

THE SHIFTING SYCOPHANT:
CHANGING IMPLICATIONS OF A LABEL IN ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

A Thesis Submitted to the College of
Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts
In the Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance Program
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

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ABSTRACT

The traditional consensus among classicists holds that the word “sycophant” in Attic Greek refers to identifiable persons displaying a specific pattern of behaviour that is detrimental to the Athenian democracy. In particular, sycophants are individuals who initiate or threaten malicious or frivolous prosecutions for financial gain. Some recent reassessments have suggested that the term is more nuanced, but such assessments still interpret the term as reflecting real or perceived problems inherent in the Athenian jury-courts. A comparison of the use of the term in the plays of Aristophanes with that in the speeches of fourth-century orators suggests that “sycophant” is solely a term of invective and does not refer to an identifiable type of individual. Moreover, this comparison reveals that, rather than being a static term, the implications inherent in the label change over time. When “sycophant” is coined in the later fifth century it is used against supporters of the radical democracy in order to support a change to a much more limited democracy or to oligarchy. A later generation of fourth-century orators employs the same label as a more general term of abuse against personal enemies or political opponents of any political stripe. Secondary meanings associated with the term allow its continued use as a rhetorical tool in a different political context with a different intent, but these continuities in its meaning have masked the change in its purpose. A clearer understanding of the label of “sycophant” lays the foundation for a more nuanced understanding of Athenian democratic discourse and of the transformation of that discourse in the course of the fourth century BCE.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due first and foremost, of course, to my supervisor, Dr. John Porter, without whose dedication this paper would not have been written. As well as performing the normal supervisory responsibilities, he also developed and taught several graduate level Greek reading courses for the initial stages of my program. I would also like to thank Dr. Zachary Yuzwa and Dr. Neil Hibbert, the members of my committee, and to Dr. Christopher Foley, the external reader, for their feedback and to Dr. Yin Liu who served as chair of my supervisory committee.

I would also like to express my appreciation to the Department of History at the University of Saskatchewan. The department permitted me to participate in their graduate history seminars and colloquia in to order complete some required elements of my degree and provided the necessary administrative support for my program.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
Permission to use.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
The Shifting Sycophant: Changing implications of a label in Athenian Democracy.....	1
Bibliography.....	61

The Shifting Sycophant: Changing Implications of a Label in Athenian Democracy

The nature and significance of the sycophant in Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries¹ is so well established in modern scholarship that further attention might seem superfluous. The well-known image of specific individuals who exploited the democratic provisions of the jury-courts for personal ends has been gleaned from the many references to sycophants in the plays and oratory of classical Athens. According to the usual narrative, these individuals initiated malicious lawsuits against their political rivals or personal enemies and blackmailed wealthy citizens with threats of vexatious prosecution. Even though they might claim to contribute to the well-being of the city, they were motivated solely by spite, or by the desire to make a profit or to promote a personal agenda.

A closer examination of the evidence for this depiction, however, in fact supports a quite different interpretation. A comparison of some essential differences between references to sycophants in the fifth century and those in the fourth shows that the writers in question are referring to the type with quite different intent. This distinction is masked by the superficial difference which accompanies the change in genre of our major sources from drama to oratory: to suit dramatic purposes, sycophants in Old Comedy of the fifth and early fourth century are specific characters, seemingly portrayals of real individuals or of a type of individual, whereas fourth-century orators more often simply assert that their opponent is acting as a sycophant.² In neither century, however, did the term refer to real, disreputable individuals haunting Athenian courts, or even a specific pattern of behaviour.

¹ All dates in this paper alluding to developments in Classical Athens are BCE.

² Osborne (1990: 93) draws attention to the fact that verb forms are much more common in oratory than the concrete noun. Note that some of the verb forms, however, are substantive participles.

Instead, the references in our sources and the contexts in which they are found indicate that “sycophant” was solely a term of invective. In our earliest examples, “sycophant” is a label invented for use by the traditional ruling elite,³ who were supporters of oligarchy or of a very limited democracy, in order to undermine the political participation of those outside their aristocratic network. The term accentuated the alleged abuses of the system in order to promote the belief that the mechanisms of the radical democracy were inherently corrupt and that only the propertied elite were fit to govern. Later use shows that the label has mutated so that a speaker can use it against a personal or political rival of any political outlook or social standing to generate hostility against him and undermine his credibility.

When the writer of the Aristotelian *Constitution of the Athenians* (*Athenaion Politeia*) evaluates the regime of the Thirty Tyrants, he approves their targeting of sycophants as an important part of ridding the city of the excesses of the radical democracy:

At the beginning, they pursued these policies and did away with the sycophants and those currying favour with the people contrary to the best policy and who were evildoers and worthless men. The city was pleased with these actions, thinking they undertook them for the best.⁴

³ Unless otherwise noted, “traditional elite,” “traditional ruling elite,” “established elite,” “propertied elite,” and “traditional ruling families” all denote members of the traditional ruling families who were considered well-born and well-connected, whose wealth lay in inherited land and who formed the majority of citizens qualified to hold the post of archon and thus, before the reforms of Ephialtes, to hold oversight over the workings of the state as a member of the Council of the Areopagus. They relied on the reciprocity inherent in kinship and friendship networks for their support.

⁴ [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 35.3. κατ’ ἀρχὰς μὲν οὖν ταῦτ’ ἐποίουν, καὶ τοὺς συκοφάντας καὶ τοὺς τῷ δήμῳ πρὸς χάριν ὀμιλοῦντας παρὰ τὸ βέλτιστον καὶ κακοπράγμονας ὄντας καὶ πονηροὺς ἀνῆρουν, ἐφ’ οἷς ἔχαιρεν ἡ πόλις γιγνομένοις, ἡγούμενοι τοῦ βελτίστου χάριν ποιεῖν αὐτούς. I quote this passage as an illustration with the assumption that the writer takes an historical point of view based on his sources.

This attempt to rid the city of the pestilence of sycophants apparently did not work in the long-run. The speeches of the later orators such as Demosthenes and Aeschines are replete with allusions to sycophancy. They decry the intent and methods of their opponents as sycophantic, while affirming their own motivation as honourable.

So now again, . . . observing Neoptolemus . . . committing the greatest injustices towards the city and managing and controlling your affairs for the benefit of Phillip, I have come to address you not on account of any personal enmity nor from sycophancy, as has become clear from my deeds after these events.⁵

These two passages display a dissonance in the way the term sycophant is used. In the first example, the Thirty are transforming or dismantling the organs of democratic government, including the Assembly and the jury-courts. They target citizens who favour those bodies: the supporters of the radical democracy. Sycophants in this example are opponents of the Thirty and of the change to an oligarchical regime. The writer further connects them with ill-intentioned politicians and social and moral inferiors and implicates them in the disastrous policies of the democracy that led to the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War. He praises the policy to eliminate them as part the initial efforts of the Thirty to restore a more moderate democracy with a substantially more limited citizen base. In the second example, no hint of this ideological division is present. Demosthenes is simply anticipating a personal slur against himself by reassuring his listeners beforehand that he is sincere, motivated only by concern for the well-being of Athens, not by a personal grudge, the desire for financial gain, or some even shadier motive. The issue is framed in terms of the personal attributes or motivation of an individual rather than in terms of his

⁵ Dem. 5.6. πάλιν τοίνυν, ... κατιδών Νεοπτόλεμον ... κακὰ δ' ἐργαζόμενον τὰ μέγιστα τὴν πόλιν καὶ τὰ παρ' ὑμῶν διοικοῦντα Φιλίππῳ καὶ πρυτανεύοντα, παρελθὼν εἶπον εἰς ὑμᾶς, οὐδεμιᾶς ἰδίας οὔτ' ἔχθρας οὔτε συκοφαντίας ἔνεκα, ὡς ἐκ τῶν μετὰ ταῦτ' ἔργων γέγονεν δῆλον.

position in society or the form of constitution he supports. The label of sycophant has become a general term of disparagement used in the attempt to discredit a judicial or political opponent.

Over the past century, the writers of standard accounts of the Athenian democracy have assumed that the references to sycophants in our sources prove that many individuals misused the opportunities that the participatory democracy offered and were a severe problem that plagued the Athenian democracy throughout the classical era.⁶ Those who espouse the dominant interpretation seek to define in some objective fashion the kind of misuse of prosecutorial rights that sycophancy entailed. Even historians who have read the references more metaphorically retain a similar focus and interpret the passages as referring to a genuine problem afflicting Athenian democracy.⁷ Since the “problem of sycophancy” is usually assumed, the discussion has been confined to trying to identify exactly what behavior was considered typical of a sycophant or to discern what weaknesses of the Athenian judicial system sycophancy reveals. Therefore, investigation

⁶ Sycophants were a “disease” of the Athenian judicial system who even formed clubs of sycophants (Lofberg 1917: 10, 60). There is “. . . plenty of evidence that sycophancy at its worst was quite prevalent in Athens,” and that sycophants conducted a “reign of terror” against possible collaborators with the oligarchy of 411-410 (Bonner and Smith 1938: 44 and 47). Sycophants were a “class of blackmailers and informers” who “brought a bad reputation to the justice administered in the jury-courts” (Ostwald 1986: 81-2). Sycophants “pervert[ed] the state’s legal machinery to their private ends (Ober 1989: 174). Sycophants were a threat to the whole system in their use of lawsuits (Hansen 1991: 194-5). The “abuse of the law” by sycophants was a “recognized evil” (Rhodes 1981: 444). “. . . there can be no doubt that sycophants were very active in Athens, enriching themselves at the expense of others . . .” (Hunter 1994: 126). For a summary of sycophant attributes, see Harvey 1990: 107-14.

⁷ Sycophants were those who “misused the lust of prosecutorial anger” (Allen 2000b: 162-5). Sycophancy described the antithesis of the approved conventions of appropriate vindictive prosecution (Kucharski 2012: 191-3). Sycophancy in the plays of Aristophanes was a metaphor for the corruption that was common in the Athenian democracy (Doganis 2001: 225-48).

into why the figure of a sycophant arose and how it evolved as a label has been limited.⁸ Scholars have been more interested in using the assumed prevalence of a problem as a means to explain various aspects of Athenian society rather than examining the way that the understanding and use of the term, grounded in the political conflicts of the time, underwent a transformation as the political culture changed.

According to the traditional narrative the radically participatory nature of Athenian democracy supplied an environment conducive to this assumed proliferation of sycophants.⁹ Athenian administration of justice was predominantly private in that it depended on the initiative of individual citizens to accuse and prosecute those who had injured them. A private individual was required to prosecute the perpetrator even in situations where the community was recognized as the injured party, or where the wronged person could not themselves initiate a case, so “whoever wished” of the male citizens was allowed bring a public legal action (*graphē*)¹⁰ against any other if he thought the situation demanded it.¹¹ “Whoever wished” could also participate in the procedures designed to hold officials to account,¹² or, during the later fifth century, bring legal actions against citizens of the member states of the Delian League. The system also required a private individual to arrest wrong-doers caught in the act (*apagōgē*) or to inform officials of citizens who were withholding money owed to the state (*phasis*). In order to counter any

⁸ The main investigation into the origins of the term consist of futile attempts to use etymological clues and the guesses of ancient commentators, e.g. Lofberg 1917: vii-ix; Harvey 1990: 105; Christ 1998: 49.

⁹ See for instance Lofberg 1917: 26-31; Bonner and Smith 1938: 41-2; McDowell 1978: 62-3.

¹⁰ A regular public legal action, one that could be initiated by any citizen enjoying full citizen rights, as opposed to a *dike*, which only the aggrieved party could initiate.

¹¹ The provision usually referred to as *ho boulomenos*, which allowed prosecution by a third party on behalf of the victim or on behalf of the city.

¹² Officials were examined for suitability before their term of office at one official hearing (*dokimasia*) and called to account for their term at the end by means of another official hearing (*euthunē*).

natural reluctance to come forward, some procedures rewarded successful volunteer prosecutors with a portion of the fine assessed. Large juries composed of citizens from all classes handed down a judgement on each case by the vote of the majority. Although the system was designed to give oversight of society and the behaviour of officials to the whole citizen body, it also allowed for private vendettas and politics-by-other-means through the courts and so led to the presumed pervasive misuse of the legal mechanisms the system provided, especially the bringing of false, frequent, or frivolous charges.

Furthermore, the traditional consensus on sycophancy asserts that the opportunities afforded to sycophants were not limited to actual initiation of a legal process. Part of the sycophant mythos emphasizes the disgrace and danger for a member of the traditional ruling elite to be dragged into court before the masses. The fear of such an eventuality allegedly led to a widespread practice of sycophants targeting wealthy citizens with threats of legal action in order to be paid to refrain.¹³

These diverse elements have led *sukophantēs* to be translated into English in correspondingly varied ways. The most usual translations are “malicious prosecutor,” “vexatious prosecutor,” “informer,” or “slanderer” (in contexts that suggest a misuse of legal opportunities) or “blackmailer” (when the context indicates a threat of prosecution).

The standard view summarized above has not gone unchallenged, however. A few scholars have recognized that the allusions to and complaints about sycophants do not reflect a serious problem infecting the Athenian democracy. Robin Osborne argues that real sycophants in the traditional understanding of the term did not exist.¹⁴ He describes

¹³ See for instance Lofberg 1917: 32-9; Bonner and Smith 1938: 42 and 52; Harvey 1990: 111.

¹⁴ Osborne 1990: 84.

the alleged “vexatious litigation” typically ascribed to the sycophant as a positive, and even crucial, feature of the radical Athenian democracy. Men referred to as sycophants, according to Osborne, held the rich and powerful to account and forced them to participate actively in the political life of Athens.¹⁵ Osborne’s argument emphasizes the valuable contribution to democracy of the Athenian provisions allowing political oversight by the citizenry as a whole and he recognizes that the term “sycophant” was a label used to delegitimize democratic authority, but he does not notice the changing implications of the term.¹⁶ A significant portion of his discussion focuses on the details of usage in fourth-century oratory. As we shall see, however, the use of the term in the give-and-take found in the orators of the fourth century has little in common with fifth-century usage which, as Osborne emphasizes, is grounded in a reaction to the radical democracy. His view that ordinary Athenians, as sycophants, held the rich and powerful to account corresponds primarily to the fears of the traditional elite reflected in Old Comedy and the earlier orators, rather than to actual circumstances. In reality, the role of lower-class citizens in active prosecution was limited. The primary involvement of such citizens in litigation was their participation as members of a jury. Both in the Assembly and the courts, their power resided in their vote. Wealthy citizens, whether of the traditional ruling elite or of the commercial class, were in a much better position to participate in the popular courts and to play a leading role in the Assembly.¹⁷ In the late fifth century, it was the *demos* seated in

¹⁵ Ibid. 98-9.

