the currency. If you give them the money, they demand heavy Aeginetan obols; if they give you change, they give you the lighter Attic coins. Here the *Britannica* tells us that a bass “of 10 lb is a large one, but fifteen-pounders have been taken.” Let us presume that our average fishmonger was not offering a bass of more than eight pounds or so — some six or seven minae at the most. At ten obols, it will have cost about an obol and a half per mina. The inscription gives three or four prices for bass — one or two for sea bass, two for fresh-water bass — of which only the price of small (less than a mina) fresh-water bass is preserved. These cost nine *chalkoi* a mina; the larger ones surely cost more. It is not likely that they got up as high as an obol and a half. There is a certain exaggeration here, but within limits. Diphilus’ fishmonger might have been fined in the Acraephian marketplace for price gouging, but he would not have been considered insane.

We must take all of these parallels with a grain — perhaps with a mina — of salt. Athens was a port city, Acraephia inland; Athens a large city (by Greek standards) with a flourishing trade, Acraephia a backwater. The prices from Athens date from the late fourth and early third centuries BCE, those from Acraephia from some fifty to a hundred years later. For all that, the congruence is surely noteworthy, and strongly suggests that there was nothing

13 Eleventh edition, vol. 18, p. 964. The article on angling, on the other hand (*ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 30) says that they run “up to about 8 lb in weight.” The current edition of the *Britannica* is less informative on the weights of fish.

14 Ath. 6. 225a.

intrinsically inflationary about the dialogue of Attic comedy. All the more remarkable, then, that in the one other area in which scholars have compared the prices of the comic stage with those of the then-living world, the results are quite different.

Menander's characters are more interested to wed than to eat, and he offers us more information on dowries than he offers on fish. His dowries, however, do not match those known from other sources. The *horoi*, for example, give sums that were almost all twenty minae or less, and even the dowries mentioned by the orators — *ex hypothesi* large enough to justify a court case and the best speech money could buy — are almost all between ten and fifty minae.¹⁵ In Menander, on the other hand, the smallest dowry anybody ever offers is a cool talent; and that is offered by none other than Cnemon the Grouch, out of a total estate of only two talents.¹⁶

The late Sir Moses Finley considered Menander's dowries merely "a comic exaggeration;"¹⁷ Lionel Casson, on the other hand, has taken them to demonstrate that whereas "only the very rich... had no financial worries ... Greek New Comedy, contrary to what has been thought, concentrates on this particular class."¹⁸ Casson's point, however, though well-taken, cannot exempt Menander of the charge of exaggeration. Cnemon, indeed, has good reason for being generous: he has undergone something of a reformation, and divides his estate between his daughter and the stepson who has just saved his

15 See the table published in D.M. Schaps, *Economic Rights of Women in Ancient Greece* (Edinburgh, 1979), p. 99, with the sources and earlier discussions cited there.

16 Men. *Dyscolus* 737–9, cf. 327, 844–7.

17 M.I. Finley, *Studies in Land and Credit in Ancient Athens* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, N.J., 1952; reissued by Arno Press, 1973), 267 n. 29. Cf. the criticism of this formulation in L. Casson, 'The Athenian Upper Class and New Comedy,' *TAPA* 106 (1976), 55 n. 64.

18 *Ibid.*, 59. T.B.L. Webster argued similarly in *An Introduction to Menander*, Manchester, 1974, 25–6: "We know in fact of a ten-talent dowry in the fifth century, and of a three-talent dowry in the fourth century, and the worth of money had gone down by the late fourth century. What Menander is saying is that, down at any rate to the two-talent level, these fathers are very rich." This cannot explain Cnemon, as the last concessive clause admits, and it is hard to believe that the ten-talent dowry was designed to put an otherwise unremarkable character in the category of Alcibiades, who got τσσαύτην προῖκα, ὅσην οὐδεὶς τῶν Ἑλλήνων ([And.] 4.14).

life. Moreover, he fears imminent death, and testamentary dowries were regularly larger, for obvious reasons, than those given by men who expected to live. Nevertheless, his is not a testamentary disposition; on the contrary, he tells his stepson to maintain both Cnemon and the young man's mother (as well, of course, as the stepson himself) out of half of the estate, while the other half is to go for the dowry. No Athenian known to us ever behaved so generously to his daughter — or, one might add, so parsimoniously to his adopted son. One gentleman known to us from Isaeus had a fortune comparable to Cnemon's; his daughter got twenty-five minae, some twenty per cent of the estate, and that is the largest percentage we can trace in all the orators.¹⁹ Whatever Cnemon's class (and Casson's own classification makes him no better than "middle-class"), his expenditure on a dowry is exaggerated. No less exaggerated is the generosity of Chaerestratus, who offers his niece two talents out of a fortune of sixty — a hefty but not incredible sum for a daughter, perhaps, but very unlikely for a niece.²⁰

Menander is exaggerating; but our tour of the fish-market has shown us that there was nothing inherently inflationary in the world of Attic comedy. If Menander is exaggerating, he is exaggerating for dramatic reasons; why did Alexis, who was almost contemporary with him, feel no need to do so?

