

Alexis fr. 146 K–A: medical advice given in Attic is ignored, but let the doctor say the same thing in Doric and we are impressed. When Epicrates fr. 10.28–30 makes a character recount a Sicilian doctor's scorn for the Academic botanists, in the midst of an Attic *πνίγος* the doctor is said to come *Σικελᾶς ἀπὸ γᾶς*, as in England we might say 'frae bonnie Scotland', his origin conferring the more authority on his drastically expressed contempt.

Since our verse is an accusation against soothsayers, the use of the anapaestic tetrameter suggests an *agôn* between a doctor and a soothsayer, each calling the other a charlatan, in which no doubt the soothsayer, speaking in iambic tetrameters, gave at least as good as he got. Although several Attic comedies are known to have featured doctors and druggists;¹⁵ we do not know enough to suggest a candidate;¹⁶ nevertheless, I suggest that it is to Athens and not Sicily that we should look. Perhaps indeed there was a comic poet Aristoxenus from whom the line was quoted for its content and whom Hephaestion or his source confused with the Selinuntine mentioned by Epicharmus; alternatively, the quoting author (in whatever work or context) was Aristoxenus the Musician, whom an intermediate author conflated with the author quoted.¹⁷

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¹⁵ See Kassel–Austin on Aristophon fr. 3, Arnott on Alexis fr. 146.

¹⁶ It would be over-speculative to suggest that the *agôn* preceded the arrival onstage of Anaxandrides' *φαρμακόμαντις*, who (speaking in Attic) is not ashamed to be an *ἀλαζών* (fr. 50 K–A), and might reasonably claim to combine both professions, though the poet is known to have used both the anapaestic and the iambic tetrameter (see frr. 10 and 35 K–A respectively). Neither he nor any other writer is known to have revived the Aeschylean *ἰατρόμαντις*.

¹⁷ Who was perhaps not named; cf. the quotations from Euripides and Sophocles in fr. 50 Wehrli. A similar conflation in the source of Gell. *NA* 15.20.8 is posited by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, 'Alexander Aetolus, Aristophanes and the Life of Euripides (Alexander Aetolus fr. 7 Powell, Aristophanes fr. 676b Kock', in *Storia, poesia e pensiero nel mondo antico: studi in onore di Marcello Gigante* (Naples, 1994), 371–9, Aristophanes being cited by Alexander in a *Βίος Εὐριπίδου*; the objections of Enrico Magnelli, *Alexandri Aetoli testimonia et fragmenta* (Florence, 1999), 223–7 do not include any reason for supposing that Alexander would have composed such a text.

‘UNDOING THE WINESKIN’S FOOT’: ATHENIAN SLANG?¹

ἄσκού με τὸν προύχοντα μὴ λύσαι πόδα ...
πρὶν ἂν πατρώϊαν αὔθις ἐστίαν μὀλω.

That I should not undo the wineskin's jutting foot ... until I had come once more to my hearth and home.
(Euripides, *Medea* 679 and 681²)

¹ My thanks to Dr Emma Stafford, Professor Judith Mossman and the anonymous referee for their comments on earlier drafts. This paper was completed before I learnt of the existence of S. Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge, 2008).

² Text from D.J. Mastronarde (ed.), *Euripides: Medea* (Cambridge, 2002), 135. Translation

I

Euripides' account of the advice given to King Aegeus of Athens is one of the best-known of all Delphic oracles,³ perhaps second only to 'If Croesus crosses the Halys, he will destroy a great empire'.⁴ The meaning is generally considered plain – Aegeus must refrain from sex until he returns to Athens.⁵ This was recognized in the ancient scholia, and it seems unlikely that it escaped the original audience in 431 B.C.⁶ Less obvious, and less often discussed, is *why* the oracle means this.

The *ἄσκος* or 'wineskin' was made out of an animal skin, and used the beast's foot as a spout (hence the use of *πούς*).⁷ The scholion notes the similarity between the wineskin and the human belly, and identifies the 'foot' with the penis (using the term *μόριον*), because the penis juts forth from the body in the same way that the wineskin's foot does.⁸ Perhaps because of this identification, *πούς* is a common term in Attic Comedy for the penis.⁹ Modern commentaries on the *Medea*, where they address the point, follow the scholion,¹⁰ but do not comment upon the 'undoing'. This apparently rather odd metaphor seems to be treated as the Delphic oracle being its usual wilfully obscure self.¹¹ But could there be another explanation?