¹⁶ Although he makes a brief nod to this possibility (“it is not impossible that use of the term changed slightly from fifth to fourth century”), he does not develop the idea or pursue any implications arising from it (Osborne 1990: 91 and 101, note 54).

¹⁷ Christ 1998: 33-34; Ober 1989: 116-8.

the Assembly and the jury-courts, not a specific group of individuals, who could best be termed sycophants in Osborne's sense.

In a similar vein, an earlier contribution by A.W.H. Adkins points out that the upper-crust writers of our source texts stigmatized as *sukophantēs* and *polupragmōn*¹⁸ any social inferior who presumed to participate in the public life of the city.¹⁹ Adkins' analysis shows how the term sycophant could be used as a label ("its emotive charge was powerful, its descriptive meaning vague"),²⁰ but his discussion focuses on *polupragmosunē* and he examines sycophancy only as a supporting concept. In this context, he emphasizes how the label casts as inappropriate the behaviour of socially inferior citizens who interfered in the business of the traditional ruling elite through their use of litigation. As in Osborne's interpretation, Adkins' argument relies on an assumption that lower status citizens actually did pursue members of the traditional ruling elite in the courts and reflects, not reality, but rather apprehension on the part of the traditional elite that the new authority of citizens from outside of their ranks would be used to their detriment. Furthermore, Adkins does not take into consideration the later texts in which the accusation of sycophancy no longer has the class-based import he emphasizes.

Matthew Christ's extensive and thoughtful exploration of Athenian anxieties regarding the abuse of litigation in their democracy includes the most thorough examination of the concept of sycophancy to date. Christ concludes that the term sycophant was developed to designate a theoretical category of outsider to which

¹⁸ In this context, the term *polupragmōn* can be understood in the sense of meddling, officious, acting as a busybody, interfering in the business of others.

¹⁹ Adkins 1976: 311.

²⁰ Ibid. 308.

Athenians could point in order to deflect criticisms of their judicial system. The concept of the “bad sycophant,” who could be blamed for any perceived excesses in the democratic courts, he claims, both helped to define good citizenship for Athenians and to defend Athenian democracy to other Greeks.²¹ Any problems existing in the popular courts could then be blamed on the sycophant, the outsider, who does not behave as a proper citizen. Christ rightly considers the label of sycophant a constructed, hostile identity and properly notes that the term was coined after the reforms of 462.²² He also thoroughly debunks the more extreme reifications of the term, such as the traditional claim that a coterie of professional sycophants was active.²³

Christ’s analysis, however, overlooks a few key points. Most critically, he dismisses the possibility of a change in the significance of the word.²⁴ By his focus on the continuities in its meaning, he misses the fact that there is also an evolution and that the outsider identified by the label of sycophant changed. Instead of an evolution over time, he attributes the clear shift in import to elite authors addressing different audiences. In this interpretation, authors who addressed other members of the elite in compositions designed for the more limited audience of readers show a class-based attitude towards sycophants. As part of their campaign to discredit democracy and the role of the lower classes in litigation, these authors draw upon the image of a sycophant as a villain who typically targets wealthy victims. Authors who downplay any particular social status of the typical sycophant, according to Christ, are addressing a public and popular audience in drama and oratory. In support of this contention, he claims that Aristophanes’ plays

²¹ Christ 1998: 67-71.

²² Ibid. 49. See footnote 72 on p. 25 below.

²³ Ibid. 64-67.

²⁴ Ibid. 49.

contain a “relatively moderate treatment of sycophancy”²⁵ and misses the strong anti-democratic message that accompanies the ridicule of specific individuals in such contexts. Also, although he specifically denies the existence of actual sycophants,²⁶ his focus on the *fear* of abuses still assumes that this fear reflects a genuine and extensive problem. For instance, blackmail of wealthy citizens with threats of litigation is one of the main villainies ascribed to sycophants, and Christ seems to accept such blackmail as a pervasive issue.²⁷ He does not try to square his assumption of the reality of the problem with his interpretation of the sycophant as fictional, nor does he elucidate who such blackmailers were. Furthermore, his discussion of the abuses within Athenian democracy does not adequately explain why Athenians created a separate category of outsider to label some citizens who abused the democratic legal provisions and did not simply target specific behaviour by means of existing terminology.²⁸

The modern discussion concerning the nature of sycophancy also struggles to make sense of the evidence for legal penalties against it. Supporters of the traditional narrative often maintain that the problems were sufficiently acute that they led to the enactment of legal remedies specifically designed to curb such activities, including a *graphē sukophantias*.²⁹ The existence of this law, however, is disputed.³⁰ Despite his acceptance of sycophants as a serious problem, Crawley examines all passages cited as evidence for a *graphē sukophantias* and dismisses their reliability as proof for the actual existence of such

²⁵ Ibid. 105. My own reading disputes this characterization of Aristophanes’ depiction of sycophants: see below pp. 16-22.

²⁶ Ibid: 63-4.

²⁷ Ibid: 135. For a contrary view, see Osborne 1990: 98. See also below p. 58.

²⁸ See below p. 38.

²⁹ Harvey 1990: 106-7; Harris 2006: 421 and 2003: 67.

³⁰ Crawley 1970: 93; Wallace 2003: 57-8; Von Fritz 1950: 195 n. 187.

a measure.³¹ References to legal measures aimed at sycophants likely allude to laws which were much broader in their intent, such as those that penalized prosecutors who received less than one-fifth of the votes or launched a case and then dropped it before it reached trial. In response to Osborne, Harvey cites the existence of a *graphē sukophantias* as prime evidence for his championship of “the traditional view of [a sycophant] as one who abused the rights of *ho boulomenos*.”³² The claim, however, is undermined by his own extensive list of other terms found associated with sycophancy in our sources.³³ This list is testimony to the difficulties which would attend the enforcement of a law which referred specifically to sycophancy. Lofberg, whose 1917 PhD thesis is the first major work in English outlining the standard view of sycophancy, also concedes that any legal remedies directed against the alleged “scourge of sycophancy” would, of necessity, have been ineffectual because “[d]istinction between the sycophant and the good informer was hard to fix.”³⁴

A key element of the evidence in dispute is the description at *Athenaion Politeia* 43.5 of the special provisions for the main meeting of the Assembly during the sixth prytany:³⁵ a vote on ostracism and the possibility of *probolai*³⁶ against sycophants and those who failed to deliver on a promise made to the people.³⁷ Scholars with a traditional view of

³¹ Crawley 1970: 78-84.

³² Harvey 1990: 103.

³³ Harvey 1990: 107-9.

³⁴ Lofberg 1917: 94-5.

³⁵ The Athenian administrative year was divided into ten prytanies, a delegation from each of the ten administrative tribes presiding over one prytany.

³⁶ A *probolē* was a preliminary accusation brought before the Assembly.

³⁷ [Aris.] *Ath. Pol.* 43.5: ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς ἕκτης πρυτανείας πρὸς τοῖς εἰρημένοις καὶ περὶ τῆς ὀστρακοφορίας ἐπιχειροτονίαν διδύασιν, εἰ δοκεῖ ποιεῖν ἢ μή, καὶ συκοφαντῶν προβολὰς τῶν Ἀθηναίων καὶ τῶν μετοίκων μέχρι τριῶν ἑκατέρων, κἂν τις ὑποσχόμενός τι μὴ ποιήσῃ τῷ δήμῳ. (At the time of the sixth prytany, in addition to the matters mentioned, they hold a vote concerning ostracism, if it seems good to have one or not, and consider *probolai* against sycophants, both Athenians and metics, up to three against each, and whether someone who promised something to the people has not done it.)

sycophants have been puzzled by the limit on *probolai* against sycophants to once a year and a maximum cap of six charges altogether, especially since the cap included three *probolai* against metic sycophants.³⁸ In his analysis of this passage, Christ concludes that the fact that the options were limited to once a year is evidence that the provisions were primarily symbolic and that this combination was instituted after 403 in order to promote confidence in the restored democracy. The vote on ostracism, he suggests, was maintained so that the democracy continued to have the theoretical option to exile possible oligarchic leaders, while the *probolai* against sycophants provided a theoretical option to punish those whose abuse of the democracy's legal processes might also threaten the stability of the state.³⁹ The largely symbolic nature of these provisions is further supported by the fact that ostracism was never used in the restored democracy⁴⁰ and we have no evidence that a *probolē* was ever directed against a putative sycophant.⁴¹ The core of Christ's conclusion supports the hypothesis that the fifth-century development of the term targeted supporters of the radical democracy and that the opportunity to bring *probolai* against sycophants was the corresponding option provided to Athenians who opposed the radical democracy in order to balance the option of ostracism provided to those who feared the rise of oligarchic leaders.

The scholars on all sides who have engaged in the debate about sycophancy over the past century have enriched our understanding of the complexities of the use of the label of sycophant. But all — those who accept the standard view, those who read the descriptions

³⁸ Harvey 1990: 106 n. 13; Rhodes 1981: 526-7; Osborne 1990: 94, note 37. Metics were foreigners now dwelling in Athens who did not have the political and legal rights of citizens.

³⁹ Christ 1992: 340-1 and 346.

⁴⁰ Ostracism, the exile of a political leader for 10 years, was instituted by Cleisthenes. It was first used in 487 and last used in 417-415. Hansen 1991: 35

⁴¹ Christ 1992: 340 and 1998: 32.

of sycophants as metaphors for problems in the Athenian democracy, and the scholars at the end of the twentieth century discussed at some length above — have missed the way that the term was coined with political intent during the political struggles of the late fifth century, but then developed into a broader label which simply called into question the integrity of a political or legal opponent in a conflict based on a difference of policy or on personal antagonism.

When the label of sycophant arose in the late fifth century, it played into the schism between supporters of the radical democracy and their opponents. The political reforms of Ephialtes and Pericles in the middle of the fifth century had greatly increased the power of the most democratic elements of the Athenian constitution, the Assembly and the jury-courts, at the expense of the Council of the Areopagus and allowed full participation in these bodies to citizens from all economic classes. Prior to these reforms, all oversight of the political and legal institutions resided with the Council of the Areopagus which was composed of ex-archons and therefore solely by members of the two wealthiest census categories. The expanded involvement of the full citizen-body in decision-making institutions, as well as in all political and judicial oversight, included participation in the opportunities traditionally considered most useful to a sycophant: popular jury-trials, the examination of officials, volunteer prosecution as a third party, and the denunciation of other citizens. Since these processes allowed the citizen-body as a whole to hold members of the traditional ruling families to account, the inclusion of all classes as full citizens threatened their domination. Members of the established ruling elite feared that the power of the citizen-body as a whole to call them to account in the courts would enable the envious lower classes to condemn rich defendants out of hand and that the numerical

superiority of the “have-nots” in the Assembly would allow a further limitation on their influence by additional political and economic democratization through such measures as the redistribution of wealth.⁴²

In the normal description of the problem of sycophancy, the expansion of democratic power led members of the upper-classes to become personally vulnerable in the face of the power of the large popular juries, manned by their less privileged fellow citizens, who lacked the education to exercise informed and impartial judgement. Their vulnerability, in this narrative, presented lower-class citizens with the opportunity to undermine members of the elite with fraudulent prosecutions and threats of litigation. The conditions underlying the development of the label of the sycophant, however, is quite different from this usual assumption. The label did not arise because of a rampant misuse of the democratic provisions or the frequent exploitation of fear on the part of the upper classes as leverage in blackmail attempts. Instead, it arose as a tool to specifically discredit the radical democracy. The model of the poor, uneducated, easily-despised individual who threatened a member of the upper classes with a court case became a way to characterize all citizens who were not part of the established landed elite as unworthy of political privileges. In reality, the citizens taking advantage of prosecutorial rights once reserved for the traditional ruling elite, just as those likely to address the Assembly, were primarily from the wealthier classes, but by the last half of the fifth century included those whose wealth came from commercial enterprises rather than inherited land holdings. The rejection on the part of the traditional ruling elite of the legitimacy of the jury-courts and thus the democracy itself is revealed in the denigration, as sycophants, of even those who

⁴² Ober 1989, 197-8.

might try to use their roles responsibly, a designation which casts the whole system and all players in it as corrupt.

The oligarchic/democratic divide became more acute after the death of Pericles. Thucydides portrays him as having the skill and incorruptible leadership to control the democracy by instructing and leading the populace.⁴³ When new leaders arose after his death, they courted personal popularity among all ranks of citizens in order to increase their influence in the Assembly rather than relying on the traditional backing of family connections and friendship-groups and on an elite position arising from aristocratic birth.⁴⁴ In the eyes of the radical democracy's opponents, as non-aristocratic politicians became prominent, they had started to lead a credulous population astray in the Assembly. Oligarchs blamed the set-backs and, ultimately, the disasters, of the Peloponnesian War on the inherent inability of the new politicians to provide responsible leadership. In a similar fashion, they believed that these leaders and other like-minded citizens, as sycophants, misled the large popular juries in the courts to the detriment of elite defendants. In the minds of people holding this view, unscrupulous men and the unruly crowd they manipulated showed that the radical democracy was weakening the Athenian character and Athenian greatness. This assessment provided a rationale whereby the Thirty Tyrants could apply the label to their opponents in order to kill them with impunity. Similar to the way "witch" and "communist" were employed in later centuries, the use of the term sycophant did not just implicate a few people who threatened the proper functioning of society but was turned against anyone who was a threat to the political elite.

