

The Blessed Afterlife in Old Comedy: Pherecrates, fr. 113

This paper argues that the automatist utopia described in fr. 113 of the *Miners* (Μεταλλῆς) by the late fifth-century comic poet Pherecrates reflects the difficult and perilous work and overall unpleasant existence of slaves laboring in the tunnels and work-stations of fifth-century B.C.E. Athenian mining concessions. Contrary to the assumptions of scholars since antiquity, Pherecrates fr. 113 is more than a mere imitation of the standard automatist utopia in contemporary comedy. I argue that it preserves an idealized utopian afterlife conceived by and for mine slaves and that its particular pleasures attempt to redress the distinctive deprivations suffered by these workers.

It is commonly believed (cf. Baldry 1953; Ruffell 2000; Farioli 2001) that the luxurious underworld of gastronomic and alcoholic abundance described by an unidentified speaker in Pherecrates fr. 113 recycles a set of hackneyed motifs associated with the trope of automatism in comedy during the last third of the fifth century B.C.E. The fragment's thirty-three lines are preserved by the second-century A.D. prose author Athenaeus at roughly the midpoint of a sequence of quoted fragments from comedies allegedly treating the theme of an earlier world without slaves (Olson 2007). Athenaeus claims that Pherecrates was one of several later comedians who merely borrowed the automatist trope from the elder poets Cratinus and Telecleides without originality. Closer scrutiny of the wondrous and grotesque automatist mechanisms by which the dead (τοῖς νεκροῖς, 7) enjoy eternal satiety, however, reveals their resemblance to the unpleasant and brutal conditions of the vast industrial mining operations of Laurium in southeast Attica (Jones 1982). For example, rivers of broth and soup churning with edibles and guided through channels (στενωποί, 4) evoke the circular washing troughs used to remove the dross from the ore in workshops (ἐργαστήρια) in preparation for smelting.

Pherecrates has replaced the dirty and stagnant waters recycled through these systems with staples of the Greek diet, magically prepared and guided down the open mouths of the deceased. Instead of a landscape dotted with foul-smelling slag-pits, oppressive heat, and toxic fumes – all byproducts of smelting and cupellation in silver processing (Conophagus 1980) – the blessed dead hemmed in by mounds of cured meats with garnishes and various fish- and cheese-based hors d'oeuvres (8-17).

Silent and sedentary, the underworld symposiasts consume freely available (καὶτομάτην, 6) pleasures in a state of perpetual bliss and without a trace of the compulsion or brutality of working conditions notoriously endured by miners in the ancient world. Thanks to Laurium's abundant archaeological remains, we know much about the awful conditions of mining work: working in cramped darkness, hunched over, kneeling, or lying flat on one's back or sides (Thphr. *Lap.* 63), and suffocated by carbon dioxide and other toxic fumes (Rihll 2001). Pherecrates fr. 113 not only treats the automatist paradise in an original fashion, but also conceives it from the perspective of one of Ancient Greece's most marginalized slave populations.

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