There is a practice depicted on Athenian red-figure vases that show sympotic scenes, which is (inaccurately) described as 'male infibulation' or 'ligaturing': the tying up of the penis.¹² Clearly, for anyone doing this, the penis would have to be untied before either urination or sex. Similarly, a wineskin would probably have to be untied before wine could be poured; a column krater now in Boston shows a wineskin with marks around its foot that presumably are meant to show a tie.¹³ So, not only is there a similarity between the wineskin's foot and the penis, but both require a similar

adapted from J. Davie (tr.), *Euripides: Medea and Other Plays* (London, 2003, corr. ed. with revised introduction and bibliography of *Euripides: Alcestis and Other Plays* [London, 1996]), 68. Davie translates *πούς* as 'neck', substituting a common English anatomical term applied to wine bottles for the 'foot' of the Greek. I have reverted to 'foot' for the purposes of my argument.

³ R. Hendess, *Oracula graeca quae apud scriptores graecos romanosque exstant* (Halis, 1877), no. 20; H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle* (Oxford, 1956) 2.48, no. 110.

⁴ Parke and Wormell (n. 3), 24 no. 53; Hdt. 1.53, Arist. *Rh.* 1407a38.

⁵ See R. Rutherford's note in Davie (n. 2), 179 n. 13; J. Morwood (tr.), *Euripides: Medea; Hippolytus; Electra; Helen* (Oxford, 1997), 174.

⁶ G.W. Most, 'Two problems in the third stasimon of Euripides' *Medea*', *CPh* 94 (1999), 21 n. 2.

⁷ An illustration can be seen in a kylix attributed to Epictetus, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (95.34; *ARV*², 75, no. 64; Beazley Archive, no. 200591).

⁸ The metaphor is also found in Archil. fr. 118 West.

⁹ See J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse*² (Oxford, 1991, 1st ed. 1975), 129–30.

¹⁰ So D.L. Page (ed.), *Euripides: Medea* (Oxford, 1938, corr. ed. 1961), 121 (very briefly); Mastronarde (n. 2), 286 (in more detail).

¹¹ Rutherford's note in Davie (n. 2), 179 n. 13, is typical: 'Oracles were proverbially obscure.'

¹² It is shown, for example, on two vases by Douris: see *ARV*², 446, no. 262 (Beazley Archive, no. 205309), and 435, no. 95 (Beazley Archive, no. 205141). On the practice, see E.J. Dingwall, *Male Infibulation* (London, 1925), 67–123; R. Osborne, 'Men without clothes', *Gender & History* 9 (1997), 514–17. Osborne writes as if the depiction of the practice in symposia is not representative of actual behaviour, as opposed to in athletic competition, where it certainly was used. He sees the depiction of the ligatured penis as a means of sexualizing the male body (which is possible whether or not it represents actual practice). I was introduced to this practice by an as yet unpublished paper by Emma Stafford, presented to the 2006 Classical Association Annual Conference, entitled 'Eight-finger dildoes and the ideal penis'; shortly thereafter I realized the connection with these lines of the *Medea*.

¹³ Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 1970.567 (*Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* 78 [1980], 33, no. 13 [A, B]; Beazley Archive, no. 9978).

'undoing' action before discharging fluid. From being odd, the metaphor becomes obvious; given that the equation of the wineskin's spout to the penis was common in Athenian society, I suspect that 'undoing the wineskin's foot' was a common Athenian euphemism for sex or urination, whether or not the individual concerned actually had his penis tied.¹⁴ Euripides, after all, was accused by his contemporaries of bringing vulgar language on to the Athenian stage,¹⁵ and this could be an example. The absence of any such comment in the scholia is unfortunate, but perhaps not a fatal argument against this notion.

A hexameter version of the oracle is quoted, in slightly different forms, by Plutarch (*Theseus* 3.5) and Apollodorus (3.15.6), and in the scholion. It is generally assumed that this predates Euripides, who is supposed to have based his trimeter version on it.¹⁶ But this cannot be proved; there is no secure attestation of this oracle predating Euripides, and if 'undoing the wineskin's foot' was Athenian slang, it is more likely that Euripides invented the oracle, and the hexameter versions were modelled upon Euripides by people who knew that the Pythia delivered her oracles in hexameter verse, and wished to create an 'original'.