⁴³ Thuc. 2.65.8-9.

⁴⁴ Ober 1989: 93; Connor 1971: 134-6.

The historical perspective of the writer of the Aristotelian *Athenaion Politeia* is consistent with the uses of sycophant terminology in authors of late fifth and early fourth centuries. Xenophon's description of the same event in *Hellenika* lays even more emphasis on the identification of sycophants with supporters of the radical democracy. He commends the Thirty for putting to death those people, "whom all knew to have made their living off sycophancy in the democracy and to have been a source of burden to the elite (*kaloi k'agathoi*) citizens."⁴⁵ Xenophon is quite clear on who was a sycophant: radical democrats who bothered the aristocracy with pesky accusations. Even more, it is democracy that allows such behaviour. The treatise on Athenian democracy by the unknown writer popularly referred to as the "Old Oligarch" describes sycophancy as a means through which Athenians spread democracy. He complains that the Athenian people act as sycophants in that they prosecute the aristocrats of allied cities.⁴⁶ As Athenian power grew in the fifth century and the Delian League developed into the Athenian Empire, trials involving citizens of allied states came to be held in Athens. The "Old Oligarch" views this development as one aspect of the conflict between democrats and oligarchs rather than of a conflict between the divergent interests of independent cities.

The plays of Aristophanes constitute our dominant source of information for the original concept of a sycophant. Instead of the "moderate treatment" of sycophancy alleged by Christ,⁴⁷ Aristophanes' depiction of sycophant characters forcefully attacks the radical democracy. Old Comedy had its origins in Dionysian ritual, so mockery and abuse were an essential part of its conventions. In democratic Athens, these conventions were extended

⁴⁵ οὐς πάντες ἤδεσαν ἐν τῇ δημοκρατίᾳ ἀπὸ συκοφαντίας ζῶντας καὶ τοῖς καλοῖς κάγαθοῖς βαρεῖς ὄντας. Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.12 & 38.

⁴⁶ [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 14.

⁴⁷ See above, p. 9.

to convey serious political commentary. The traditional Dionysian ridicule of individuals was easily grafted onto criticism of political figures in Old Comedy, but Aristophanes extends the tradition of mockery and political comment by targeting not just political figures, but democracy itself. Although his motivations and personal views are disputed,⁴⁸ the recurring motif of sycophant characters and negative sycophantic imagery offer a critical attack on the radical democracy. The function of these characters and the complementary imagery is to condemn the democracy's main institutions as irredeemably corrupt.

The diverse activities of the sycophants in Aristophanes' plays reflect a range of the legal actions under the democracy that an ordinary citizen could initiate without being himself a victim: they inform officials of illegal activities, prosecute citizens of allied cities, and initiate third-party prosecution. Corrupt leadership in the Assembly is also incorporated into the concept of sycophancy by Aristophanes' portrayal of sycophantic politicians. In his description, politicians in the radical democracy attempt to neutralize their opponents by embroiling them in lawsuits and try to gain popular support by courting jury members at the same time.⁴⁹

Modern scholars view these passages as a justifiable critique of the problems which weakened the judicial system and interpret the activities of Aristophanes' sycophants as evidence of a proliferation of malicious lawsuits in Athenian courts.⁵⁰ The portrayal of

⁴⁸ Aristophanes' intentions have been variously interpreted: for his political satire as descriptive rather than prescriptive, Heath 1987: 41-2; for his support of the radical democracy, Sidwell 2009; and for his primary motivation to win a dramatic contest, Vickers 1997: 12-3.

⁴⁹ Sycophants as informers, *Ar. Ach.* 823-7, 910-5; sycophants as prosecutors of allies, *Av.* 1422; sycophant as a user of the *ho boulomenos* provision, *Plut.* 900-18; the use of prosecution as a political tool, *Vesp.* 590-7.

⁵⁰ Harvey 1990: 114-6.

these sycophants, however, rather than presenting a constructive warning designed to improve democracy, forms instead a critical aspect of an attack on the democratic courts themselves and identifies sycophants as supporters of the radical democracy. The informers in *Acharnians* are not just unpleasant meddlers: by their attack on Dikaiopolis' peace market, they reveal themselves as supporters of the continuation of the war.⁵¹ The importance of the fleet, manned by poorer citizens for pay, for the waging of war and the maintenance of empire was a major factor in the development of the radical democracy, so its opponents were also the strongest opponents of the Peloponnesian War.⁵² The summoner in *Birds* is a sycophant not only because he is underhanded in his dealings with Athenian allies, but because the very judicial provisions he uses are those condemned as strengthening democracy by its opponents such as the "Old Oligarch."⁵³ The new society championed by Praxagora in *Assemblywomen* will have no sycophancy because it will have no courts or prosecutions, by which she means no democratic jury-courts.⁵⁴ The characterization of all the sycophants in the plays displays them as having a pernicious influence on Athens, not just because of their individual misdoings, but also because of the roles they play in society. There is no room for them or the democratic provisions on which they rely in any of the improved societies Aristophanes envisions for his audience.⁵⁵

This attitude is most dramatically demonstrated in *Wealth*. When the god Wealth has regained his sight and made all good men rich, the sycophant is poor. His behaviour is

⁵¹ The sycophant here is an example of Osborne's sycophants who hold the rich to account; Dikaiopolis is trading with enemy states in time of war. See pages 6-7.

⁵² Kagan 2003: 384. For a general discussion of the connection between the importance of the navy and democracy, see Raaflaub 2007: 138-42.

⁵³ [Xen]. *Ath. Pol.* 14.

⁵⁴ *Ar. Eccl.* 454.

⁵⁵ Sycophants are violently expelled from a renewed society in: *Ar. Ach.* 926-53, *Av.* 1464-8, *Eccl.* 454 & 562, *Plut.* 935-58, *Eq.* 1396-1401.

so beyond the pale that, unlike every other character in the play, he cannot reform and is the only one left behind when all others, regardless of their previous behaviour, troop in to the celebration. The sycophant's defence is his legitimate use of the democratic precept of *ho boulomenos*. The play suggests this provision is the problem – a provision specifically mentioned by the writer of the *Athenaion Politeia* as one of the most democratic elements of the Athenian constitution.⁵⁶ When the sycophant's interlocutor responds to the justification, he does not assert that the sycophant is simply misusing an otherwise reasonable provision in the Athenian constitution: he implies that it is wrong for him to presume to prosecute anyone at all.⁵⁷

Aristophanes' use of sycophants to attack the courts, and thus democracy, is consistent with his wider critique. His representation of the Athenian democracy shows that those who initiate unwarranted legal charges are not the only problem. In *Wasps*, Philocleon's delight in his power over his social "betters" underscores why he should not be trusted in his role as a juror. He is not portrayed as an outlier but as a typical mean-spirited juror who is only in the court to collect his three obols and satisfy his envy of the rich by finding them guilty as charged. The depiction of jurors in this play offers no suggestion that they benefit society but exacerbates the fears of elite Athenians that the envious attitude of the more populous lower classes would prejudice their judgement of elite defendants. Furthermore, the frequent mention of court cases, jurors, and sycophants throughout the plays implies that Athenian courts are bogged down with a surfeit of

⁵⁶ [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 9.1.

⁵⁷ *Ar. Pl.* 931.

“vexatious” lawsuits initiated by champions of the radical democracy in order to woo such jurors and harness their ill-will to their own political agendas.⁵⁸

Aristophanes’ attacks on Cleon as one of these unscrupulous political leaders provide his clearest and most nuanced case against the radical democracy as inherently corrupt. Although Cleon was a wealthy Athenian, his family was not from the traditional elite.⁵⁹ To emphasize his outsider status as compared to previous elite leaders, Aristophanes presents him as a non-Athenian and hence an illegitimate leader and imbues his role as a *rhētor* (speaker) in the Assembly with sycophantic attributes. In Aristophanes’ portrayal, Cleon uses the courts to prosecute his political opponents and to ensure the loyalty of jurors who have, in consequence, ample opportunity to be paid; he blackmails opponents with threats of punishment; he extorts payment from the allies.⁶⁰ The corruption that Aristophanes presents as inherent in the radical democracy is demonstrated by the plot of *Knights*: the character representing Cleon can only be deposed by an even lowlier figure, a coarse sausage-seller, Agoracritus, who outperforms him in the use of his own despicable tactics. The problem is not the unique personality of Cleon but the democratic system itself. Cleon serves a stand-in for other leaders coming to prominence in the Assembly: a new generation of orators which arose from the commercial class and not from the traditional ruling families. In contrast to aristocratic leaders, they style themselves as watchdogs of the people⁶¹ and flatter the lower echelons of the

⁵⁸ *Ar. Ach.* 908-58, *Av.* 109-11 & 33-41, *Eccl.* 676, *Vesp.* 596-8.

⁵⁹ Ober 1989: 93.

⁶⁰ Cleon as non-Athenian: *Eq.* 2; Cleon feeds the jurors with lawsuits: *Eq.* 259-65, 799-800, *Vesp.* 698-705; blackmails opponents with threats of punishment: *Eq.* 63-8; extorts money from the allies: *Eq.* 325, 438, *Vesp.* 669-71.

⁶¹ *Pax* 313; *Vesp.* 970, 1031; MacDowell 1971: 258 (note on line 970) & 266 (note on line 1031); Ostwald 1986: 213, note 59.

citizenry although they look only to their own self-interest and not the well-being of the city. The depiction of these politicians also presents them as lacking the breeding and composure of previous elite leaders: coarse, loud-mouthed, and full of bluster, able to beguile the citizens in the Assembly with emotional appeals and empty promises and to mislead the jurors into supporting their inappropriate political ambitions.⁶² In this negative view of the radical democracy, good leaders, that is leaders from the traditional ruling elite, are hindered by their composed behaviour and good breeding.

The prominence of sycophant characters and the sycophantic attributes of Cleon in the plays emphasize the problem elite citizens perceived in radical democracy: the participation of all classes of citizens in democratic decision-making. In order to undergird this position and to project a positive image of a more limited democracy, Aristophanes portrays the protagonists in his plays as self-sufficient landowning farmers. These protagonists are representatives of the upper-classes or the most prosperous hoplite farmers who defend the city by means of their own resources, as in the time of the Persian Wars, an idealization of what the true citizen should be. The voting citizenry of the Athenian democracy of the late fifth century, however, included rowers paid for their service and other urban poor working for hire. Furthermore, by the late fifth century the participation of these poorer citizens in the political process was encouraged by payment for jury-duty and rewards for successful prosecution. In the eyes of the critics, these elements were corrupting the nobler democracy of an earlier era – the much more limited democracy dramatically represented by the powerful image of the rejuvenated Demos

⁶² MacDowell 1971: 151 (note on line 145.)

(representing the citizens) depicted at the end of *Knights*: the “slimmed down,” rural, and old-fashioned landowner.⁶³

The licence granted to a comic poet freed Aristophanes to openly criticize the radical democracy and to develop the social type of “sycophant” in order to exemplify the corruption he presents as an integral part of that system. This use of the original construct of a sycophant, however, is not limited to the works of Aristophanes but is also found in some of the surviving works of the earlier Attic orators. These speeches do not present the variety of behaviours ascribed to sycophants by Aristophanes. Nor are they so clearly critical of the democratic courts as an institution: many of the speeches were, after all, written to be presented in those same courts. Speeches by the earlier orators, however, contain references to their opponents as sycophants in a way that echoes Aristophanes. They too suggest that sycophants are poor citizens who misuse the legal system by presuming to prosecute wealthy Athenians. The power of the lower social strata in the radical democracy is again identified as the problem.

The defendant in Antiphon’s *Murder of Herodes* frames part of his defence in a way that reflects this attitude. Herodes disappeared off a boat in the middle of the night after a drinking party. Despite a dearth of evidence, his relatives have accused the speaker, who had been present on the boat at the time of Herodes’ death, of murder. One of the speaker’s main themes is that the relatives of Herodes are prosecuting him because he is rich and they are not. Their desire to obtain money from him, he claims, explains why they trumped up evidence in the form of a slave’s testimony, apparently their main piece of evidence against him. According to the speaker, sycophants of this sort are a problem not just for

⁶³ Ar. *Eq.* 1316-28.

him but also for everyone else as well. He argues that he must be acquitted so that the sycophants do not triumph. If the jury believes the prosecutors and convicts him, they will give additional power to such undeserving villains as these who dare to accuse him. "Help me. Do not demonstrate that the sycophants are more powerful than you are yourselves."⁶⁴ The underlying message focuses on his concern that his social inferiors hold power over a rich citizen such as himself through their prosecution and his plea is an attempt to align the sympathies of the jury to those of the elite.

The *For Polystratus*, ascribed to Lysias provides an additional example. Scholars date this speech to about 410. That date suggests that it predates Lysias' career as a logographer and so is unlikely to be one of his speeches.⁶⁵ The early dating, however, gives it particular importance as an illustration for the fifth-century presentation of sycophants. In this speech, the son of Polystratus insists that his father and Phrynichus were not friends and had very different backgrounds. Polystratus was well educated in the city and as an adult was a responsible citizen, tending to his land and his own business. Phrynichus, on the other hand, was an ill-educated lout from the countryside, who came into town to earn his living as a sycophant. The speech offers a pointed juxtaposition of the well-educated, landowning citizen and the poorly educated, lower-class one who rises to prominence through disreputable means.⁶⁶

Other authors born in the fifth-century continued with these same themes regarding sycophants even when some of their works were written in the fourth century. Although most of Isocrates' surviving speeches were written after the turn of the century, he was

⁶⁴ Ant. 5.80: ἀλλ' ὑμεῖς βοηθήσατέ μοι, καὶ μὴ διδάσκετε τοὺς συκοφάντας μείζον ὑμῶν αὐτῶν δύνασθαι.

⁶⁵ Todd 2000: 217.

