

EURIPIDĒS' ATTACK ON THE ATHLETES

- Κακῶν γὰρ ἕντων μυρίων καθ' Ἑλλάδα
οὐδὲν ἀκρίον ἐστὶν ἀθλητῶν γένους·
οἱ πρῶτα μὲν ζῆν οὔτε μανθάνουσιν εὖ
οὔτ' ἂν δύναιτο· πῶς γὰρ ὅστις ἔστ' ἀνήρ
5 γνάθου τε δοῦλος θ' ἤσσημένος
κτῆσαιτ' ἂν ἔλβον εἰς ὑπερβολὴν πατρός;
οὐδ' αὖ πένεσθαι κάξυπηρετεῖν τύχαις
οἰοί τ'· ἔθῃ γὰρ οὐκ ἔθισθέντες καλὰ
σκληρῶς διαλλάσσουν εἰς τὰμήχανα.
10 λαμπροὶ δ' ἐν ἤβῃ καὶ πόλεως ἀγάλματα
φοιτῶσ'· ὅταν δὲ προσπέσῃ γῆρας πικρόν,
τρίβωνες ἐκβαλόντες οἴχονται κρόκας.

- Ἐμεμψάμην δὲ καὶ τὸν Ἑλλήνων νόμον,
οἱ τῶνδ' ἕκατι σύλλογον ποιούμενοι
15 τιμῶσ' ἀχρεῖους [ἡδονὰς] δαιτὸς <ἐπιδόντες> χάριν.
τί γὰρ παλαίσας εὖ, τί δ' ὠκύπους ἀνήρ
ἢ δίσκον ἄρας ἢ γνάθον παῖσας καλῶς
πόλε πατρώϊαι στέφανον ἤρκεσεν λαβῶν;
20 δίσκους ἔχοντες ἢ δί<χ> ἀσπίδων χερσὶ
θείνοντες ἐκβαλοῦσι πολεμίους πάτρας;
οὐδεὶς σιδήρου ταῦτα μωραίνει πέλας [στάς].
<ἄλλ> ἀνδρας <οἶμαι> χρῆ σοφούς τε κάγαθούς
φύλλοις στέφεισθαι χῶστις ἡγεῖται πόλει
25 κάλλιστα, σῶφρων καὶ δίκαιος ὢν ἀνήρ,
ὅστις τε μύθοις ἔργ' ἀπαλλάσσει κακὰ
μάχας τ' ἀφαιρῶν καὶ στάσεις· τοιαῦτα γὰρ
πόλει τε πάσῃ πᾶσί θ' Ἑλλήσιν καλὰ.

7 κάξυπηρετεῖν Galeni *Protrept.* 10 Kaibel : καὶ ζυνηρετεῖν Athē-
naei cod. A 12 ἐκβαλόντες Ath. : ἐκλείποντες et ἐκλιπόν-
τες Diog. Laërt. 1. 56 15 ἡδονὰς seclusi et ἐπιδόντες addidi
16 τι... τί δ' Ath.: τις... τίς Gal. 20 δίχ' Lobeck :
δι' Ath. Gal. 22 στάς del. Cobet 23 ἄλλ' add. Nauck
et οἶμαι add. Mekler 26 τε Musgrave : γε Ath.

TRANSLATION

There are countless evils throughout the Hellenic land, but none is worse than the race of athletes. First of all, they neither learn how to live a happy life, nor could they live it even if they would. For how a man who is slave to his jaw and subject to his belly could acquire wealth to increase his father's estate? And then again, they are not able to endure poverty nor to adapt themselves to misfortunes. For, being accustomed to ignoble habits they can hardly change them when faced with adversities. So then in the youthful prime of their life they strut about, glory and delight of the city: but when the bitter old age falls upon them, they vanish just like a worn-out cloak¹.

I also blame the custom of the Greeks, who these men's sake call an assembly and honor useless (citizens) by granting them the privilege of (free) feast. For, what succour to his native city does a man bring who has won a crown for skillful wrestling, or for swiftness of his feet, or for lifting the discus, or else for masterly hitting somebody's jaw? Will they fight the enemy with discuses in both their hands? Or maybe they will drive away the enemy soldiers from the native land without using any shields, just by smiting them with their fist! No man indulges in such follies when facing the enemy's steel.