II

If the oracle is Euripides' invention, does it reveal anything about Euripides' portrait of Aegeus?¹⁷ This is an area of interpretation which is, of necessity, somewhat speculative, but needs to be addressed.

Some modern critics take the view that Aegeus is a bit dim.¹⁸ This is not to say that he is unsympathetic. He is noble, honourable, and possesses moral rectitude;¹⁹ but the basically decent yet not very clever man has become something of a stock figure in more recent comedy,²⁰ and a number of modern productions have chosen to portray Aegeus in that fashion.²¹ His failure to understand what the oracle means can be taken as contributing to that view.²² This might be underlined to an Athenian

¹⁴ Without making this specific point, Most (n. 6), 21 n. 2, calls the oracle one of 'a widespread class of popular obscene *double entendres*'.

¹⁵ Ar. *Ran.* 841, 1069, 1301–3.

¹⁶ So Parke and Wormell, loc. cit. (n. 3); J. Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (Berkeley, 1978), 286.

¹⁷ On the Aegeus episode overall, see Page (n. 10), xxix–xxx; Mastronarde (n. 2), 281–3, and references; M. Davies, 'New light on the Aegeus episode in Euripides' *Medea*', *Prometheus* 31 (2005), 151–6, and references in his n. 1. Davies does not address the oracle.

¹⁸ T.V. Buttrey, 'Accident and design in Euripides' *Medea*', *AJPh* 79 (1958), 11; Most (n. 6), 21. It is possible that criticism of the portrayal of Aegeus goes back to Arist. *Poet.* 1461b19–21, who says that Euripides uses Aegeus τῶ ἀλόγῳ ('illogically'). But it is not clear what Aristotle means, or even that he refers to the *Medea*, as opposed to the lost *Aegeus* (see Buttrey, op. cit., 1; Mastronarde [n. 2], 282, who considers Aristotle's complaint to be most likely about the structure of the play).

¹⁹ P.E. Easterling, 'The infanticide in Euripides *Medea*', *YCIS* 25 (1977), 185.

²⁰ For a modern example, note British comic Harry Enfield's 'Tim Nice But Dim', whose epithet sums him up. This sort of character shares some elements with Theophrastus' *anaisthêsia* (*Characters* 14).

²¹ F. Raphael and K. McLeish, 'Between two worlds', in the programme notes for the 1991 Royal Exchange Theatre Company (Manchester) production of their translation (directed by Phyllida Lloyd), write: 'The king of Athens is presented as a gullible buffoon'. A similar portrayal was seen in the 2007 Cambridge Greek Play (directed by Annie Castledine and Clive Mingus).

²² e.g. Most (n. 6), 21 n. 2. One modern adaptation, that of Graham Ley, has *Medea* burst into laughter when Aegeus reveals the oracle (<<http://spa.ex.ac.uk/drama/staff/dramaturgy/medea.pdf>> [accessed April 2009], 26).

audience if he has, in effect, expressed ignorance of the meaning of 'pointing Percy at the porcelain' (a common British euphemism for urination). This would be an unflattering portrait of Aegeus, further coloured for the original audience by the knowledge that he did not keep his wineskin tied up until he returned to Athens, but instead fathered Theseus on Aethra, the daughter of Pittheus of Troezen (Plutarch, *Theseus* 3.5–6), rather than on his legitimate wife, as presumably he hoped.

Most has raised the possibility that implied criticism of Athens may have been a factor in the third prize Euripides received for the trilogy,²³ and Hall has suggested that the unflattering portrait of Aegeus may also have contributed.²⁴ Already in antiquity the play had a reputation of being, at the very least, unusually sympathetic to the Corinthians, given that hostilities with Corinth, though still short of a fully declared war, had been going on since 433 B.C. The scholion to line 9 states that Euripides received five talents from Corinth to change the story so that Medea killed her children, rather than the Corinthians. It may not be true that Euripides was bribed, but the story suggests that the audience had grounds for expecting Corinthian responsibility for the deaths of the children, and Medea's committing the act was Euripides' innovation.²⁵

However, it is not necessary to see Aegeus as a fool. He may only seem less intelligent in comparison with Medea, whose intelligence he concedes (677), and by whom he is deceived. It must be remembered that Medea is more intelligent than anyone else in the play; as well as Aegeus, she deceives the Chorus, Jason and Creon, even though the last is aware that he ought to know better (350).