⁶⁶ Lys. 20.11-2.

born around 436 and retains many of the prejudices of the earlier era. His speech written for a prosecutor named Nicias contains several assertions that the speaker cannot be a sycophant because he is rich and well-born.⁶⁷ This argument confirms the identification of the sycophant as a member of the irresponsible lower classes. Isocrates further reinforces this class-based view of the sycophant when, elsewhere in his works, he contrasts them with the *kaloï k'agathoi*, a phrase commonly used to denote elite citizens – wealthy, educated and of aristocratic lineage.⁶⁸ It is not only wealth that he emphasizes, but the education that comes with it and which furnishes a citizen with the background to be able to make informed decisions.⁶⁹

Exhibiting an outlook similar to that found in Aristophanes, Isocrates also portrays the democratic courts as the problem. In his *Antidosis*, a justification of his philosophy written in the form of a speech for the defence, he complains that one of the problems with Athenian justice is that sycophants, whom he equates with accusers, are given preference over defendants.⁷⁰ In this way, the courts allow lowlifes to make a living by their prosecution of others, to slander philosophers such as himself, and to diminish Athens' reputation and position in the Greek world.⁷¹ He too harks back to the glory days of the more limited democracy of the early fifth century. Their ancestors admired wisdom and tried criminals in just one court, he says, but went after sycophants by several procedures in the courts, the Council and the Assembly.⁷² The appeal to ancestral laws against sycophancy here is, of course, the normal anachronism found in Attic oratory – the claim of

⁶⁷ Isoc. 21.5, 8 & 13-4.

⁶⁸ Isoc. 8.133 & 15.241.

⁶⁹ Isoc. 15.179, 288 & 308-9.

⁷⁰ Isoc. 15.21-2.

⁷¹ Isoc. 15.164, 237, 241, 288, 300 & 308.

⁷² Isoc. 15.313-4.

sycophancy could only arise in the context of the participation of all ranks of society in the democratic jury-courts and the expanded authority of those courts.⁷³ The assertion, however, reveals his opinion that the earlier form of a very limited democracy was preferable to the current constitution.⁷⁴

Xenophon's so-called recollections of Socrates also include an anecdote that provides an additional illustration of the fifth-century model of a sycophant and exhibits an attitude towards the democratic courts which corresponds to that of Aristophanes. Again, although the *Memorabilia* was written well into the fourth century, Xenophon, like Isocrates, was raised in fifth-century Attica and writes in exile disseminating his own version of Socrates' teaching with the Athens of his youth as a backdrop. In one of the tales, Crito complains that he is beset by sycophants, portraying himself as the typical elite citizen targeted unfairly by non-elite prosecutors.⁷⁵ Following Socrates' advice, Crito hires Archidemus to employ sycophantic methods to fend off the accusers as a dog keeps the wolves from the sheep. In the resolution of the story, one of the men bothering Crito is "conscious of his own guilt," so he settles and pays up.⁷⁶ Several key features of this story illuminate the original concept of the sycophant. First of all, the metaphor of the wealthy

⁷³ Harvey (1990: 105) seems to be perplexed by the 170-year gap between the institution of *ho boulomenos* and the first mention of a sycophant. The gap is to be expected if the concept of sycophancy arose from the expansion of the political authority of the courts in the latter half of the fifth century and not the institution of public legal actions. The oligarchic/democratic divide became serious in the last third of the fifth century (Raaflaub 1990: 40) and this time-frame coincides with the first references to sycophants. Its origin seems to be part of the same trend that Donlan finds when he argues that the term *kaloï k'agathoi* arose after the mid-fifth century as part of the attempt by the elites to define their superiority (Donlan 1973: 374).

⁷⁴ Isoc. 7.16-7.

⁷⁵ Xen. *Mem.* 2.9. Very few references to sycophants occur in the works of either Xenophon or Plato, but both mention Crito in this context. In Plato's *Crito* (44e-45a), however, Crito dismisses the importance of sycophants, because they are easy to buy off.

⁷⁶ Xen. *Mem.* 2.9.6. ὁ δὲ συνειδῶς αὐτῷ πολλὰ καὶ πονηρὰ πάντ' ἐποίει ὥστε ἀπαλλαγῆναι τοῦ Ἀρχεδήμου. ὁ δὲ Ἀρχέδημος οὐκ ἀπηλλάττετο, ἕως τὸν τε Κρίτωνα ἀφῆκε καὶ αὐτῷ χρήματα ἔδωκεν.

elite as sheep and the prosecutors as wolves reveals Xenophon's fundamental assumption that the elite were in danger from the political power and predatory attitude of the majority. Moreover, he sees this danger as inherent in the democracy, so that his fable echoes the plot of Aristophanes' *Knights*: he represents the operation of justice in the radical democracy as necessarily corrupt so that the only way for a member of the aristocracy to escape the clutches of envious social inferiors is to employ the tactics typical of lower-class sycophants against them through the agency of a hireling; Crito, of course, does not sully his own hands with the distasteful tactics. Furthermore, Xenophon turns the normal narration of sycophancy on its head. The usual paradigm is of a wealthy, innocent victim who is unfairly targeted and, unlike Crito who has the benefit of Socrates' advice, pays up, not from recognition of his misdoing, but because he wants to avoid the danger and inconvenience of a trial. In Xenophon's narrative reversal, the lowlife sycophant is revealed as guilty and thus justly targeted. Although in this anecdote Archidemus uses tactics typical of a sycophant and acts in the public sphere on behalf of another for payment, another activity considered part of a sycophant's arsenal,⁷⁷ he is not considered a sycophant because he is working on behalf of a member of the traditional elite against a guilty member of the lower classes: a sycophant is not defined by his behaviour but by his relationship to the upper-classes.

In spite of the attempts of the Thirty, democracy did not disappear for long, nor did the accusations of sycophancy. After the restoration of the democratic system, however, the use of the label of sycophant started to change until it no longer held the political fire typical of its original usage. A complete change in its implications did not, of course, occur

⁷⁷ As in [Dem.] 59.43. One of the activities listed with Stephanus' sycophancy is signing his name to another man's proposal.

immediately. An early, short-term, application depends upon the import of fifth-century usage, but in a subtler fashion, almost as a “code-word”. As part of the settlement in 403, Athenians swore to refrain from holding the “men of the city,” those who were able to remain in the city under the rule of the Thirty, responsible for the actions of the few who actively supported the oligarchs and “not to remember past wrongs.”⁷⁸ Some scholars argue that the amnesty was not routinely observed and that sycophants frequently dragged “men of the city” into court for past behaviour in contravention of its spirit.⁷⁹ The evidence for this argument is found in the speeches written in defence of citizens who had remained in the city during the oligarchy and were charged in the years immediately following the restoration of democracy. The defendants delivering these speeches refer to their prosecutors as sycophants when they claim the charge is in contravention of the amnesty. This specific accusation evokes the anti-democratic resonances of the term found in the works of Aristophanes and Antiphon: someone accused of collusion with the Thirty is, after all, apt to be one of the elite and his accuser is more likely to be a supporter of radical democracy. Furthermore, such a counter-accusation neatly sidesteps the question of whether the case is in fact legitimate. In these instances, however, the characterization of a sycophant is already starting to change. The speakers no longer assert that the radical democracy creates an environment that allows sycophancy to exist. Instead, they claim that the prosecutor’s sycophantic tactics present a direct threat to the reconciliation process and the acceptance of democracy by the upper classes.

Lysias 25, for example, a defence speech written for a client accused of subverting the democracy by collusion with the Thirty, contains an argument that connects

⁷⁸ [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 39.6: τῶν δὲ παρεληλυθότων μηδενὶ πρὸς μηδένα μνησικακεῖν ἐξεῖναι.

⁷⁹ Strauss 1986: 89-90. See also Bonner and Smith 1938: 44 and 47.

sycophancy with contravention of the amnesty. The speaker is a member of the liturgical class⁸⁰ and remained in the city under the oligarchy. He insists that he should enjoy the protection of the amnesty because he was not part of the 400 in the earlier oligarchy of 411-410 and he did not hold office under the Thirty or collaborate with the crimes of their regime.⁸¹ His accusers are clearly sycophants, he claims, because they have charged him in contravention of the amnesty.⁸² He describes his prosecutors in terms similar to the typical sycophants of the fifth century: they target rich individuals who have done nothing wrong, take bribes, engage in blackmail and are the cause of Athens' misfortunes. The speaker even foreshadows the *Athenaion Politeia* when he praises the Thirty for punishing such individuals.⁸³ He urges the jurors to vote against these men in order to gain as broad a base of support as possible for the democracy.⁸⁴ He does not suggest that the activities of the sycophants are a sign that democracy does not work, however, but that it is these activities that undermine democracy.⁸⁵ He asserts that his own expenditures on the public good, by contrast, strengthen the democracy.⁸⁶ No other speech in the Lysianic corpus refers to sycophants so frequently or in the way that this speaker does; perhaps he was more supportive of the aims of the Thirty than he admits.

In order to consolidate the reconciliation process, Athenians allowed the person accused to initiate a *paragraphe* against the prosecutor if he thought that the case was in

⁸⁰ I.e. he was one of the very rich who could afford to equip triremes, fund dramatic choruses, etc. Lys. 25.4, 12 & 13 all mention that the speaker's expenditure on the public good was even more than required.

⁸¹ Lys. 25.14-5.

⁸² Lys. 25.28-9.

⁸³ Lys. 25.19: πολλοὶ μὲν τὰ δημόσια ἔκλεπτον, ἔνιοι δ' ἐπὶ τοῖς ὑμετέροις ἐδωροδόκουν, οἱ δὲ συκοφαντοῦντες τοὺς συμμάχους ἀφίστασαν. καὶ εἰ μὲν οἱ τριάκοντα τούτους μόνους ἐτιμωροῦντο, ἄνδρας ἀγαθοὺς καὶ ὑμεῖς ἂν αὐτοὺς ἠγεῖσθε.

⁸⁴ Lys. 25.3: οὕτω γὰρ ἂν τοῖς καθεστηκόσι πράγμασι πλείστους συμμάχους ἔχοιτε.

⁸⁵ Lys. 25.19 & 24.

⁸⁶ Lys. 25.13.

contravention of the terms of the amnesty. The counter-suit was heard first and the original suit could only proceed if the *paragraphē* failed. Isocrates 18 is such a counter-suit against Callimachus, the prosecutor of one of Isocrates' clients. As part of his introduction, the speaker explains the origin of the procedure and connects contravention of the amnesty with sycophants by reminding his audience that Athenians had instituted the *paragraphē* procedure because "when you came back from Piraeus, you saw some of the citizens eager to act as sycophants and trying to dissolve the amnesty."⁸⁷ The amnesty was agreed upon in order to limit reprisals after a civil war and to allow the city as a whole to overlook the behaviour of those who colluded with the oligarchs out of fear by placing all blame on the Thirty themselves. A defendant who claimed protection of the amnesty might risk the appearance of some guilt, but the speaker explains he is taking this step solely in retaliation, so that Callimachus will be subject to more severe punishment than if he simply lost his original prosecution.⁸⁸ The procedure also allows the speaker to distance himself from the actual charge against him and to focus on the importance of the amnesty for the unity of the city. His accusers endanger the reconciliation, he claims, by a charge that is illegal under the terms of the amnesty. The jurors should reject the case in order that the "men of the city" will remain supportive of the restored democracy: those "whom you, by judging justly, will enable to live in the city without fear."⁸⁹ Again, this speaker is overtly supportive of the restored democracy and claims that the sycophancy of his prosecutors undermines the unity of the city. His emphasis on the amnesty and the problem

⁸⁷ Isoc. 18.2: ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἐκ Πειραιέως κατελθόντες ἐνίους ἐωρᾶτε τῶν πολιτῶν συκοφαντεῖν ὠρμημένους καὶ τὰς συνθήκας λύειν ἐπιχειροῦντας . . ."

⁸⁸ Isoc. 18.3.

⁸⁹ Isoc. 18.42: οὐς ὑμεῖς τὰ δίκαια γνόντες ἀδεῶς οἰκεῖν ἐν τῇ πόλει ποιήσετε.

sycophants cause for the “men of the city,” however, connects such sycophants with adherents of the radical democracy.

An appeal to the amnesty was not always limited to speeches arguing against charges in relation to incidents which occurred during 404-403. Andocides, as one element of his argument in *On the Mysteries*, also equates prosecutors who contravene the amnesty to sycophants. Andocides is not defending himself against charges of collusion with the Thirty; he was still in exile during their rule. The roots of the charges he faces date from well before that time. Andocides had been involved in the profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries in 415 and had subsequently been exiled under the terms of the decree of Isotimides, which banned anyone who admitted to impiety from entering the marketplace or the temples.⁹⁰ After his return to Athens following the resolution of the civil war, Andocides participated in the Mysteries and was then charged with violating the terms of the decree. In his own defence, he argues that the decree of Isotimides has become invalid under the terms of the amnesty and thus the current charge is without its original foundation. Although neither the decree of Isotimides nor the actions that gave rise to the charge he is facing pertain directly to the civil war, he still invokes the climate of reconciliation as an important element of his defence. He equates his predicament to that of citizens who remained in the city under the oligarchs and who now rely upon the amnesty to bolster their confidence in the restored democracy. He directly links prosecutions against “men of the city” to sycophancy and warns that if he is found guilty the amnesty will be undermined:

⁹⁰ MacDowell 1962: 3-4.

So, if they see you approving accusations for events that occurred earlier, what view do you think they will hold concerning their own position? . . . For many enemies and many sycophants will appear who will bring each of them to trial.⁹¹

As with the speaker in Lysias 25 and Isocrates, Andocides' background and political sympathies were hostile to the radical democracy.⁹² His assertion that those who bring charges against oligarchic sympathizers are sycophants contravening the amnesty continues to exploit the original fifth-century concept of sycophancy while ostensibly supporting the restored democracy. Furthermore, by using the term in this specific context, these speakers can proclaim their own loyalty to the restored democracy and assert that their sycophant accusers, as disruptive, lower-class radical democrats, endanger it because they alienate support from the upper classes.

