

ARISTOPHANES' *FROGS* AND ATHENIAN LITERACY: *RAN.* 52–53, 1114

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Two passages in the *Frogs* speak of the reading and possession of books in terms that must surprise any one who has formed, on the basis of other evidence, a proper estimate of the level of literacy prevailing in Athens at the end of the fifth century. For they speak of the reading of a Euripidean tragedy aboard an Athenian warship and of the possession of a "book" by members of the audience in the theatre of Dionysus. There is little evidence elsewhere that encourages us to believe in a practice of literacy that is so refined or so widespread. Here new interpretations will be offered for the two passages that relieve us of the necessity, which has been generally felt, of taking them at face-value, as direct evidence for the level of literacy. Not that they are irrelevant to that problem, but only that they are not to be taken *au pied de la lettre*. If they are read instead in an Aristophanic spirit, what they have to say can be shown, I believe, to cohere very well with the testimony of our other evidence in this matter.

Heracles looks, with amused incredulity, at Dionysus' costume.¹ The god is wearing a lion-skin over a saffron-coloured garment and is equipped not only with a club but also with the cothurnus. In each case the combination is incongruous, for clubs and lion-skins are as rude and manly as the cothurnus and saffron clothes are elegant and feminine. "What sense does it make?" (*τίς ὁ νοῦς*;) is Heracles' bemused question. Dionysus goes on: "I served at sea under

¹ Aristoph. *Ran.* 38 ff. Cf. Stanford's and Tucker's notes on lines 46–47. Reference to the following editions of the *Frogs* is made by the name of the editor alone: F. H. M. Blaydes (Halle 1889), J. van Leeuwen (Leiden 1896), T. G. Tucker (London 1906), L. Radermacher (2nd ed., Vienna 1954), and W. B. Stanford (2nd ed., London 1963). For more bibliographical details, cf. Stanford 207–11.

Cleisthenes . . .," and claims the sinking of a dozen ships, in the face of Heracles' manifest disbelief. The comic theme of discrepancy is continued, for the sexual innuendo contrasts the effeminacy of Cleisthenes² with the rough life of a sailor in war-time.

The critical passage now follows immediately. "And indeed," Dionysus continues, "as I was reading the *Andromeda* to myself aboard ship, my heart was suddenly struck by a yearning—do you imagine how strong it was?" (καὶ δῆτ' ἐπὶ τῆς νεῶς ἀναγιγνώσκοντί μοι / τὴν Ἀνδρομέδαν πρὸς ἑμαυτὸν ἐξαίφνης πόθος / τὴν καρδίαν ἐπάταξε πῶς οἶει σφόδρα.) "How big was that?" Heracles enquires. "A small one, about Molon's size" is the answer.

The point of the joke here is elusive and uncertain, but we may imagine a reference to the yearning of Andromeda for her rescuer Perseus. If then Molon was Euripides' leading actor,³ it is possible to conceive of the passion of Andromeda being identified either with the actor who took that role or with the one who impersonated the object of her love. On this view, we might venture a parallel, for example, with a film in which Elizabeth Taylor is Cleopatra and Richard Burton, Mark Antony. A susceptible fan, who had witnessed their love-agony, might boast of a comparable passion—about Richard Burton's size!

Furthermore, it is probable on general grounds that Heracles is shown to be physically large and burly, while Dionysus is small and puny. This probability is to be confirmed, a few lines later (58 and 60), by their differing forms of address, for Dionysus says "brother" (ἄδελφος), but Heracles, "little brother" (ἀδελφίδιον). Their attitudes conform to this difference, for Heracles comes to the door expecting a Centaur and cannot restrain his laughter at what he finds instead. Dionysus, on the other hand, is anxious to establish his position and even claims to have frightened Heracles and to have sunk a flotilla of the enemy. His allusion to the size of his passion may then be under-

² Cf. the note of R. A. Neil, *The Knights* (Cambridge 1901), on line 1374 of that play. A much more extensive sexual innuendo is discovered in the passage by W. J. Verdenius in *ΚΩΜΩΙΔΙΟΤΡΑΓΗΜΑΤΑ: Studia Aristophanea viri Aristophanei W. J. W. Koster in Honorem* (Amsterdam 1967) 145 and by C. Ruck in *Arion* n.s. 2 (1975) 19, 22, 29–30, 52, note 97.