Aegeus is, therefore, not necessarily stupid because he cannot interpret the oracle. It could be intended literally, as a warning to Aegeus not to drink (and in one version of the story, Aegeus fathered Theseus while drunk; Apollodorus, 3.15.7). If 'undoing the wineskin' is a reference to tying up the penis, then theoretically there are still two possible meanings. Does the oracle intend Aegeus to refrain from sex, or from urination? However, the latter is a bit implausible; even without a diversion to Corinth, the journey from Troezen to Athens is much too far for an older man on foot to journey without relieving himself. In any case knowledge held by the audience of subsequent events would make it clear that it was sex that was meant.

Mastronarde further raises the question of whether the original audience would think that Medea recognizes the oracle's meaning, and if so, why does she conceal that meaning from Aegeus?²⁶ Given Medea's often-highlighted intelligence, it might seem unlikely that the audience would not expect her to see the meaning (or at least one possible meaning; she is not possessed of the audience's foreknowledge of the birth of Theseus).²⁷ Presumably, in that case, she does not tell Aegeus because this further strengthens her hold over Aegeus; not only is he obliged by promises, oaths and the obligations of *xenia* to provide her sanctuary, but he has a hope of learning

²³ Most (n. 6), 21. The third *stasimon* (824–65) begins with praise for Athens, and then asks how Medea can be expected to be received there after killing her children. But the audience would know that Medea *was* received, and so the implication is that Athens' actions do not always live up to the city's ideals (Most [n. 6], 26–7; Mastronarde [n. 2], 305; Graham Kirby, in the 'Director's foreword' to the programme notes for the 2006 UCL Classical Play, sees Athens' reception of Medea as 'a rebuke to the Athenian audience and establishment').

²⁴ E. Hall, 'Introduction', in Morwood (n. 5), xv–xvi.

²⁵ Arist. *Poet.* 1453b28–9. See T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore, 1993), 369–70; Mastronarde (n. 2), 50–3.

²⁶ Mastronarde (n. 2), 54.

²⁷ Ley's adaptation (n. 22) makes her understanding explicit, and also has her explain the oracle to Aegeus.

something to his advantage with regard to the oracle.²⁸ But perhaps (and this is highly speculative) a woman (and a foreign woman at that) would not be expected to be familiar with Athenian euphemisms connected with the penis²⁹ (though this is perhaps the sort of argument that it is easier to see when reading the play at a measured pace, and possibly more than an audience seeing the play being performed would have time to consider).

III

Almost certainly, Euripides intended this couplet to raise a laugh from the audience. The modern British comic actor Rowan Atkinson, in a monologue in which he plays a schoolmaster, declares ‘*Antony and Cleopatra* is not a funny play. If Shakespeare had meant it to be funny, he would have put a joke in it’. *Medea* is not a funny play either. Nevertheless, there is an argument here that Euripides did include at least one joke. But why?

Partly, it may simply be that Euripides wants a lighter scene, to give the audience relief after the intensity of the argument between Jason and Medea in the second episode (446–626).³⁰ To this end, he is willing to slip in a crude *double entendre*.

But there may be more to it. It might be useful to examine another joke in Euripides. At *Troades* 1050, Menelaus responds to Hecuba’s request that he not allow Helen on the same ship as him with ‘Has she put on weight?’ (μείζον βρῖθος ἢ πάροιθ’ ἔχει;).³¹ Simon Goldhill discusses this in a recent radio broadcast.³² He says: ‘The thrill of misplaced laughter is one of [Euripides’] strategies for getting at his audience’. Is the crudity of the joke in *Medea* another means of unsettling the audience? The joke about the wineskin is meant to create laughter, but it would be uncomfortable laughter, given the overall tone of the play up to this point; even though Medea killing her own children was Euripides’ new twist, and so the original audience were not expecting it and would not necessarily realize how much darker the play would become, nevertheless Medea has already threatened the destruction of Creon, his daughter and Jason, in 364–409. Euripides then presents his audience with Aegeus’ act of generosity towards Medea, which becomes much more equivocal and complicated once she reveals her plan of infanticide (792–3).

