

The Prehistory of *Bomolochia*

The Greek word *bomolochia* [βωμολοχία], which is attested first in the context of fifth century B.C.E. comedy and evolved into a general term for buffoonery, reveals in its etymology important tensions in the Greek sacrifice that were already present in very early Greek poetry.

Etymologically, *bomolochia* means “lying in ambush at an altar,” presumably to cadge a portion of meat at a sacrificial banquet. The comic poets’ dramaturgy explains how this term came to mean buffoonery. In Aristophanes’ *Birds*, for instance, characters repeatedly use buffoonish tactics to wheedle shares of sacrificial meat from Pisthetaerus after he has set up his regime of birds. This comic motif of trying to get shares of sacrificial banquets lasts into New Comedy.

The laughter that arises from attempts to get portions at a sacrificial banquet accords with two major theories of laughter: incongruity theory and superiority theory. Superiority theory maintains that laughter is an expression of derisory contempt by a superior towards an inferior (Ruch 2008). When the *bomolochos* attempts to attain a portion denied to him by his inferior status, superiors laugh at him in derision. Incongruity theory claims that laughter arises when two incongruous interpretive frames for the same phenomena conflict (Ruch 2008). We may laugh when dogs act like a humans because the interpretive frame created in appearance—that they are human—incongruously conflicts with the reality that they are dogs. Detienne, Vernant, and Saïd have established that sacrificial banqueting outlines a social order; it marks people’s social position by excluding them from or including them in sacrificial feasts, and, among those who are included, the portion received marks social rank: better portions indicate better rank. When *bomolochoi* attempt to arrogate to themselves

portions that conflict with a normative sacrificial order, a laughter-inducing incongruity arises.

Bomolochia, a common motif from the comic stage, occurs already in Homer. At *Odyssey* 20.279-98, when Telemachus instructs the workers in his house to give Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, an equal portion of meat to that gotten by others, the rich and arrogant suitor Ctesippus makes a joke in which he mocks Odysseus for getting a portion which would equate him with the aristocratic suitors; in essence, he is calling Odysseus a *bomolochos*. He draws out the joke by throwing a hoof at Odysseus as a guest-friend gift in a mocking parody of elite gift exchange. Ctesippus' mocking joke relies on his and other suitors' superior status to a beggar like the disguised Odysseus and the incongruity that arises when a beggar is given aristocratic perquisites. There are deeper incongruities here as well: in fact, the real *bomolochos* is Ctesippus who has managed to appropriate shares of meat from Odysseus' household as he incongruously mocks Odysseus, the person who has the best right to a share.

Bomolochia, in as much as it involves strategic seeking after portions of meat, also figures in the feast between mortals and Zeus in Hesiod's *Theogony* (535-60). Prometheus put before mortal people good portions disguised to be bad and before Zeus bad portions disguised to be good. Prometheus then told Zeus to choose whichever he wanted. Zeus chose the bad portions, establishing the pattern that good parts of sacrificial victims go to men and bad parts go to gods. This is a particularly interesting example of *bomolochia* because it reflects classic "two-party isolated division" (Lowry 1991), a method by which two people can divide some desired item. One person divides the item; the other then gets to choose which portion she or he desires. Here, Prometheus divides

and Zeus chooses. Such division promises a fair outcome for both parties; interestingly, Prometheus' cheating here undercuts that possibility.

Bomolochia has great import for studies of ancient Greek sacrifice. Most accounts of sacrifice are synchronic and structural. They try to establish a unified, timeless structure that accounts for Greek sacrifice and extract it from history (compare the many theories presented in Naiden 2013 including Naiden's own). *Bomolochia*, however, points to a different, complementary aspect of sacrifice. *Bomolochia* reveals sacrifice to be a place of contention, competition, and gamesmanship, with material benefits and losses for its participants; moreover, the incongruous frames of interpretation it invokes break sacrifice down from a unitary community action into an arena of competing interests.

Bibliography

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