³ Dem. 19.246 and "Timichidas" in the scholion; cf. *RE* 16.1 (1933) 12 s.v. *Μόλων* (6). For other explanations of the joke, cf. the notes of Blaydes, Tucker, and Stanford on line 55.

stood along the same lines: he wishes to match Heracles in the strength of his desires and replies with the hyperbole of nonchalance, "Only a little one (as I should measure passions)—about Molon's size!"

However that may be, it is attractive to interpret this passage in terms of the same contrast that has run through the preceding lines. Read in that way, the lines depict an incongruous situation, in which Athenian sailors on active service spend their time reading books in their hammocks, as it were, and recent romantic tragedies of Euripides at that. Such a pursuit in such circumstances is then as little appropriate as the combination of a lion-skin with a saffron dress, or of a club with the cothurnus, or the picture of Cleisthenes on the bridge during a naval action. It can cause no surprise that Dionysus exhibits an interest in the theatre, but the form that his interest is here said to take can only be comic exaggeration. The interpretation offers for the first time a unified reading of the humour of the whole scene and saves us from mistaking Aristophanes' spirited fancies for statements of sober fact.

The second passage relevant to literacy is made up of some trochaics beginning at 1109. The chorus wish to give assurance to Aeschylus and Euripides that the spectators in the theatre make a fit audience for their contest in tragedy. "If you are afraid that the spectators are ignorant (*μή τις ἀμαθία προσῇ*), so as to fail to appreciate the nicer points that you make, dismiss this fear, for this is no longer the case. They have served on campaigns, and each one, book in hand, acquires the finer points. Their talents are anyway the best, and now they have been honed to a fine edge. (*ἐστρατευμένοι γάρ εἰσι, / βιβλίον τ' ἔχων ἕκαστος / μανθάνει τὰ δεξιὰ· / αἱ φύσεις τ' ἄλλως κρᾶτισται, / νῦν δὲ καὶ παρηκόνηνται.*) So have no fear: go to it, without reserve as far as the audience is concerned, for they have all acquired the necessary accomplishments (*ὥς ὄντων σοφῶν*)."

I believe that the passage is best understood, if it is taken to allude to the three elements of sophistic education, which are natural ability, intellectual instruction, and practical training. Protagoras, the first of the sophists, called them *φύσις*, *διδασκαλία*, and *ἄσκησις*,⁴ but the

⁴ Prot. fr. B3 VS. Cf. the discussion of the triad, with many examples, by P. Shorey, *Φύσις, Μελέτη, Ἐπιστήμη*, *TAPA* 40 (1909) 185–201; C. P. Gunning, *De Sophistis Graeciae praeceptoribus* (Amsterdam 1915) 92 ff.; E. Jacoby, *De Antiphontis Sophistae* *Περὶ Ομονοίας Libro* (Berlin 1908) 43–46.

second may also be called διδαχή, μάθησις, παιδευσις, τέχνη, or ἐπιστήμη⁵ and the third, μελέτη, ἐμπειρία, or φιλοπονία,⁶ to mention the chief variants. In its somewhat differing verbal forms, the triad is widely used in discussions of education from the time of the earliest sophists.