R. Tordoff writes of this act:

Aegeus’ royal command [to grant sanctuary to Medea] is a problem for us, the Athenian audience. Medea is coming here and we must now receive her into our protection and our community ... the play forces us to come to terms with both the appalling violence Medea has perpetrated, but also with her suffering.³³

The crude joke of ‘unloosening the wineskin’ puts the audience in an uncomfortable relationship to the text, where they are not sure how to react, a feeling that will grow as the play develops. It is, as Goldhill states of the joke in *Troades*, a means of shaking

²⁸ Cf. Gantz (n. 25), 248.

²⁹ Cf. Gantz (n. 25), 248 n. 29: ‘perhaps she too fails to understand it’.

³⁰ P. Vellacott (tr.), *Euripides: Medea and Other Plays* (Harmondsworth, 1963), 8: ‘the figure of Aegeus provides the one flicker of relief in the otherwise uniform sombreness of the drama’.

³¹ K.H. Lee (ed.), *Euripides: Troades* (London, 1976), 244.

³² S. Goldhill, in an edition of the BBC/Open University series, *The Essay – Greek and Roman Voices*, ‘Euripides: 3’, broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on Wednesday 3 March 2008.

³³ R. Tordoff, ‘Women on the Euripidean stage’, in the programme notes for the 2006 UCL production.

up the audience, and making them think about their reactions to what they are seeing, whilst providing no easy answers. This is something which is common to all Euripidean tragedy.³⁴

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³⁴ Rutherford, in Davie (n. 2), 48.

ONCE AGAIN THE OPENING OF PLATO'S *GORGIAS*

James Doyle has performed a considerable service by calling attention to the way in which the opening of Plato's *Gorgias* prefigures 'the opposition between philosophy and its deadly rival rhetoric, and the ruthless contention by which this opposition is dramatized' throughout the dialogue.¹ The words *πολέμου καὶ μάχης*, the first words of the dialogue, anticipate the ensuing conflict between Socrates, the champion of philosophy, and Gorgias, Polus and Callicles, who bear the standard of the 'art' of rhetoric; Socrates' claim that his late arrival is to be blamed on Chaerephon, who 'forced us to dally in the agora', reminds the reader that it was Chaerephon's question put to the Delphic oracle, as reported in the *Apology*, that inspired in Socrates his lifelong dedication to dialectic, practised largely in the agora.² Inevitably, Doyle has not said the last word on the subject.

The proverb or proverbs (*τὸ λεγόμενον*, 447A3) to which the opening of the dialogue alludes relates to the differing judgements accorded to the person who arrives too late for combat and the one who arrives too late for a festival (*κατόπιν ἑορτῆς*, 447A3). Since at least the time of Edward Meredith Cope, commentators have quoted in this connection Falstaff's 'Well, to the latter end of a fray and the beginning of a feast fits a dull fighter and a keen guest'.³ Now, while a feast represents a major component of a festival (*ἑορτή*), the two are not necessarily to be identified. Still, commentators have seemingly shared Sir John's priorities and have (I think rightly) seen that what is at issue here is a concern about arriving after the food has been consumed. For the 'festival' that Socrates and Chaerephon have missed, as Callicles explains to them, was 'quite an elegant one, since Gorgias has just treated us to a fine, extended display of rhetorical skill' (*καὶ μάλα γε ἀσπείας ἑορτῆς· πολλὰ γὰρ καὶ καλὰ Γοργίας ἡμῖν ὀλίγον πρότερον ἐπεδείξατο*, 447A5–6). As Joachim Dalfen notes, it is not unusual for Plato to speak of the enjoyment of the spoken word in

¹ J. Doyle, 'On the first eight lines of Plato's *Gorgias*', *CQ* 56 (2006), 599–602, extending and amplifying an observation of Myles Burnyeat, 'First words: a valedictory lecture', *PCPhS* 43 (1997), 1–20, at 11–12. I should like to thank my colleague Kirk Sanders and *CQ*'s reader for helpful comments and suggestions.

² Doyle does not note that the three antagonists whom Socrates faces in the *Gorgias* parallel the three accusers against whom he must defend himself in the *Apology* (23E).

³ E.M. Cope (tr.), *Plato's Gorgias* (Cambridge, 1864), 1, quoting the last lines of *1 Henry IV*, act 4, scene 2.