Parasitus colax (Terence, Eunuchus 30)*

At the start of Terence’s Eunuchus the prologue-speaker says that a rival poet, upon examining an advance rehearsal of Terence’s latest play . . . (as punctuated by Barsby:1) I omit as irrelevant to this discussion vv. 27-9):—

exclamat furem non poetam fabulam
dedisse, et nil dedisse verborum tamen.
Colcem esse Naevi et Plauti veterem fabulum: 25
parasiti personam inde ablatam et militis.
[ . . .
Colax Menandrist, in ea parasitus colax 30
et miles gloriosus.

In his 2001 Loeb edition of Terence, Barsby translates as follows, although I omit for now his translation of the phrase parasitus colax in v. 30:—

He shouted that the play was the work of a thief, not a playwright, but that the attempt to deceive had not worked. There was, he claimed, a ‘Flatterer’ by Naevius and an old play by Plautus, and the character of the parasite and the soldier had been stolen from these. [ . . .] There is a ‘Flatterer’ of Menander, in which there is parasitus colax and a swaggering soldier.

The punctuation and exact meaning of the earlier lines are, of course, much discussed; our concern for now is solely with the end of v. 30. What is the precise meaning and grammatical construction of the phrase parasitus colax at the end of the line?

Donatus is regrettably silent here, and renderings of the phrase by modern writers and translators are surprisingly varied; I count no fewer than five currently in circulation, viz.:—

(i) ‘a flattering parasite’ (colax an attributive adjective modifying parasitus)2)
(ii) ‘a parasitic flatterer’ (parasitus an attributive adjective modifying colax)3)

*) My warm thanks to Mnemosyne’s referee for insightful suggestions, corrections, and recommendations, nearly all of which I have adopted.
1) Barsby 1999.
2) So Fabia (1895, ad loc.): “Parasitus colax. Le mot colax joue ici le rôle d’un adjectif modifiant parasitus: un parasite flatteur”, Brothers (2000), who translates (ad loc. and p. 35 n. 169) “toadying sponger”, and Barsby in his 2001 translation, “a flattering parasite” (omitted from the translation above).
3) So Damon (1997, 14): “a parasitic flatterer”.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2007 DOI: 10.1163/156852507X169681
(iii) ‘a parasite flatterer’ (compound substantive)
(iv) ‘a parasite—(sc. namely), the flatterer (sc. of the title)’ (predicative apposition)
(v) ‘a parasite (sc. whose name is) Κόλαξ’ (apposition of the Greek proper name)

All five interpretations entail problems, three of which anyway should probably be ruled out by grammar alone.

The Greek word κόλαξ was never naturalized as a Latin word at all, and, more importantly, in Greek it is never an adjective (contrast κολακεύων; and cf. κολακευτικός, κολακικός). As a noun, therefore, it cannot modify parasitus (‘a flattering parasite’), Fabia’s bare assertion to the contrary (n. 2 above) notwithstanding, and so (i) must be ruled out.

Likewise, since parasitus is not an adjective either (contrast Latin parasitans or parasiticus, Greek παροσιτῶν or παροσιτικός), it cannot modify colax (‘a parasitic flatterer’). (The title of the lost Plautine or pseudo-Plautine play Parasitus Medicus is no true exception, since, like the titles Maccus Virgo, Maccus Miles, and Pappus Agricola of Atellan farce, it is a title of a play, in which both words in the pair are natural or naturalized Latin, and at any rate one word in the pair is probably to be construed in predicative apposition [‘The Parasite playing the role of a doctor’] rather than attributively.) Therefore (ii) must also be ruled out.

Nor can we easily regard the construct as a compound substantive (view (iii), ‘parasite flatterer’), a formation easy enough in English or German but hardly so in Latin or Greek, for which one would naturally expect either

---

4) So Barsby in his 1999 commentary, ad loc.: “parasitus colax ‘a parasite flatterer’”.
5) So Brown (1992), who translates (105), “… in it there’s a parasite (the Toady of the title)”.
6) So, I assume, Tromaras (1991), who, following among other earlier editions the Lindsay-Kauer 1926 Oxford text, prints… parasitus Colax, with a capital ‘C’. Tromaras offers us no clue how to interpret that in his commentary, but it seems to take up a view expressed in the TLL s.v. colax, which asks, “Ter. Eun. 30 ‘in east (sc. comedia Menandri) parasitus -x (an Colax nom. prop.)’”, and in McGlynn 1963-7, which likewise wonders (s.v. colax), “fabulae (et parasitii) nomen”.
8) Ribbeck (1883, 70) uses the expression κόλαξ-παρόσιτος, but that is, of course, merely a German (educated) compound and not to be mistaken for anything actually found in Greek. For Greek compounds of κόλαξ and παρόσιτος attested in literature, see Ribbeck’s list of synonyms on pp. 93-100, and the discussion in Nesselrath 1985, 88-121. (If, incidentally, Ribbeck offers any interpretative comment on the phrase parasitus colax in Eun. 30, I have not succeeded in finding it; Nesselrath does not.)