The most likely explanation is that a dowry on the stage is not a sum of money, but a dramatic effect: it shows the man to be either generous or stingy. To be stingy, it must seem stingy even to the poorest of the spectators — and indeed, there are men in Menander who give away, or threaten to give away, young women with no dowry at all, a practice which was possible but apparently not common in the real world;²¹ if, on the other hand, the dowry is to be generous, it must seem generous even to the richest of the spectators — and so half a talent simply will not do, because there are those who would turn

19 Isaeus 8.35, cf. Schaps, (above n.15) 78.

20 Men. *Aspis* 135–6, 268–9. Casson (p. 56) considers Chaerestratus to prove the accuracy of Menander's dowries: "since he has a daughter of his own, he will presumably deal at least as generously with her," making four talents, equal to the amount that Pasio (estimated by J.K. Davies in *Athenian Propertied Families, 600–300 B. C.*, [Oxford, 1971], 434 at 65 talents) gave his wife on his deathbed. In fact, however, a wife is much closer than a niece, and a will is much more generous than a gift given by a "fine and open-handed *senex*". Chaerestratus is surely a man of enormous wealth, not merely well-to-do; but two talents is still too much, and Pasio's gift not a good parallel.

21 Schaps, (above n.15) 143 n.39.

up their nose at such a sum. Inflation in Menander is not an economic fact; it is a dramatic necessity.²²

There were cases, indeed, where inflation was just as necessary in the comic fishmarket — and when that was the case, the exaggeration could be even greater than it was with Menander's dowries. The only price for fish that I have found in Menander — four drachmas for gobies — is entirely out of line,²³ even granting that the speaker seems to object to it; but here we have no context. In Eupolis 150,²⁴ someone spends a hundred drachmas on eight bass and twelve giltheads.²⁵ Unless the giltheads were truly made of gold, these bass went for a good deal more than the ones that Diphilus' fishmonger sold for ten obols. If the bass accounted for half of the total, they cost some six drachmas apiece, almost four times Diphilus' price. Exorbitant, but not inappropriate, for the play was apparently about Callias, the J. Paul Getty of

- 22 Dramatic necessity explains Cnemon as well: he cannot be truly poor, for that would make his ill-nature a mere reflection of his hard circumstances, nor can he be too rich, for then he would be a miser, not a grouch. After his reformation, on the other hand, he cannot give his daughter a dowry that would seem stingy. It is noteworthy that the two talents are mentioned precisely in the course of a description of his character. A similar economic incongruity occurs in the *Aspis*, where the heir to an estate of four talents must hire himself out as a mercenary to earn (at a drachma or two a day, minus expenses but plus, it must be admitted, booty) a dowry for his sister. Cleostratus must go to war, for it is his absence and presumed death around which the play is built; on the other hand, the wealth of the estate that will fall to his sister on his death must be sufficient to incite his aged uncle Smicrines to wish to marry the young girl. It was not, and is not, in the nature of theatre-goers to take out their pocket calculators to decide when this kind of calculation is exaggerated; though the exaggeration must, of course, be kept within bounds, and of the words I used to describe the dowries (Schaps, [n. 15]99 “Menander's dowries are hopelessly exaggerated”), I happily consider that Casson has forced me to repent of the word *hopelessly*.
- 23 Menander fr. 173 Koerte=Ath. 9.385d-f. On the low worth of gobies see D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Fishes* (Oxford, 1947), 137–9.
- 24 Ath. 7.328b.
- 25 That seems to be the meaning of δραχμῶν ἑκατὸν ἰχθυῶς ἐώνημαι μόνον/ ὀκτῶ λάβρακας, χρυσόφρυς δὲ δώδεκα; Thompson, who writes ([above n.23] p. 294 s.v. χρύσοφρυς), “According to Eupolis it (sc. gilthead) is worth twelve drachmae as against eight for λάβραξ”, seems to be taking the numbers (ὀκτῶ ... δώδεκα) as genitives, which would give an even higher price but seems to me to give inferior sense.

ancient Athens, and is full of conspicuous consumption: in fr. 149²⁶ he orders a meal for a hundred drachmas and wine for another hundred. No more seriously must we take the eels of Antiphanes 147²⁷ that are dearer than the gods: the gods can be had just for a prayer, but an eel — you have to shell out at least twelve drachmas just to smell it.²⁸

There is nothing new or surprising in the fact that comic prices might be exaggerated; I don't suppose any serious student of comedy has ever doubted it. What is worth noting is that the exaggeration is not universal: here and there in comedy a price seems to be simply a price. One must tread carefully here to avoid circularity — “this is apparently a true price because it is the one we should have expected” — and one should never press a comic price too far: no dramatist took the care over his prices that the simplest greengrocer must have taken. With these reservations in mind, one may make some use of the hazy light of comedy to illuminate the prices of the Greek market.

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26 Pollux 9.59.

27 Ath. 7.229e.

28 The speaker of Philippides 9 affects pity for the poor rogues (ἀπορουμένους ... μαστιγίας) who eat smoked fish worth two or three obols from a silver platter that weighs a mina, or capers worth three coppers in a cup weighing fifty silver drachmas. “Two or three obols” would have bought a good deal of fish in Acraephia, and the joke here does not require a high price; quite the contrary. The speaker, nevertheless, can afford to have his poor rogues (who are, of course, none too poor) pay an exorbitant price without losing the incongruity between the food and its container.