In our passage the exceptional φύσις of the spectators is mentioned explicitly, and it is said to have been whetted to a keen edge. The metaphor of whetting, usually in the verbs ἀκονάω and θήγω, is common enough, and occurs sometimes in the context of education or morale.⁷ Xenophon speaks of whetting the spirit of troops⁸ and Isocrates speaks of himself as a whetstone in his function as teacher.⁹ Earlier Pindar twice speaks of the trainer of athletes thus metaphorically, once when the notion of φύσις is in the context (θάξαις δέ κε φύντ' ἀρετῇ).¹⁰ It is appropriate to recognise the same use in the Aristophanic passage: the natural talents of the spectators have been improved by their education. The instruction that has contributed to this result is explicitly acknowledged in μανθάνει τὰ δεξιὰ. The preceding reference to campaigning must then refer to the third element. In other Greek texts, training is represented by labour or experience, and military training is called ἀσκησις or μελέτη:¹¹ and it is known today that veterans of military service regard their experience as an important qualification for employment or advancement. Aristophanes should then be taken to mean that natural talent has been improved by the harsh training of active service and by a more refined instruction in the

⁵ For διδαχή, see Democr. fr. 33 VS and Thuc. 1.121.4 and cf. Eur. *Suppl.* 911–15, Plato, *Prot.* 323c ff., *Meno* 70a, and *Rep.* 7.536d; for μάθησις, Eur. *Suppl.* 915, Plato, *Rep.* 7.535c, and Hippocr. *Lex* 4.638 Littré; for παιδευσις, Isocr. 13.14–15 and cf. 15.186 ff. and Plato, *Rep.* 7.535b; for τέχνη, *Prot.* fr. B10 VS and Plato, *Rep.* 2.374d, e; for ἐπιστήμη, Thuc. 1.121.4, Isocr. 15.187, Plato, *Phaedr.* 269d and *Rep.* 2.374d.

⁶ For μελέτη, see *Prot.* fr. B10 VS, Epich. fr. 33 VS, Crit. fr. B9 VS, Evenus fr. 9 IEG, Thuc. 1.121.4, Plato, *Phaedr.* 269d and *Rep.* 2.374d, 7.535c; for ἐπιμέλεια, Plato *Prot.* 323c ff. and *Rep.* 2.374d, e; for ἐμπειρία, Isocr. 13.14–15 and 15.186 ff.; for φιλοπονία, Plato, *Rep.* 7.535c, d and Hippocr. *Lex* 4.638 Littré.

⁷ Cf. J. Taillardat, *Les images d'Aristophane* (Paris 1965²) 466–67.

⁸ Xen. *Cyrop.* 2.1.20.

⁹ Isocr. *ap.* [Plut.] *Vit. X Orat.* 838e.

¹⁰ Pind. *Ol.* 10.20; cf. *Isth.* 6.73.

¹¹ Cf., e.g., n. 6 above for φιλοπονία and διαπονεῖν in Plato, *Laws* 7.810b, ἐπιπόνως ἀσκήσει and πόνων μελέτη in Thuc. 2.39, and military ἀσκησις in Xen. *Cyrop.* 8.1.34, Plato, *Laws* 7.809c, and Arist. *Pol.* 2.1271b5.

"finer points" of reading and that in this way they have been saved from ignorance.¹²

It is usually said that *ἐστρατευμένοι* is metaphorical and that the spectators had served their campaigns in the theatre or in the reading of books. This view is compatible with the general interpretation offered here, so that the question is not crucial. But the metaphor seems less probable than the literal sense. Certainly, no Greek parallels are offered for the former use. Furthermore, the use of the metaphor, if it were to be conceded, would seem to imply the relevance of campaigning. For why should the poet have chosen that metaphor as a description of one element of the educational triad, unless military service had already been accepted, for some purposes, as *ἄσκησις*? Finally, the Athenian prejudices of the audience seem to be more clearly reflected in the literal than in the metaphorical meaning. That the citizenry felt pride, and an increased self-confidence, in their military service in the field we may take for granted; it is less clear that they boasted of their theatrical or literary experiences.

This interpretation gives excellent sense, for it makes use of a standard formula in a familiar burlesque. Campaigning has little to do with literary judgments, for which it is here said to be a preparatory training, and the bald assertion that it has this effect is as incongruous as Dionysus' rapturous reading aboard the fleet. If the assertion also compliments the Athenians in the theatre, it does so in the comic poet's way, with the back of his hand, as it were.