Lysias was likely born in the mid-440s and came from a wealthy family,⁹³ which suggests that he, like Isocrates and Xenophon, would use the term sycophant as a criticism of the radical democracy and its mechanisms similar to Aristophanes, but he was also a metic and was himself a victim of the Thirty. This latter background may explain why, in contrast to his speech for the man accused of subverting the democracy, Lysias employs the term sycophant in most of his speeches with an import that anticipates that common in the fourth century. Orators of a later generation, such as Demosthenes and Aeschines, treat the term sycophant as a general slur without the political implications of its earlier use. Many examples in the speeches of Lysias also demonstrate this shift. In the speech regarding the property of Aristophanes, for instance, the sycophants are simply those challenging an

⁹¹ Andoc. 1.104: εἰ οὖν γνώσονται ὑμᾶς ἀποδεχομένους τὰς κατηγορίας τῶν πρότερον γεγενημένων, τίνα αὐτοὺς οἴεσθε γνώμην ἔξειν περὶ σφῶν αὐτῶν; . . . φανήσονται γὰρ πολλοὶ μὲν ἐχθροὶ πολλοὶ δὲ συκοφάνται, οἳ καταστήσουσιν αὐτῶν ἕκαστον εἰς ἀγῶνα.

⁹² For Andocides' political views see Missiou 1992: 25-49.

⁹³ Todd 2007: 7.

inheritance.⁹⁴ Euphiletus of Lysias 1 denies any personal history with Eratosthenes, the man he claims to have executed for seducing his wife. He lists sycophancy as just one of several possible reasons that might have led to hostility between them and would have provided a motive for him to entrap his victim.⁹⁵ The defendant speaking in Lysias 4 refers to his accuser as a sycophant simply as a part of his rebuttal. In the context of this speech, the sycophancy of his opponent lies in his dishonesty: the proof of his dishonesty is shown by his refusal of an oath challenge to have a slave interrogated under torture to test the truth of his testimony.⁹⁶ In none of these speeches is there any suspicion of a political implication in the reference to sycophancy. The defence speech against Simon also provides an illustration of the shift in the use of the term towards one focusing on the personal moral character of an opponent. In recounting his rivalry with Simon for the favours of a young man, the speaker eventually refers to his accuser as a sycophant. He ties the label into the picture he has drawn of Simon throughout the speech: violent (even towards the young man at the centre of the dispute), prone to disgraceful behaviour while drunk, and eager to bring a private quarrel over a love interest into the courts.⁹⁷ The overall characterization presents a foil for the kind, moderate and retiring disposition of the speaker and lays the groundwork for his assertion that Simon's sycophancy is

⁹⁴ Lys. 19.9

⁹⁵ Lys. 1.44. οὔτε γὰρ συκοφαντῶν γραφάς με ἐγράφατο, οὔτε ἐκβάλλειν ἐκ τῆς πόλεως ἐπεχείρησεν, οὔτε ἰδίας δίκας ἐδικάζετο, οὔτε συνήδει κακὸν οὐδὲν ὃ ἐγὼ δεδιὼς μή τις πύθηται ἐπεθύμουν αὐτὸν ἀπολέσαι, (For he did not, acting as a sycophant, bring a public suit against me nor did he try to exile me from the city, nor did he bring any private suit, nor was he aware of any past misdeeds of mine that might lead me to desire his death lest anyone learn of them.)

⁹⁶ Lys. 4.14. ὡςθ' ὑμῖν προσήκει μὴ ἀποδέχεσθαι αὐτοῦ διὰ τοῦτο οὐκ ἀξιούντος βασανισθῆναι τὴν ἄνθρωπον ὅτι αὐτὴν ἐλευθέραν ἐσκήπτετο εἶναι, ἀλλὰ πολὺ μᾶλλον συκοφαντίαν καταγιγνώσκειν, ὅτι παραλιπῶν ἔλεγχον οὕτως ἀκριβῆ ἔξαπατήσειν ὑμᾶς ῥαδίως ᾤήθη. (So that it is not fitting for you to accept that he did not think it right to have the woman tortured because he claimed that she was free, but much more to condemn him for sycophancy, because by avoiding an accurate test he thought to deceive you so easily). For similar examples, see 7.38, 18.9, 26.24.

⁹⁷ Violence: Lys. 3.5; drunken behaviour: 3.19 & 39; private quarrel: 3.9.

inconsistent with his claim to ardour: a lover has simple, straightforward motives, whereas the sycophant has unscrupulous ones.⁹⁸ This opposition between a sycophant and a lover foreshadows the association of sycophancy with prostitution by later orators.⁹⁹ Most notably, in a complete reversal from the identification of sycophants with democratic opponents to the oligarchy, as in the *Athenaia Politeia*, according to Lysias it is not radical democrats but the ultimate oligarchs, the Thirty themselves, whose illegal and outrageous behaviour reveals them as sycophants:

When the Thirty, who were wicked sycophants, first established their rule, asserting that they needed to make the city clean of wrong-doers and to turn the remaining citizens to virtue and justice; although saying such things, they did not undertake to do them, as I will try to remind you, first speaking concerning my own affairs, then you concerning yours.¹⁰⁰

This oratorical flip in meaning, switching the label of sycophant to refer to oligarchs instead of supporters of the radical democracy and connecting the term to violent and illegal behaviour rather than participation in the democratic institutions as the criterion for sycophancy, enables the ensuing shift in the import of the term to a general term of abuse.

In the wake of the events of 404-403, Athenian political culture started to change. Political antagonisms in the fourth century were no longer defined by the oligarchic/democratic divide. The Thirty had not just tried to establish the more limited

⁹⁸ Lys. 3.44: οὐ γὰρ τοῦ αὐτοῦ μοι δοκεῖ εἶναι ἐρᾶν τε καὶ συκοφαντεῖν, ἀλλὰ τὸ μὲν τῶν εὐηθεστέρων, τὸ δὲ τῶν πανουργοτάτων. (For it does not seem to me that it is characteristic of the same person to love and to act as a sycophant, but the one is characteristic of relatively goodhearted men and the other of the most villainous.)

⁹⁹ See page 41 below.

¹⁰⁰ Lys 12.5: ἐπειδὴ δ' οἱ τριάκοντα πονηροὶ μὲν καὶ συκοφάνται ὄντες εἰς τὴν ἀρχὴν κατέστησαν, φάσκοντες χρῆναι τῶν ἀδίκων καθαρὰν ποιῆσαι τὴν πόλιν καὶ τοὺς λοιποὺς πολίτας ἐπ' ἀρετὴν καὶ δικαιοσύνην τραπέεσθαι, [καὶ] τοιαῦτα λέγοντες οὐ τοιαῦτα ποιεῖν ἐτόλμων, ὡς ἐγὼ περὶ τῶν ἑμαυτοῦ πρώτων εἰπῶν καὶ περὶ τῶν ὑμετέρων ἀναμνήσαι πειράσομαι.

democracy of the *patria politeia* (ancestral constitution), but to establish a Spartan-style system under which a much more limited number of citizens would have political power.¹⁰¹ After the tribulations of the war and the excesses of the oligarchy, the democracy became more stable after the restoration,¹⁰² perhaps due in part to the revision of the law-code and the establishment of a process to ensure the legality of any laws passed by the Assembly.¹⁰³ Critics of democracy ceased serious attempts to re-establish a more oligarchical system,¹⁰⁴ while the populace did not attempt to redistribute wealth as rich citizens had feared in the fifth century. Athens was able to rebuild her walls and her fleet and was not destabilized by devastation and plague as she had been during the Peloponnesian War. The political dominance of traditionally powerful families, such as the Alcmaeonids and the Philaidae, had dissipated.¹⁰⁵ Leadership by non-aristocrats, whose wealth came from commerce or manufacturing, and the political participation of all economic classes of citizens, eventually became more acceptable.¹⁰⁶ Instead of relying on membership in the traditional ruling elite, men of the fourth century could attain influential status through other means.¹⁰⁷

Unlike the plays of Aristophanes and the speeches by Antiphon and Isocrates, the younger generation of fourth-century Attic orators uses the accusation of sycophancy to attack the character of their opponents, not their status or the democratic legal system. After the reconciliation, the amnesty and the restoration of democracy, public speakers in a

¹⁰¹ Krentz 1982: 65-6; Munn 2000: 225, 229.

¹⁰² Ober 1989: 103.

¹⁰³ Ostwald 1986: 524.

¹⁰⁴ Yunis 1996: 38.

¹⁰⁵ Taylor 2007: 79-80; Harris 1995: 35.

¹⁰⁶ Strauss 1986: 12-3.

¹⁰⁷ Harris 1995: 34-6; Strauss 1986: 14.

reunified Athens accepted a broad-based democracy.¹⁰⁸ Appeals to the ancestral constitution by fifth-century authors hark back to the more limited democracy of the early part of the century or before. In the fourth century, orators still appeal to the ancestral constitution of Solon for rhetorical effect, but they retroactively ascribe later democratic reforms to this constitution.¹⁰⁹ Their *patria politeia* is, in actuality, the late fifth-century radical democracy. By this time, many Athenians consider this more broadly-based democracy part of the admirable character of their *polis*.

When democracy was restored, Athenians also reinstated the jury-courts, the examination of citizens at the beginning and end of their tenure in office, the legal remedy of third-party prosecution on behalf of others or the state, and legal challenges to proposed legislation. These essentially democratic provisions still allowed for partisan and personal politics to spill over from the Assembly into the courts. Even without the political division between oligarchs and democrats, Athenian politics still engendered factions led by individual leaders.¹¹⁰ Since the purpose of forensic oratory was to persuade the large, democratic juries to side with the speaker, rhetorically framed arguments and appeals to emotion were more important than provable facts. Although the identification of sycophants with radical democrats was no longer relevant, a shift in the connotations of the label of sycophant allowed it to remain useful as part of the rhetorical arsenal.

Instead of vivid portrayals of specific sycophantic behaviour as Aristophanes presents in his plays, later speechwriters such as Demosthenes, Aeschines, and Apollodorus, follow the model set by Lysias. The speakers usually simply accuse their

¹⁰⁸ Hansen 1991: 43.

¹⁰⁹ Hansen 1990: 78-9, 99; Cartledge 2016: 222.

¹¹⁰ Strauss 1986: 15-31.

opponent of being a sycophant, or, more frequently, as trying “to sycophant,” and do not often present specific details. Furthermore, these terms no longer suggest that the right to prosecute is a problem but that their opponent is misusing the right. Defendants often use the term sycophant as a convenient shorthand to declare that the case against them is unwarranted. In anticipation of a defence argument to this end, prosecutors, in turn, often disclaim sycophancy and are at pains to enunciate an appropriate rationale for their case.¹¹¹ Or, in some cases, the prosecutor complains that he has to prosecute because of previous sycophantic behaviour on the part of the defendant.¹¹² Emotive pleas of, “I am the victim of sycophants,” from a defendant and, “I am not a sycophant,” from a prosecutor are used to situate the speaker as the reasonable, trustworthy contestant. To label an opponent as a sycophant implies that he is insincere and calculating and that he employs tricky rhetorical techniques. In this way the speaker presents himself, by contrast, as sincere and only in court in order to defend his appropriate interests.

Either side can find some reason to cast his opponent as a sycophant. In defence speeches, prosecutors referred to as sycophants are commonly presented as overly eager: taking innocent men to court or refusing to settle issues privately. Their sycophancy and the possibly fraudulent nature of their case can also be seen in such situations as delayed prosecution or in the refusal of a judicial challenge to submit a slave to interrogation under torture to exact a “true” testimony.¹¹³ Prosecutors, on the other hand are very anxious to avoid the possible stigma of sycophancy. In the speech against Nicostratus, Apollodorus makes this point from his first words. He is not being a sycophant, he asserts, but is the

¹¹¹ Lys. 7.1, 19.9, 22.1-2, Dem. 5.6, 53.1.

¹¹² Dem. 39.2, 25, 26, 34 and 40.3, 9, 43.

¹¹³ Lys. 4.14, 7.20.

victim of wrongdoing and violence and is only looking for his rightful satisfaction.¹¹⁴ In this assertion, he does not focus on why his opponent might claim that he is a sycophant but instead uses the term as a counterpoint to his own unassailable position.

The versatility of the label is illustrated by the prosecution speech concerning the estate of Cleonymus by Isaeus. The main line of argument by the speaker contrasts the uncertain status of a written will to the certainty of kinship. Although the defendants were heirs according to the terms of a written will, the speaker claims that the property by rights should go to himself and his brother as the closer relatives of Cleonymus. He claims that the defendants' reliance on the will reveals them as sycophants: "Now, you all know of our kinship and close relationship, by means of which we fight our case, but none of you know if the will, on which these men rely in acting as sycophants towards us, is valid."¹¹⁵ By this statement, he calls to the attention of his audience that the defendants as the more distant connections of Cleonymus are outsiders interfering with the natural inheritance-patterns of Athenian tradition. Since the speaker is a prosecutor who admits the existence of the written will in their favour, the defendants, for their part, could easily describe him as a sycophant and portray his challenge as an obviously vindictive attempt at self-enrichment. Indeed, the speaker attempts to counter such an imputation with the normal disclaimer that his own case is just and therefore not sycophantic.¹¹⁶

If opponents in the law-courts can so lightly throw the label of sycophant against one another, or use it as a foil for their own motives, it is clear that the term is now

¹¹⁴ [Dem.] 53.1. On authorship see Bers 2003: 56.

¹¹⁵ Isae. 1.42. καὶ νῦν ὑμεῖς τὴν μὲν συγγένειαν καὶ τὴν οἰκειότητα τὴν ἡμετέραν, οἷς ἡμεῖς ἀγωνιζόμεθα, ἅπαντες ἐπίστασθε: τὰς δὲ διαθήκας, αἷς οὗτοι πιστεύοντες ἡμᾶς συκοφαντοῦσιν, οὐδεὶς ὑμῶν οἶδε κυρίας γενομένης.

