Freedom of speech can be conceptualized not only at the level of explicit legal regulation and formal political provision, but also in terms of the expectations embodied in what the Greeks came to know as ‘unwritten law’, νόμος ἄγχος. Over and above questions about the technical entitlement (of individuals or groups) to speak in particular contexts, we can also investigate the social values and pressures that, in a more diffuse manner, help to determine what people feel free, or not free, to say. This paper will address one important dimension of this second class of issues in relation to Greek culture of (principally) the archaic and classical periods, namely what Greeks themselves denoted by the name of αἰσχρολογία, ‘shameful speech’, as well as by a cluster of closely associated terminology (including κακολογία, κακηγορία, λοιπο-φία, βλασφημία and their cognates). Aischrologia or aischrology, as I shall standardly call it (while permitting myself, in ways I hope will be transparent, to refer to it sometimes as shameful, indecent or foul speech), is a locus of educational, psychological, ethical, political and religious concern throughout the whole of Greek antiquity. It occupies a notable space within the realm of ‘unwritten law’, a realm whose permeation by the operations of shame is conveniently attested by the remark of the Thucydidean Pericles that unwritten laws carry with them ‘agreed shame’, αἰσχρολογίας ὑμένην (or, as one might gloss the phrase, ‘a social contract of shame’).1 Some manifestations of (arguably) aischrologic behavior, though not the aischrolog- wordgroup itself, first appear, dramatized in emblematic fashion, in the Homeric epics: above all, in the Achilles–Agamemnon quarrel of Iliad 1, the Thersites episode of book 2, and the conduct of some of the suitors in the Odyssey.2 The

1 Thuc. 2.37.3.
2 Note also the phrases αἰσχροῖς ἐπέσσον (Hom. Il. 3.38, 6.325, 13.768), ἐπέσσον αἰσχροῖς (24.238), and the adverb αἰσχρῶς at Il. 23.473, Od. 18.321: while the basic force here of αἰσχρῶς seems to be ‘insulting’, it may also imply that the words used
apprehensions attaching to aischrology thereafter crop up in a range of oratorical, literary, historical, and philosophical sources. Their deep-rootedness is ultimately reflected in the new lease of life they acquire in the ethical discourse of Christianity, where Paul, and then, in a Pauline tradition, Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and others, turn a newly antigelastic gaze on aischrology and related forms of behavior, often in the process combining distinctively Christian polemics with echoes of older pagan motifs of moralizing.

In the present context I limit myself to a pair of aims: first, to explore the basic psychologico-ethical dynamics of certain Greek anxieties about shameful speech, especially in relation to the vexed issue of public abuse and insult; secondly, to say something, against the background of this wider nexus of cultural values, about the idiosyncratic (and problematic) status of Old Comedy, arguably the most aischrologic of all genres. Because of my particular interest in Old Comedy, it is with classical Athenian perceptions of aischrologia that I want primarily to engage here, and therefore with the relationship between aischrology and explicitly democratic ideology. To anticipate one of my key concerns, it can be said that if democratic ‘frank speech’, parrhêsia, includes (some) freedom to say what is unpopular or even offensive, it necessarily generates acute problems about both the definition and the regulation of aischrologic speech, not least where parrhêsia intersects with the arousal of laughter. It is no accident that classical Athenian texts contain evidence of a climate of unease about the nature and desirability of parrhêsia. Symptomatic here, though in a complex way, is the reflect badly on the speaker (or would normally be shameful for a speaker); cf. Cairns 1993, 58–59. But the attempt of Lowry 1991, 17–57 to link the description of αἴσθησις at Il. 2.216 to what Thersites says is unconvincing.

3 The aischrolog- wordgroup is not found before the fourth century: the earliest surviving occurrences (all cited subsequently in my argument) are Plato Rep. 3.395c, Xen. Lac. Resp. 5.6, Aristotle Rhet. 3.2, 1405b9, Pol. 7.17, 1336b4. But the root concept is clearly older: see esp. Theogn. 479–484 on utterances (by inebriated symposiasts) that would be aischra for the sober; cf. also the Homeric phrases in n. 2 above. The verb αἰσθησιςευπρεπεῖν appears in Hippoc. De arte 1 (fifth century?) and Ephiphus fr. 23 PCG (see n. 44 below). For Christian polemics against aischrology and related forms of laughter, see e.g. Paul I Corinthians 5.11, 6.10–11, Ephesians 5.3–5, Colossians 3.8, Clem. Alex. Paed. 2.5.45–48, 2.6.49–52, John Chrys. In ep. ad Eph., 62.118–121 PG; for brief analysis of Christian attitudes see Adkin 1985, with Screech 1997, esp. 132–140. I discuss this material in the final chapter of my book (in progress), Greek Laughter: a Study in Cultural Psychology.

4 A positive democratic value is assigned to parrhêsia at e.g. Eurip. Hipp. 422, Aeschin. 3.6, Dem. 7.1, 15.1, 60.25–26, Dinarchus 5.1, Isoc. 6.97; anxieties over its