It is simplest to suppose that there is the same wild exaggeration in the claim that their learning is proved by the fact that each one has his book in hand. The phrase probably means no more than that they are bookish to the extent that they have been to school and have acquired the skill of reading. Varied evidence, from Aristophanes and elsewhere, shows that a basic literacy had become common,¹³

¹² *σοφῶν* in 1118 is contrasted with *ἀμαθία* in 1109, as education with ignorance. For the contrast, cf. Neil on *Eq.* 191-93; and for the parallel contrast of *φορτικός* with *δεξιός* or *σοφός*, see *Nub.* 520-27.

¹³ Cf. E. G. Turner, *Athenian Books in Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.* (London 1952). Turner's account is attacked, but not overthrown, by E. A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Oxford 1963) 38-41, 52-56; cf. the evidence collected by F. D. Harvey, "Literacy in the Athenian Democracy," *REG* 79 (1966) 585-635. Some of the evidence for literacy follows. Five passages from Aristophanes: at *Nub.* 18-20 Strepsiades has an

and the figure of the demagogue who got no further than his letters in his musical education is familiar from the *Knights* (188–89).¹⁴ Books containing literary texts, on the other hand, must have been in much less general use, though the reading of Dionysus and Socrates' reference to the book of Anaxagoras (*Apol.* 26d) show that book-texts were available for those who wanted them and could afford them. But the accumulation of books is likely to have been restricted to intellectuals,¹⁵ and Aristophanes is able to appeal to a popular prejudice

account book (*γραμματεῖον*), can read it, and make calculations from it; Demosthenes can read at *Eq.* 118–19; Mnesilochus can write at *Thesm.* 767–84, and Bdelycleon at *Vesp.* 538; and the use of books and writing at *Av.* 974–1030. Plato (*Apol.* 26d: *ἀπείρους γραμμάτων*) implies that the jury is not illiterate and that literacy involves at least the possibility of acquaintance with books, such as those of Anaxagoras. Com. fr. adesp. 20 (1.958 Edmonds) suggests that some at least of the Athenian soldiers of Nicias' army in Sicily were literate and so capable of teaching reading and writing to their Sicilian captors; for the use of Athenian prisoners in teaching from memory the verses of Euripides, cf. *Plut. Nic.* 29. Athen. 10.453c ff. quotes a versified alphabet from the *γραμματική τραγωδία* of Callias of Athens, who, according to Athenaeus, was "a little earlier than Strattis" and may be the comic poet of the same name who won a victory at the City Dionysia in 446: K. J. Dover in *OCD*² s.v.; *FAC* 1.176–81 Edmonds. Note also the implications of the word *ἀναλφάβητος* in Nicochaes fr. 3A (1.928 Edmonds) and of Eur. fr. 382 N². The *γραμματιστής* taught reading and writing at the first stage of Athenian education, as demonstrated by Plato, *Prot.* 325d, e, *Polit.* 277e ff. and 285c, and *Laws* 7.809e ff.; cf. *Crito* 50d, *Laws* 3.689d, *Clitophon* 407c, *Xen. Pol. Lac.* 2.1 and *Isocr.* 15.267. It is relevant to observe that the *Protagoras* probably has a dramatic date a little earlier than the beginning of the Peloponnesian war and describes educational conditions that existed when Plato was himself a boy. Havelock, *Preface* 40, argues from the silence of Aristophanes at *Nub.* 961 ff. that reading and writing were not taught to boys in 423 but were reserved until adolescence. The inference is dubious, for it is possible to observe the same silence in Plato's account of musical education in the *Republic* (2.376e ff.), but no one draws such an inference there. Also, the contemporary evidence of vase-painting, as well as the literary texts (which are, to be sure, later in date), are against it: Turner, *Athenian Books* 7–9, 12–15; H. R. Immerwahr, "Book Rolls on Attic Vases," *Classical, Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies in Honor of B. L. Ullman* 1 (Rome 1964) 17–48; R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship* (Oxford 1968) 27; T. B. L. Webster, *Potter and Patron in Ancient Athens* (London 1972) 58 and 244–45. On schools at Athens, see Aristoph. *Nub.* 964–65; on Chios, *Hdt.* 6.27; at Mycalessus (where there was more than one school), *Thuc.* 7.29.5; and at Astypalaea, *Paus.* 6.96.