¹¹⁶ Isae. 1.50. ... ἡμᾶς τε μὴ συκοφαντεῖν ἀλλὰ δικαίως τούτων ἀμφισβητεῖν (... that we are not acting as sycophants, but justly laying a claim about these matters).

employed as a broad label without a direct connection to any specific political outlook or behaviour. Rather than reflecting a society rife with sycophants as a specific group bent on misusing the legal system for their own ends, the multiplicity and variety of references actually supports the interpretation that “sycophant” is a label used simply to cast aspersions on one’s opponent. If we accept the argument that the frequent references to sycophancy in Attic oratory reflect a real problem caused by a specific group of individuals, we end up with virtually all the known participants in Athenian courts identified as part of a cabal abusing the system. Modern reconstructions of sycophancy, especially those that connect the term with false charges, rely on trusting the claims of defendants in surviving examples of Attic oratory.¹¹⁷ It is unreasonable to expect a man on trial, however, to promote the validity of the charges against him or to applaud the prosecutor as a benefit to the city.

What then is behind the continued use of terminology that arose with a specific anti-democratic intention when the political context for such allegations has changed? Why do orators who wish to claim the case against them is unjustified continue to use terminology that is decidedly more loaded than the common vocabulary of denunciation? Attic Greek offers a variety of specific expressions to denote the behaviours and attributes ascribed to sycophants: *pseudē katagorein* for accusing falsely, *mēnutēs* for informer, *diaballein* for slandering and *blasphēmia* for slander, *seiein* for blackmailing, *ponēros* as a general term of disparagement, and several terms and circumlocutions for bribery.¹¹⁸ This being so, the continued use of so broad and imprecise a term as sycophant requires explanation. In spite of its imprecision, the term is not meaningless, but continues to be identified with various

¹¹⁷ As, for example, Lofberg 1917, passim and Harvey 1990: 112.

¹¹⁸ Harvey 1985: 82-9.

connotations that promote its use as a suggestive shorthand to cater to ongoing prejudices in Athenian society. These connotations distinguish *sukophantēs* from other less precise terms of disparagement, such as *ponēros*.¹¹⁹ In the fourth century, instead of playing into the democratic/oligarchical divide, the term plays into the conflict between civic pride in Athenian traditions of participatory democracy and ambivalence towards the use of the courts.¹²⁰

First of all, the charge of sycophancy is useful because of its intimate association with payment. Aristophanes portrays sycophants in *Birds* and *Wealth* as professional prosecutors who rely on rewards from prosecution for their livelihood. In the orators, the suggestion that the sycophant is only interested in his own financial gain is seldom far below the surface and is often overt. In Lysias 24, the invalid protesting the removal of his pension makes fun of the idea that a sycophant would try to make money off him.¹²¹ A speaker cannot rely solely on the presence of financial awards to claim sycophancy in suits in which financial considerations are inherent, such as those arising from inheritance disputes. He needs to supply additional details to assert or deny that the financial motivation is sycophantic. For instance, in the course of his ongoing legal suits with his former guardian Aphobus over the maladministration of his inheritance, Demosthenes disclaims any sycophancy in his legal battles because he presented an itemized list: the list is a guarantee of the genuine nature of his claim, whereas a sycophant would have demanded a lump sum.¹²² Complicated inheritance disputes can be fertile ground for accusations of sycophancy and the need to counteract them. One Aristaechmus had been

¹¹⁹ *ponēros*: base, worthless. See fuller definition at note 167 (p. 55 below) and discussion on pp. 55-6.

¹²⁰ See Christ 1998: 163.

¹²¹ Lys. 24.2.

¹²² Dem. 29.30.

sued by former wards for misappropriation of their inheritance. The ensuing legal struggles continued into the next generation and Aristaechmus' son needed to defend himself against further financial claims made by his father's former wards. In explaining the background of the dispute, he cites the inordinate size of the original claim as proof that the claimants had demanded far more than was warranted and so proved themselves to be sycophants.¹²³

The connection of payment with sycophancy resonated in several ways with Athenians. First of all, the very concept of working for others in return for payment did not earn the respect that it does in modern culture. Athenians were originally respected for working their own land and, later, also for running their own manufacturing business or commercial enterprise. The landowner who tended his own land or the owner of factory worked for, and was responsible to, himself. Ideally, a free citizen did not subject himself to the indignity of working for another.¹²⁴ Also, the fact that paid employees often worked side by side with slaves, further diminished the status of free men paid for their services.

Furthermore, Athenians feared that payment corrupted human motivation in a way that could compromise an individual's behaviour. During his prosecution speech against Aeschines for a traitorous embassy, Demosthenes claims he is not a sycophant and points out that it would be illogical to try to enrich himself through the prosecution of members of the pro-Macedonian faction since joining them would be more profitable.¹²⁵ The suggestion is that other citizens have had their loyalty to Athens compromised in exchange for financial benefits. In a similar vein, when Aeschines links Timarchus' extortion of

¹²³ Dem. 38.20.

¹²⁴ Harvey 1985: 84-5.

¹²⁵ Dem. 19.222.

money to his sycophancy, the accusation comes right after Aeschines refers to him as a prostitute.¹²⁶ As a counterpoint to the assertion by the speaker in *Lysias 3* that a lover cannot be the same person as a sycophant, the demand on the part of a sycophant for money is likened to prostitution. As a prostitute sells his body to anyone who will pay rather than giving freely to a lover, so too, the speaker suggests, a sycophant sells his skills, rather than using them on his own behalf or in support of his social connections or to the benefit of the *polis*. Apollodorus makes a similar connection in his speech *Against Neaira*. He attacks the character of Neaira's husband, Stephanus, by describing how he made money as a sycophant. Apparently, however, sycophancy was not always a very lucrative way to make money: Apollodorus claims that Stephanus supplemented it with money made from Neaira's prostitution and by blackmailing her clients.¹²⁷ Again, financial motivation is presented as compromising Stephanus' behaviour. Moreover, the implication that the prosecutor is acting for financial gain provided a useful means of counteracting any claim that he was acting on behalf of the city. Even if there is no obvious financial motive inherent in the charge that has been brought by the prosecution, the claim of sycophancy suggests that the accuser must be seeking to obtain some benefit.

This general attitude towards payment fed into ambivalence toward the courts. In particular, Athenians continued to be distrustful of the role of financial incentives in the legal system. In some actions, volunteer prosecutors were awarded a portion of the fine owed to the state in order to encourage such citizen involvement. Anyone who might benefit from these provisions could be accused of sycophancy and of prosecuting in hope of financial gain instead of from concern for the city or from motives of personal honour. A

¹²⁶ Aeschin. 1.31-2.

¹²⁷ [Dem.] 59.39-41.

multiplicity of court cases was still assumed to thrive because of these payments,¹²⁸ an assumption that promoted the impression that the courts were tainted by the exchange of money. The ideal was for free, independent citizens to determine the concerns of the city collectively as amateurs and to avoid the development of paid professionals in the political and legal system.¹²⁹ Even worse in the eyes of the upper classes, in order to allow poorer Athenians to take the time to participate in the democracy, they were paid to attend the Assembly and to sit as jurors. Richer citizens in the fourth century, like those in the fifth, continued to see this payment as corrupting the whole system and to regard the jurors, like Philocleon in Aristophanes' *Wasps*, as motivated only by money and envy. Elite Athenians valued working for oneself and contributing one's services freely to the city – a prerogative, of course, of those who could afford the leisure to do so. By labelling his opponent a sycophant, with the implication that he is bringing a charge for financial gain, a defendant can maintain his loyalty to the broad-based democratic system but rely on a continuing prejudice that only the educated and well-to-do citizen is able to make responsible decisions.

In some cases, the claim that the opponent is now rich because of his sycophantic activities¹³⁰ also resonated with the Athenian continuing disdain for the *nouveaux riches*. North American culture may be inspired by rags-to-riches tales, but Athenians presumed that a poor man becomes rich only in some disreputable way or at public expense,¹³¹ so to label an opponent a sycophant provides a convenient way to suggest that he has attained

¹²⁸ Ostwald 1986: 209; Harvey 1990: 112; [Dem.] 58.63-4.

¹²⁹ Yunis 1996: 6.

¹³⁰ See for instance Lys. 20.11-2.

¹³¹ Ober 1989: 233-8.

his current status by reprehensible means. Moreover, they assumed that the newly wealthy lacked the breeding and education of the scions of old money. Although the political divide between supporters of the radical democracy and their opponents lessened in the fourth century and equality of speech (*isegoria*) and the equality of male citizens before the law (*isonomia*) were ideals of the Athenian democracy, the cachet of family background and inherited wealth did not disappear.

Another specific connotation that sets the claim of sycophancy apart from other general disparaging terms and at the same time plays into the Athenian ambivalence towards participatory democracy is its association with clever speaking. “Clever speaking” is not always a compliment. The phrase could reflect that the need for a man to be able to speak persuasively in order to win honour in the Assembly and in the courts was in tension with an underlying suspicion of new intellectual trends and techniques of persuasive rhetoric taught in the open society of democratic Athens. Rhetorical technique was suspected of promoting misleading or dishonest argumentation of a sort that would unduly sway the people, either in the Assembly or before a jury, to make decisions detrimental to the city. Isocrates incorporates this theme in his speeches. In the speech *Against Euthynas*, the speaker, drawing on the traditional image of a poor citizen preying on a wealthy one, claims Nicias cannot be a sycophant because he is not especially good at speaking, but is well-to-do. He says:

I think that everyone knows that especially those who are clever at speaking, but have nothing, try to act as a sycophant towards those who are not good at speaking,

but have sufficient funds to pay.¹³²

The connection of sycophancy to a dubious ability in rhetorical speaking ties sycophancy into the general distrust of skillful speaking. The speaker in the oration against Theocrines, preserved among Demosthenes' speeches, begs the jury to trust the man who speaks justly, not the one who speaks well.¹³³ This warning echoes the implication in Aristophanes' *Clouds* that the ability to make the weaker argument appear the stronger could be learned and used to persuade other citizens against their own better judgement. Although Aristophanes does not overtly denounce sycophancy in this play, his portrayal of rhetorical education has implications concerning contemporary Athenian attitudes towards the possible abuse of rhetorical technique in the courts: the protagonist wants to educate his son in the methods of clever argumentation so he will be able to extricate them from their debts. Since the outcome of a court-case and a vote in the Assembly hung upon the ability of the participants to persuade their hearers, the mastery of rhetorical techniques was important for success and yet was, at the same time, considered suspect. A claim of sycophancy implied that an opponent's persuasive ability was an outcome of this dubious skill.

The strength of the connection between sycophancy and the misuse of rhetoric is reflected in the use of the label of sycophant outside the legal and political realm. In Plato's *Republic*, Thrasymachus complains that Socrates is a sycophant because of his tricky use of language. In English translation, this use of *sukophantēs* is often translated as "quibbler."¹³⁴

¹³² Isoc. 21.5: οἶμαι δὴ πάντας εἰδέναι ὅτι μάλιστα συκοφαντεῖν ἐπιχειροῦσιν οἱ λέγειν μὲν δεινοί, ἔχοντες δὲ μηδέν, τοὺς ἀδυνάτους μὲν εἰπεῖν, ἱκανοὺς δὲ χρήματα τελεῖν.

¹³³ [Dem.] 58.61.

¹³⁴ Plato, *Resp.* 340d: συκοφάντης γὰρ εἶ, ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἐν τοῖς λόγοις . . .

The complaint that someone quibbles does not seem a very serious charge, but in this vignette, not only does the term suggest that Socrates is twisting the truth or words of his interlocutor, but also that he has assumed the role of an underhanded prosecutor.¹³⁵ Even more removed from the courts is Aristotle's later use of sycophant terminology to warn against misleading rhetoric: *sukophantēma* in *Sophistical Refutations* refers to rhetorical fallacies, not fraudulent court cases.¹³⁶

The association of sycophancy with clever speaking also connects it with another group regarded with suspicion, the sophists.¹³⁷ In *Clouds*, the protagonist Strepsiades educates his son in clever argumentation and finds the technique turned against himself. This plot-line emphasizes that rhetorical techniques and those who use them are untrustworthy. Concern with the perceived teaching of the sophists finds support in the orators. Isocrates laments the hypocrisy of sophists: they distrust their noble students and so reveal their own lack of trustworthiness, and they judge speech more assiduously than deeds.¹³⁸ The pattern continues with later orators. To Aeschines, Demosthenes is a sycophant in that he is a teacher of duplicitous rhetoric who treats the courts as a venue in which to instruct his students¹³⁹ and so carries the untrustworthy methods of the sophists into the courts.

A third pervasive implication conveyed by a reference to one's opponent as a sycophant is that he is meddling. The contrast between the officious sycophants in

¹³⁵ Ober 1998: 216-7. Osborne (1990: 85-6) refers to this example in examining the metaphorical uses of sycophant, which supports his claim that skill in speaking is crucial to the assumed meaning of the word.

¹³⁶ Arist. *Soph. El.*, 174b 8-12.

¹³⁷ Hesk 2000: 4.

¹³⁸ Isoc. 13.6-7.

¹³⁹ Aeschin. 1.173.

Acharnians meddling in Dikaiopolis' private peace-time market and Dikaiopolis as the idealized self-sufficient landowner who just wants to be left in peace on his farm is also reflected in the use of the label of sycophant in the fourth-century orators.¹⁴⁰ When all prosecution requires some private citizen to initiate it, the one who prosecutes you for your illegal activities might be your neighbour or relative or enemy, or, worse, someone with no connection to you at all. The traditional affiliation of Athenians was with household, kin, and friends. A man of honour was expected to help his friends and harm his enemies.¹⁴¹ To become involved in the affairs of someone who is not one of your connections is to be *polupragmōn* or meddling, a busybody. The speaker in *Lysias* 24 disclaims both enmity and friendship with the man who has accused him of unfairly receiving a pension.¹⁴² It is an argument designed to demonstrate the unwarranted interference of his accuser. Even outside of the courtroom, an individual finds it necessary to explain why he or she is taking an interest in a stranger's business. The woman who informs Euphiletos of his wife's infidelity in *Lysias* 1 is at pains to explain that she is not acting out of any meddlingness (*polupragmosunē*), but in order to help her mistress take revenge against Eratosthenes.¹⁴³ Her claim to desire revenge establishes her as a trustworthy informant, whereas the suspicion of meddling would undermine her credibility. Referring to an accuser as a sycophant suggests that he is taking an inappropriate interest in the defendant's business and that he must, therefore, have some

¹⁴⁰ For *apragmosunē*, lack of involvement in public affairs, as an ideal, see Carter 1986: 109ff.

