CHAPTER SEVEN

IMAGINING BAD CITIZENSHIP IN CLASSICAL ATHENS: ARISTOPHANES’ ECCLESIAZUSAE 730–876

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1. Introduction

When Athenians discussed citizenship and its obligations under the democracy, they regularly invoked not only positive values and models but also anti-values and negative models. As Virginia Hunter aptly observes, ‘The competing stereotypes of the good and the bad citizen are part of an ideology of citizenship’. The roots of this way of talking about citizenship no doubt lie deep in Greek culture, where praise and blame are intimately linked and goodness and badness flip-sides of the same coin. In my view, however, there is a further and direct explanation for the fact that repudiation of bad citizenship went hand-in-hand with praise of good civic behavior in Athens: bad citizenship—in its diverse forms and at diverse levels—was a familiar phenomenon and a common alternative to good citizenship. Notwithstanding the idealization of citizen behavior in the Attic funeral orations and the romanticization of this in some modern scholarship, Athenians varied widely in their commitment to the city and its ideals. Viewed in this light, the frequently invoked polarity of good and bad citizenship reflects not only the way the Athenian mind works but also the civic experience of Athenians.

In this chapter, I want to explore the place of ‘badness’ in Athenian discourse about citizenship by looking at three types of ‘bad Athenians’: sykophants (section 2), ‘shirkers’ (e.g. draft-dodgers) (section 3), and a

2 Hunter 1994, 110.
3 On bad citizenship in the legal sphere in Athens, see Christ 1998; on evasion of basic duties of citizenship, including military service and financial obligations, see Christ 2006.
particularly striking instance of a freerider from Aristophanes (section 4). In particular, I will probe some of the tensions behind the construction of a society based on a strict division between good and bad citizens. Aristophanes, I will suggest, is of particular interest in this regard: while he is certainly ready to exploit the absolute opposition of good and bad citizens in his comic enterprise and to join in the scapegoating of rascally ‘others’, he also sometimes problematizes this conception of society and its enemies and, in so doing, lays bare the tensions that it conceals.

2. Badness in civic discourse: the sykophant

One conspicuous area where Athenians invoke anti-values in civic discourse is in their discussion of the proper use of litigation under the democracy. In this context, ‘sykophancy’ appears as an inversion of proper legal behavior and the ‘sykophant’ as the litigious alter ego to the model, law-abiding Athenian. As I argue in The Litigious Athenian, Athenians cast the sykophant as a depraved outsider whose legal behavior is antithetical to that of the good citizen. The alterity of this noxious creature is made abundantly clear through both word and action on the comic stage. For example, in Aristophanes’ Acharnians (425 BCE), Dicaeopolis traces the roots of the Peloponnesian war to sykophantic informers against Megarian goods (515-519):

For men among us (I am not talking about the city as a whole; remember this, that I am not speaking of the city) in any case, rascally fellows, ill-struck, worthless, ill-coined, spurious fellows kept crying out as sykophants against Megarian cloaks.

’Ἡμῶν γὰρ ἄνδρες,—οὐχὶ τὴν πόλιν λέγω· μέμνησθε τούθ’, ὃτι οὐχὶ τὴν πόλιν λέγω,— ἀλλ’ ἄνδραία μοχθηρά, παρακεκομένα, ἄτιμα καὶ παράσημα καὶ παράξενα, ἐνυχφάντει Μεγαρέων τὰ χλανίσμα.

Dicaeopolis, in emphatically distinguishing sykophants from the city at large makes it clear that these individuals are outsiders in every sense—

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4 Christ 1998, esp. 48–71. On the Athenian portrayal of the sykophant, see also the exchange between Osborne (1990) and Harvey (1990); Rubinstein 2000, 198–212 (but cf. Christ 2002); and Fisher in this volume.