¹⁴ Contrast the illiteracy boasted of by Cratinus fr. 122 (1.60 Edmonds), which confirms that literacy had become a public issue.

¹⁵ In *Xen. Mem.* 4.2.1 Euthydemus has a collection of books and at 1.6.14 Socrates is made to speak of reading the books left by "the wise of old" and making excerpts from them. Euripides is derided by Aristophanes (*Ran.* 943 and 1409) as a bookish poet and he was later said (*Athen.* 1.3a) to have possessed the first library; the latter may be only an inference from the former, as is suggested by Havelock, *Preface* 55, note 14. Euclides,

in his audience by ridiculing Euripides as a bookish poet (*Ran.* 943 and 1409). He is very unlikely to have sought to flatter the members of that same audience by complimenting them on their varied reading of literary texts. The poet knows his Athenians and, if he exaggerates their literary abilities, he bases his praise on accomplishments that they believed they possessed and on values that they consciously accepted. In the Athenian comic theatre the refinement of a little book-learning may be held to combine with rugged military experience in fitting a well-endowed citizen to judge poetry, or to do anything else.¹⁶

This interpretation has the advantage of removing two difficulties that beset commentators: why does the poet speak of a *βιβλίον* without qualification, if he had in mind particular books or a kind of book, and of a single book, if he intended a reference to a varied reading in literature? The difficulties do not arise, if the poet is making an entirely general point about the refinement gained through the skill of reading. If we are so curious as to ask what the book was that the spectators are said to possess, the best guess is probably that it was the first book acquired upon learning to read. But this consideration appears to be quite irrelevant to Aristophanes' purpose, which is to assert quite generally that they have been improved by *μάθησις*,

who was archon in 403/2, is also said by the same source to have had a library, but this also may be no more than inference, from his orthographical activities. The evidence for earlier libraries is very dubious: Pfeiffer, *History* 6-8, 66-67, who indeed finds "the first large private library" to be that of Aristotle (*Strabo* 13.2.54: 608). Aristophanes' joke in fr. 490 ("He has been corrupted by a book, or by Prodicus, or by some idle talker or other") comes close to identifying a book with an intellectual. J. D. Denniston in *CQ* 21 (1927) 118 writes of fifth-century Athens: (books) "were still rare enough to be the hallmark of a type." Cf. Harvey in *REG* 79 (1966) 588 and note 4. On the book-trade in Athens and Athenian attitudes to books, cf. Turner, *Athenian Books* 16-23; J. A. Davison in *Phoenix* 16 (1962) 219-22 = *From Archilochus to Pindar* (Oxford 1968) 108-13; Harvey, 634-35. Book-shops: *Aristoph. Av.* 1288 and *Eupolis* fr. 304; cf. *Pollux* 9.47; the export of books: *Xen. Anab.* 7.5.12-14; book-sellers: *Aristomenes* fr. 9, *Theopompus* fr. 77, *Nicophon* fr. 9 Edmonds = 19 Kock. Cf. also *Com. fr. adesp.* 497 (3.500 Kock).

¹⁶ It is claimed by Thucydides' Pericles (2.40.1) that the Athenians combined culture with toughness: *φιλοσοφοῦμεν ἀνευ μαλακίας*; and Plato required of the guardians of the ideal city that they combine harmoniously spirit (*τὸ θυμοειδές*) with the love of wisdom (*τὸ φιλόσοφον*): *Rep.* 2.375a-d, 3.410b-412a. Athenian citizens were called upon to judge the dramatic contests, but there seems to have been no especial test of critical capacity: A. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens* (Oxford 1968²) 97.

without falling into the bookishness of the intellectuals. It may even be, too, that the possession of a book had become, with the increase in literacy, something of a common status-symbol in regard to education, though it is unlikely that this situation had much reality except in the comic poet's imagination. But if the possession of a book had come to have that value in society at large, apart from the comic stage, it was well not to confuse this accomplishment with the accumulation of books and the practice of a wide reading of literature. Both generality and singularity are in place: the "finer points" were of a kind produced by reading itself, not by any particular book nor by many books. The sense then is: "Everyone has his book nowadays, and reading gives him an extra polish."