¹⁴¹ Pl. *Resp.* 334b; Fisher 1976: 19.

¹⁴² Lys. 24.2. εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἔνεκα χρημάτων με συκοφαντεῖ — : εἰ δ' ὥς ἐχθρὸν ἑαυτοῦ με τιμωρεῖται, ψεύδεται: διὰ γὰρ τὴν πονηρίαν αὐτοῦ οὔτε φίλω οὔτε ἐχθρῷ πώποτε ἐχρησάμην αὐτῷ.

¹⁴³ Lys. 1.15-16.

disreputable angle. Even legitimate use of the legal process can thus be regarded as suspicious activity.

Sycophancy as meddlesomeness is dramatically portrayed by the speaker in the first oration against Aristogeiton preserved among Demosthenes' speeches. The prosecutor is repeatedly referred to as a sycophant. Although the specific allegations are vague, the term is coupled with harsh imagery. When the speaker likens Aristogeiton to a scorpion in the agora, his scorn reveals the seriousness with which he wishes his hearers to regard the alleged sycophancy and meddlesomeness of his opponent:

But he proceeds through the agora just as a viper or a scorpion which has raised its sting, darting here and there, looking out to see just who he might afflict with misfortune, slander or some other evil and put into a state of fear, and so exact money from him.¹⁴⁴

He is in the agora on the look-out for an opportunity to make money by interfering in the business of someone else, rather than attending to his own affairs. Sycophantic meddlesomeness is not just harmful; this image portrays it as completely outside the boundaries of appropriate human behaviour.

More often, however, meddlesomeness is not expressed in such extreme terms. The meddlesomeness of an opponent, for instance, can be discerned in an unreasonable delay in prosecution. The delay is portrayed as a technique to suit some ulterior agenda of the prosecutor and so casts doubt on the legitimacy of the case. Euxitheus, in his speech appealing a citizenship challenge that went against him in his deme, complains that the accuser had had plenty of previous opportunities to question his citizenship. The delay

¹⁴⁴ [Dem.] 25.52: ἀλλὰ πορεύεται διὰ τῆς ἀγορᾶς, ὡσπερ ἔχισ ἢ σκορπίος ἠρκῶς τὸ κέντρον, ἄττων δεῦρο κάκεισε, σκοπῶν τίνι συμφορὰν ἢ βλασφημίαν ἢ κακόν τι προστριψάμενος καὶ καταστήσας εἰς φόβον ἀργύριον εἰσπράξεται.

shows that the current attack on his status constitutes unprovoked interference in his life: “that (earlier) time was the appropriate opportunity for one who knew he was speaking the truth, but now is a convenient time for an enemy and someone wishing to act as a sycophant.”¹⁴⁵

To contrast his own behaviour with that of his opponent as a sycophant, a defendant frequently portrays himself as *apragmōn* (not interested in participating in public affairs or in the business of other citizens). Because of his typical *apragmosunē*, he is unfamiliar with the courts and has only become involved because of the outrageous charges of the prosecutor. The speaker in Lysias 7, a defence speech for a man accused of cutting down a sacred olive tree, laments that he had thought that his quiet life meant that he could avoid legal entanglements. The sycophants who now prosecute him, he claims, are a danger not just to him, but to society as a whole because innocent and guilty alike are equally at risk from their accusations.¹⁴⁶ This self-presentation of the speaker as *apragmōn* draws on the stereotype of a solid, landowning citizen. He has spent his life tending his land, minding his own and no-one else’s business. Although he himself has avoided the courts, he is now dragged into them through no fault of his own. The defendant in Lysias 25 also cites his own lack of political participation under any regime as behaviour appropriate to a citizen, in contrast to the interfering behaviour of his accusers who concern themselves with the

¹⁴⁵ Dem. 57.49: ἦν δ’ ἐκεῖνος μὲν ὁ καιρὸς τοῦ συνειδότος αὐτῷ τάληθῆ λέγειν, ὁ δὲ νυνὶ παρῶν ἐχθροῦ καὶ συκοφαντεῖν βουλομένου.

¹⁴⁶ Lys. 7.1. πρότερον μὲν, ὡς βουλή, ἐνόμιζον ἐξεῖναι τῷ βουλομένῳ, ἡσυχίαν ἄγοντι, μήτε δίκας ἔχειν μήτε πράγματα· νυνὶ δὲ οὕτως ἀπροσδοκῆτως αἰτίαις καὶ πονηροῖς συκοφάνταις περιπέπτωκα, ὥστ’ εἴ πως οἶόν τε, δοκεῖ μοι δεῖν καὶ τοὺς μὴ γεγονότας ἤδη δεδιέναι περὶ τῶν μελλόντων ἔσεσθαι: διὰ γὰρ τοὺς τοιούτους οἱ κίνδυνοι οἱ κοινοὶ γίνονται καὶ τοῖς μηδὲν ἀδικοῦσι καὶ τοῖς πολλὰ ἡμαρτηκόσιν.

business of others at the expense of their own affairs.¹⁴⁷ Not all self-described *apragmōn* citizens can cite a lifetime with no involvement in the courts; some speakers cite their youth and inexperience as evidence of their *apragmosunē*. The speaker in the oration against Callicles portrays himself as the victim of a neighbour interfering in his life in an unwarranted fashion. His self-portrayal notes his youth and inexperience which render him ill-equipped to defend himself against the machinations of his older neighbour, who has brought a sycophantic charge in an attempt to drive him off his land.¹⁴⁸

Even a prosecutor can present himself as *apragmōn* with a claim that he has been forced into an unpleasant duty because the activities of the defendant have led to the necessity of a legal action. In the speech against Timarchus, Aeschines as the prosecutor turns the label of sycophant against the defendant in this way. At the beginning of his attack, he declares:

Although I have never, Athenians, either initiated an indictment against any of the citizens or caused grief during his *euthyna*, but think I have exhibited myself as a quiet and modest man towards each of them, when I saw that the city was being harmed by this Timarchus here who was speaking in the assembly in contravention of the laws and was myself a victim of his sycophancy in a private matter — of which sort I will show in my forthcoming speech — I thought it to be a most shameful thing not to come to the help of the whole city, the laws, you and myself.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Lys. 25.14-5. He contrasts the behaviour of his opponents, who neglect their own affairs by poking into the affairs of others, with his own *apragmosunē* highlighted in section 1: τῶν δὲ κατηγορῶν θαυμάζω, οἱ ἀμελοῦντες τῶν οἰκείων τῶν ἀλλοτρίων ἐπιμέλονται. (But I marvel at my accusers, who while neglecting their own affairs, concentrate on those of other men.)

¹⁴⁸ Dem. 55.7 & 35.

¹⁴⁹ Aeshin. 1.1-2: οὐδένα πώποτε τῶν πολιτῶν, ὧ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, οὔτε γραφὴν γραψάμενος οὔτ' ἐν εὐθύταις λυπήσας, ἀλλ' ὡς ἔγωγε νομίζω μέτριον ἑμαυτὸν πρὸς ἕκαστα τούτων παρεσχηκῶς, ὁρῶν δὲ τήν τε πόλιν μεγάλα βλαπτομένην ὑπὸ Τιμάρχου τουτοῦ δημηγοροῦντος παρὰ τοὺς νόμους, καὶ αὐτὸς ἰδίᾳ συκοφαντούμενος — ὃν δὲ τρόπον, προϊόντος ἐπιδείξω τοῦ λόγου — ἐν τι τῶν αἰσχίστων ἡγησάμην εἶναι μὴ βοηθῆσαι τῇ τε πόλει πάση καὶ τοῖς νόμοις καὶ ὑμῖν καὶ ἑμαυτῷ.

In a few speeches, the prosecutor admits that he has initiated a charge solely on behalf of the city with no personal involvement, as do Lycurgus in *Against Leocrates* and the speaker in Lysias 22 who accuses the grain dealers of illegal price hikes. In these speeches, the speaker is at pains to assert that he has brought the suit because the situation affects everyone: the matter at hand is of public concern, so as a citizen he has a legitimate interest in the case. In this way he clearly hopes to establish that he is not a meddler.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, the speaker in *Against the Grain Dealers*, claims that his public-spirited case is an attempt both to protect the grain dealers from execution without trial and to protect the public from illegal price gouging.¹⁵¹ A co-operative and participatory justice system rests on the philosophy that because the actions of each individual affect the *polis* as a whole, citizens have a legitimate concern with the outcome of the actions of all members of the community. In theory, this philosophy was well established in Athenian law, since the legal provision of *ho boulomenos* was attributed to Solon.¹⁵² In practice, however, the speakers in these cases are well-advised to justify their position in order to defend themselves against the counterclaim on the part of their opponents that they are meddling sycophants, in the mode of the informants in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*.

In Athens, the *apragmōn/polupragmōn* contrast was further complicated by the shame/honour ethos that informed Greek society. On one hand, the ideal of *apragmosunē* was the standard to set against meddling, but on the other hand it was itself in conflict with the need of a man to find personal validation in the approval of society. Respect was earned by an individual's demonstration of excellence and the honour bestowed by his

¹⁵⁰ Lys. 22.1-2; Lycurg. 1.5-6. See Allen 2000a: 12.

¹⁵¹ Lys. 22.2 & 19-22.

¹⁵² See p. 5

community in return. Correspondingly, the lack of such accomplishment meant diminished honour. At the low end of the scale, even the Greek terms for punishment are related to the word for honour.¹⁵³ One way to demonstrate excellence in a democracy is by active participation in public life, but active participation in pursuit of honour leads to competition with others in any field of endeavour. If the participatory nature of the radical democracy was at odds with the ideal of *apragmosunē*, the co-operative ideal also collided with these traditional Greek ideals of honour and competition. Athenian culture was infused with competition: even public religious festivals were grounded in athletic and dramatic contests. Participatory democracy, in contrast, depended upon a co-operative citizen body making decisions for the good of the city rather than competitive elite citizens one-upping one another. When the courts offered an additional opportunity for personal competition, this use undermined their potential to serve as a democratic institution where any citizen prosecutor held fellow-citizens to account for the benefit of the community as a whole. Furthermore, such competition was honourable only between social equals – especially two members of the elite class.¹⁵⁴ In this environment, a prosecutor who is not part of the consensual rivalry between equals is considered an outsider. Any elite defendant can use the label of sycophant to cast his opponent as an ill-bred, lower-class outsider and present the case as an unwarranted attack which undermines the fabric of society.

Another way for a speaker to emphasize the ideal of the *apragmōn* citizen is to contrast his modest and restrained behaviour, characteristic of an educated, well-bred man, to the coarse, uncontrolled antics of other Athenian politicians. As an accompaniment

¹⁵³ Allen 2000b: 59-61.

¹⁵⁴ Ober 1989: 84; Carter 1986: 21.

to the sycophancy ascribed to Cleon, Aristophanes also portrays Cleon as out-shouting all others in the Assembly and the writer of the *Athenaia Politeia* claims he “was the first person who shouted and hurled abuse from the platform and spoke in the Assembly having girded up his clothing, while others spoke in an orderly way”¹⁵⁵ Isocrates also exploits this image as a contrast to his own self-portrayal. The image of his small voice that made him unfit for public life illustrates his well-bred *apragmosunē*, because in Athens, he claims, a role in public life required a loud voice.¹⁵⁶ Isocrates uses the image of non-elite, raucous politicians who misuse the courts as a foil for his own positive self-portrait as a responsible citizen. This stigma of uncivilized behaviour as a correlation of sycophancy continues to be used by fourth-century orators to denigrate an opponent. In the speech against Aristogeiton, the speaker associates Aristogeiton’s sycophancy with outrageous behaviour in a way that recalls Aristophanes’ characterization of Cleon. His opponent, he claims, is one of those speakers who go to the assembly with boldness, false accusations, shouting, sycophancy, and shamelessness.¹⁵⁷ Unlike Aristophanes’ portrayal of sycophantic politicians, however, the speaker criticizes Aristogeiton’s style, but he does not suggest that this is the only possible way to behave given the nature of democratic institutions. He does not assume that the only way to defeat him is by behaving in the same way.¹⁵⁸

Although sycophancy as unwarranted interference is invoked as a contrast to the ideal of *apragmosunē*, it can also be invoked as the counterpoint to the nobility of legitimate public involvement. At the beginning of *On the Peace*, in order to declare his own

¹⁵⁵ [Arist] *Ath Pol.* 28.3: πρῶτος ἐπὶ τοῦ βήματος ἀνέκραγε καὶ ἐλοιδορήσατο, καὶ περιζωσάμενος ἐδημηγόρησε, τῶν ἄλλων ἐν κόσμῳ λεγόντων.

¹⁵⁶ Isoc. 12.10; Too 1995: 89.

¹⁵⁷ [Dem] 25.9. See previous reference to this speech on p. 47.

¹⁵⁸ See p. 20 above and Ar. *Eq.* 135-45.

high-minded intentions, Demosthenes emphasizes that he has come forward not out of sycophancy or enmity but for the good of the city.¹⁵⁹ He draws on the same theme as part of his argument against a decree proposed by Aristocrates. The decree would offer special protection to Charidemus (a mercenary general and an advisor to Cersobleptes of Thrace) in an attempt to ensure the position of Thrace as a first line of defence against Macedonia. The decree proposes that if anyone were to kill Charidemus, Athens would retaliate against the killer, even to the point of threatening a city that might interfere with the retribution.¹⁶⁰ Demosthenes' client opposes this decree on the grounds that its illegality and its potentially disastrous consequences for the city present an immediate and longer-term danger to Athens. His sincere, patriotic motivation is emphasized in direct contrast to that of a sycophant. The speaker reminds his listeners that he had not opposed two previous decrees which had benefitted Charidemus: because those decrees threatened no harm to Athens, only someone with a grudge against Aristocrates or a sycophant would have done so.¹⁶¹ With the one word, sycophant, the speaker contrasts his own pristine motives to the possible financial greed, sophistry or officious meddling that might motivate another speaker.

The lack of a strictly defined meaning for sycophancy easily led to its use to describe one's opponent as a generally bad character. Bribery is not the same as slander, but both

¹⁵⁹ Dem. 5.6. Quoted on p. 3 of this paper.

¹⁶⁰ Dem. 23.91: γέγραφεν γὰρ 'ἐάν τις ἀποκτείνῃ Χαρίδημον, ἀγώγιμος ἔστω, ἐὰν δέ τις ἀφέληται ἢ πόλις ἢ ἰδιώτης, ἔκσπονδος ἔστω.' ([The decree] proscribes that if anyone kills Charidemus let him be liable to arrest and if anyone either a city or an individual, hinders the arrest, let [the city] be out of the treaty.)

¹⁶¹ Dem. 23.190: καὶ νομίζω τὸ μὲν, οἷς ἔμελλεν ἐκεῖνος λαβὼν μηδὲν ὑπερμέγεθες τὴν πόλιν βλάψειν, ἀντιλέγειν ἢ κακῶς ἰδίᾳ πεπονθότος ἢ συκοφαντοῦντος εἶναι, τὸ δέ, ἐφ' οἷς μέγα πράγμα ἄλυσιτελὲς τῇ πόλει κατεσκευάζετο, ἐναντιοῦσθαι χρηστοῦ καὶ φιλοπόλιδος ἀνδρὸς ἔργον εἶναι. (And I think on one hand that to speak against payments which by receiving that man was not likely to harm the city in any great way is characteristic of someone who has some private enmity towards him or of a sycophant, but on the other hand to oppose those by which he will create a great problem for the city is the task of a good and patriotic man.)

can be an implied aspect of sycophancy. The list of attributes of Aristogeiton set out by the prosecutor shows just how vague, but also how bitter, the use of the term sycophant could be: “[is he] not impious, savage, foul, and a sycophant?”¹⁶² This example clearly does not connect in any specific way to the traditional activities of the sycophant, but simply emphasizes the bad character of the speaker’s opponent. When the political rivalry of Demosthenes and Aeschines overflows into the courts, they regularly refer to one another, and each other’s supporters, as sycophants. Like the sycophant in *Acharnians* who is described as “all bad,”¹⁶³ Aeschines portrays Timarchus, a supporter of Demosthenes, as an outright bad character. He lists sycophancy as one of Timarchus’ many character flaws, along with profligacy, self-indulgence, cowardice, and shamelessness.¹⁶⁴ On the other hand, Demosthenes insists that Aeschines is a sycophant, as well as a liar and a traitor in the pay of Phillip of Macedon.¹⁶⁵ He also includes sycophancy among his own list of colourful, negative attributes, including several describing Aeschines as an unsuccessful actor:

A wicked thing, men of Athens, a wicked thing is the sycophant, always and in every way malicious and over-fond of accusations: and this manikin is by very nature a fox, from the beginning having done nothing wholesome or frank, a self-consciously tragic monkey, a rustic Oenomaus, a counterfeit orator. For what advantage has your cleverness brought to your homeland?¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² [Dem.] 25.63: οὐκ ἀσεβής; οὐκ ὤμῳς; οὐκ ἀκάθαρτος; οὐ συκοφάντης;

¹⁶³ Ar. *Ach.* 909: ἀλλ’ ἅπαν κακόν.

¹⁶⁴ Aeschin. 1.105.

¹⁶⁵ Dem. 18.112-3, 118, 121, 138, 212, 232.

¹⁶⁶ Dem. 18.242: πονηρόν, ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, πονηρόν ὁ συκοφάντης αἰεὶ καὶ πανταχόθεν βάσκανον καὶ φιλαίτιον· τοῦτο δὲ καὶ φύσει κίναδος τὰνθρώπιόν ἐστιν, οὐδὲν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ὑγιὲς πεπιοηκὸς οὐδ’ ἐλεύθερον, αὐτοτραγικὸς πίθηκος, ἀρουραῖος Οἰνόμαος, παράσημος ῥήτωρ. τί γὰρ ἢ σὴ δεινότης εἰς ὄνησιν ἕκει τῇ πατρίδι;

The insults drawing attention to Aeschines' former career as a third actor (tragic monkey and rustic Oenomaus, referring to the fact that Aeschines once played the role of this king), further imply that his sycophantic behaviour is an insincere performance, acting a part in front of a court as if in front of the audience at a play. Aeschines responds in kind when defending himself against Demosthenes. Demosthenes, he claims, is a sycophant — he has been one all his adult life, simply because that is what wicked men are called.¹⁶⁷ Unlike Aristophanes, who characterizes the Athenian democracy as being overrun with such “all-bad” sycophants, however, when Aeschines labels Demosthenes a sycophant, whether he equates sycophancy with general wickedness or sees duplicitous rhetoric as a constituent part of it, he does so clearly because of their policy and personal differences. Aeschines does not claim that the inherent nature of a democracy encourages Demosthenes' sycophant behaviour or that the only way to gain the support of the populace is from such behaviour.

As in the quotations above, *sukophantēs* throughout the period is frequently associated with another negative word with an even more general application, *ponēros*.¹⁶⁸ David Rosenbloom has delineated the changing nuances of *ponēros*.¹⁶⁹ He argues that in the fifth century, Old Comedy disparaged as *ponēroi* the new politicians whose wealth came from commerce and manufacturing, in contrast to the *chrēstoi*, the traditional leaders from landowning aristocratic families. New leaders such as Hyperbolus and Cleon were criticised for bringing the voice and attitude of the marketplace to the leadership of the city

¹⁶⁷ Aeschin. 2.99: ἀνὴρ δὲ γενόμενος προσεῖληφε τὴν τῶν πονηρῶν κοινὴν ἐπωνυμίαν, συκοφάντης.

¹⁶⁸ *Ponēros* literally means “oppressed by toils” (LSJ) and is often used of those who need to work for a living. By extension, in certain usages (but not all) it accumulated value connotations arising from scorn for manual labour, such as base or worthless and by further extension became a general term of moral disapproval, similar to but more complicated and much more common than “villain” in English.

¹⁶⁹ See Rosenbloom 2002 and 2004.

in place of the education and military excellence of the traditional elites. In the wake of the oligarchy of the Thirty, in Rosenbloom's analysis, this attitude started to change. The Thirty did not limit their purge of the city to those who were held through consensus to be *ponēroi*, so they themselves eventually became regarded as *ponēroi* leaders.¹⁷⁰ In the fourth century, Athenians regarded the restored democracy as the antithesis of the Thirty and at the same time no longer portrayed the marketplace as a source only of *ponēria*. So, as Athenian culture began to accept the leadership of politicians who rose from the commercial ranks of society, *ponēros* became a less class-based term and was used more frequently to denote negative moral worth.¹⁷¹ If we extend Rosenbloom's insight, we find that the label of sycophant, often used in conjunction with *ponēros*,¹⁷² follows a similar trajectory. Originally it was employed to target citizens who were not from the traditional ruling elite who took advantage of the extension of legal and political privileges. With the development of the image of the lower-class, uneducated, despicable sycophant, members of the elite class could apply the label to suggest that all citizens outside the traditional ruling aristocracy were unqualified to participate in the political institutions.

Aristophanes' harsh treatment of sycophants in his plays sounds very much like the general trope Rosenbloom finds in Old Comedy for *ponēroi*: "Branding such leaders as *ponēros* and depicting them as lower class villains, the genre expelled them as ritual scapegoats . . . purifying and renewing the city, returning the *chrēstoi* to hegemony."¹⁷³ As the use of *ponēros* changed, its continuing association with *sukophantēs* helped to contribute to the transformation of the charge of sycophancy from one used against non-elite citizens and

¹⁷⁰ Rosenbloom 2002: 337 and 2004: 340-1.

¹⁷¹ Rosenbloom 2004: 342-3.

¹⁷² See for example: *Ar. Pl.* 31; *Lys.* 7.1; *Isoc.* 18.55; *Dem.* 18.242; *Aesch.* 2.99.

¹⁷³ Rosenbloom 2004: 336.

the democracy itself into a more general slur used to cast aspersions against the character of an opponent.

The association with financial corruption, suspect rhetorical techniques, meddling and generally bad character all contributed to the label of sycophant remaining a useful rhetorical tool for Athenian litigants to employ when they sought to win the support of an Athenian jury. The imprecision inherent in the term, along with the retention of specific and strongly associated insinuations, helped a contender in a legal case to imply that his opponent's case was objectionable. A common ploy of a liturgical class defendant is to assert that he should be acquitted because of all the benefits he has bestowed on the city.¹⁷⁴ By this argument he places the importance of his gifts to the community and the gratitude the community owes in exchange above the proper process of adjudication in the courts. He implies that even if he is guilty he should be acquitted for the greater good of the city. In a complementary fashion, the accusation that a prosecutor is a sycophant declares that his actions are to detriment of the community notwithstanding any other factors. The implication is that the motivation of the alleged sycophant cannot be concern for society, so it must be for financial gain or an inappropriate desire to meddle. Furthermore, it implies that the very persuasiveness of a speech is due to his opponent's exploitation of deceptive rhetorical techniques. Therefore, the speaker's assertion is that the common good of society demands that the case presented by the sycophant must be defeated.

The tradition of literal interpretation assumes the reality of flesh and blood sycophants as a serious problem who perverted justice by their fraudulent prosecutions

¹⁷⁴ Johnstone (1999: 93-4) has analyzed the frequency of this motif in the surviving speeches of Athenian litigants and found that over half of defendants cited their liturgies and one-fifth of the prosecutors did so.

initiated only for personal gain. Scholars who accept this interpretation endorse the warnings of the “man of the city” in Lysias 25 in reference to the sycophants who have accused him:

For it is now obvious to everyone that because of those governing unjustly in an oligarchy, democracy comes into being and because of those being a sycophant in the democracy, oligarchy has been twice established.¹⁷⁵

Aristotle later echoes a similar theme: “For many of the institutions thought to be for the people destroy democracies, and many of those thought oligarchical destroy oligarchies.”¹⁷⁶ In spite of these warnings, Athenian democracy did not collapse because of the supposed corruption caused by the activities of sycophants misusing democratic legal provisions. Instead, democracy was eventually dismantled in the wake of the Macedonian conquest. A group of colourful characters in Aristophanes and the frequent accusation of sycophancy in surviving literature have led modern classicists to overestimate and misinterpret the problem that the misuse of the courts represented in classical Athens. The speaker in *Against Theocrines* complains bitterly that the courts have never punished sycophants like Theocrines in the way they deserve.¹⁷⁷ This rhetorical complaint does not prove that Theocrines is part of a cadre which endangers the Athenian democracy, nor does it show that juries were regularly conned by clever but unscrupulous prosecutors. Theocrines is a sycophant because his prosecutor finds it useful to bolster his argument by the use of a versatile and suggestive label.

¹⁷⁵ Lys. 25.27: πᾶσι γὰρ ἤδη φανερόν ἐστιν ὅτι διὰ τοὺς μὲν ἀδίκως πολιτευομένους ἐν τῇ ὀλιγαρχίᾳ δημοκρατία γίνεταί, διὰ δὲ τοὺς ἐν τῇ δημοκρατίᾳ συκοφαντοῦντας ὀλιγαρχία δις κατέστη.

¹⁷⁶ Arist. *Pol.* 1309b: πολλὰ γὰρ τῶν δοκούντων δημοτικῶν λύει τὰς δημοκρατίας καὶ τῶν ὀλιγαρχικῶν τὰς ὀλιγαρχίας.

¹⁷⁷ [Dem.] 58.63.

The hostile label of sycophant was applied by fifth-century political opponents of the radical democracy to argue the latter was hopelessly corrupt and needed to be replaced by the ancestral constitution of a more limited democracy or even by a Spartan-style oligarchy. During the stable democracy of the fourth century, this villainous figure evolved into a convenient insult which provided a defendant with the means to condemn his attacker and to undermine the efforts of citizen prosecutors regardless of their motivation. To Christ, the sycophant's defence in *Wealth* shows how "a glib sycophant can pose as a legitimate volunteer prosecutor."¹⁷⁸ An alternate interpretation of the realities that lay behind this scene is that the volunteer prosecutor is easily cast as that particular sort of villain, a sycophant. To understand sycophant as a label with changing implications, rather than as a reference to a particular kind of individual or a specific kind of behaviour, allows us to start to make sense of the confusing *mélange* of references we find in the sources. This is not to say no Athenians ever prosecuted other citizens from inappropriate motives, or that there were no frivolous or slanderous lawsuits, or that no-one tried to blackmail or bribe anyone else: there may have been, after all, a few real communist spies in the United States State Department in 1950. Any democratic legal system will have a few individuals who make inappropriate use of its provisions, although what is inappropriate can be a matter of perception. An "ambulance-chaser" to one person may be a lawyer standing up for a victim of culpable negligence to another. The cry of "lock her up" was perceived as a legitimate goal among supporters of Donald Trump in the 2016 United States election campaign, but as shockingly anti-democratic rhetoric to supporters of Hillary Clinton. The frequent use of the term sycophant does not give us any information as to the degree and

¹⁷⁸ Christ 1998: 147.

frequency of abuses which actually occurred within the radical democracy. Understanding “sycophant” as an evocative, but somewhat open-ended label rather than a term designating a class of villains frees us to revise our view of this aspect of Athenian democracy.

In the nineteenth century, our traditional understanding of a sycophant was somewhat quaintly described in a standard reference work using the language of the time:

Sycophantes, in the time of Aristophanes and Demosthenes . . . had not much in common with our sycophant, but was a happy compound of the common barretor, informer, pettifogger, busybody, rogue, liar, and slanderer.¹⁷⁹

Loath as one might be to discard the reality of this almost Dickensian character, I would suggest amending the definition:

The term sycophant had not much in common with our sycophant but was a negative label applied in the time of Aristophanes to discredit the participation in public affairs of citizens who were not members of the traditional ruling elite, and in the time of Demosthenes as a means of casting aspersion on an opponent in court or the assembly in order to position the speaker as the reasonable party.

¹⁷⁹ “Sycophantes” in Smith 1890.

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