Much larger claims have often been made on the strength of the phrase, as that it is evidence for the generalised habit of reading or that the spectators had in their possession texts of the play, anthologies of quotations, or even a military manual or a handbook on poetics.¹⁷ On general grounds, these inferences seem to go far beyond our other evidence for the extent of Athenian literacy at the end of the fifth century. In particular, they spoil the effect of the line by making it solemnly serious, as though the audience wished or needed to be convinced of its qualifications for the task before it. Further, the interpretation seems to require a parallel reading of the reference to campaigning, finding in it a metaphor for experience in the literary criticism of earlier comedy.¹⁸ This seems to be unnecessary. It is simpler and funnier to suppose that Aristophanes bases his com-

¹⁷ Texts of plays: U. Von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Einleitung in die griechische Tragödie* (Berlin 1907) = *Euripides Herakles 1* (Darmstadt 1959) 121-24, and A. Tuilier, *Recherches critiques sur la tradition du texte d'Euripide* (Paris 1968) 23-24, who believes that the book was the text of the *Frogs* itself. Cf. also van Leeuwen's note on 1109-18; anthology of quotations: Havelock, *Preface* 55-56. Cf. Davison in *Phoenix* 16 (1962) 156 = *From Archilochus to Pindar* 107-08; military handbook: Tucker's note on 1114; handbook on poetics: A. W. Verrall in *CR* 22 (1908) 174-75, followed by Radermacher, pp. 303-04. For summaries of opinions, cf. C. M. J. Sicking, *Aristophanes' Ranae* (Assen 1962) 162, note 2, Stanford's note on 1113-14, and Harvey in *REG* 79 (1966) 601-02.

¹⁸ Cf. the Scholiast and van Leeuwen's and Stanford's notes on 1113-14. E. Fraenkel in *Jahresber. des philol. Vereins zu Berlin* 42 (Berlin 1916) 138-39 in *Sokrates* N.F. 4 (1916) held that the spectators were veterans of the first performance of the *Frogs*, and had also read the text, but in *Beobachtungen zu Aristophanes* (Rome 1962) 179, note 1, he abandoned the view that any particular work is meant by βιβλίον in 1114.

mendation on the kind of common education and skill that all citizens probably had. The Athenian crowd must have agreed with him in setting little store by the intellectuals' new fondness for reading many books. In the same way, Dionysus' practice of reading at sea is probably meant to seem ridiculous in Athenian eyes rather than typical of their own habits. The earlier passage shows that it was possible to obtain a book containing a popular Euripidean tragedy, but both oppose rather than support the view that such books were in common use.¹⁹

On the positive side, it is implied that a minimal literacy, consisting in the ability to read and write, as taught by the *γραμματιστής*, was common, though apparently recent. The Athenian citizen knew his letters and thought himself well able to judge both the traditional poets and the new intellectual class.²⁰ Doubtless, he read little literature, but he had no reason to regard reading as a recondite skill or readers as an alien *élite* from which he found himself altogether excluded.

¹⁹ The view of Wilamowitz, who is followed by A. Tuilier note 17 above. A judicious criticism of this theory is offered by D. J. Mastronarde, *Studies in Euripides' Phoinissai* (Diss., Toronto 1974) 326–30, 334–37; cf. also Pfeiffer, *History* 29.

²⁰ His judgment was probably that of a spectator rather than that of a reader. The view that Aristophanes' parody does not imply the use of book-texts by members of the audience is argued by W. B. Sedgwick, "The Frogs and the Audience," *C & M* 9 (1948) 1–9, R. Harriott, "Aristophanes' Audience and the Plays of Euripides," *BICS* 9 (1962) 1–8, and by Turner, *Athenian Books* 22. The older view, that an acquaintance through reading must be assumed, is held by Pfeiffer, *History* 28.