I think we should crown with leaves men wise and good; and whoever guides the city in the best way, a man moderate and just; and whoever by good word can avert evil deeds, preventing fights and civil strife. For such things are a blessing for the entire city and for all Greeks.

(1) After quoting these twenty-eight lines, Athenaeus states (413 F), „Euripides took over these ideas from an elegy of Xenophanes of Colophon, who said. . .“. Then Atheneus quotes Xenophanes' classical attack on the Olympic winners, B 2.1—22 Diels-Kranz. I think Athenaeus is right in believing that Euripides here was inspired by Xenophanes. But this does not tell the whole story.

Euripides' elaborate attack on the athletes falls easily into two parts: lines 1—12 against lines 13—28. In part one (1—12), the reason for rejecting the athletic training is an *individual* one. Such training does not teach a citizen to live a *happy* life (εὖ ζῆν, 3). For it does not teach him „the right habits“ (ἔθνη καλὰ, 8). An athlete is unable to increase his father's patrimony (as he is expected to do: Plato, *Republic* 330 b 1), for he is constantly subject to athletic training and special diet (e. g., for the heavy body build of a wrestler, boxer, or pankratiast). The overspecialized athletic training does not enable him to endure poverty, hardship, misfortune, old age, or to adapt himself to them.

¹Cf. Isaiah 50.9; Psalm 101 ((102). 27, and Jean Dumortier, *REG* 80 (1967) 148—51.

In part two (lines 13—28), however, the reason for rejecting the athletic training is a *social* one. The athletes are *useless* citizens (ἀχρητοί, 15), no matter how successful at Panhellenic athletic games they may be (lines 16—18). They are useless in times of war, for the simple reason that the athletic training does not make a skillful soldier.

Now, neither of these two arguments comes from Xenophanes' elegy. Euripides' ideological imitation of Xenophanes is limited to the preference given to ἄνδρες σοφοί (line 23) over the Olympic athletic winners, that is all. Xenophanes' enlightening message in B 2 is clear enough. No παιδοτρίβης and no γυμνασίαρχος can teach a citizen „the wholesome art or wisdom“ (ἡ ἀγαθὴ σοφίη, B 2.14) of how to govern well his city (εὐνομίη, 19): only such a wise man as Xenophanes can (ἡμετέρη σοφίη, 12). And without a good government there can be no prosperity for the city (εὐδαιμονίη, implied in the phrase, „what fattens the chambers of the city,“ *πιαίνει... μυχὸς πόλεως*, line 22)².

Xenophanes' „good government“ coming from „wise men“ seems to be present in Euripides' phrase, ὅστις ἠγεῖται πόλει/κάλλιστα (line 24 f.). In addition, Xenophanes' diction can be detected in Euripides: compare Xenophanes 13, ἀλλ' εἰκῆι μάλα τοῦτο νομίζεται („this is an utterly gratuitous custom among the Greeks“), with Euripides 13, ἐμεμψάμην δὲ καὶ τὸν Ἑλλήνων νόμον. Finally, both Xenophanes and Euripides produce a list of athletic events (five of them in Xenophanes, 1—5, against four in Euripides, 16—17: wrestling, foot-racing, throwing the discus, and boxing). In conclusion, Xenophanes' influence upon Euripides' ideas seems to be rather limited: it comes down to the preference given to an ἄνηρ σοφός (a wise educator or leader of the citizens) over a good athlete. Later on, the same preference will be expressed by Socrates in Plato's *Apology* 36 d 5; by Isocrates (*Paneg.* 4. 1—2), Diodorus of Sicily (9.2.5), and others.

(2) Xenophanes is of no avail for Euripides' thesis expressed in lines 16—22: a good soldier is above a good athlete; military training is above the athletic training. Most probably, Euripides is here being inspired by similar ideas expressed by Tyrtaeus Fr. 12 West and by Solon (ap. Diog. Laërt. 1.55; Plutarch *Solon* 23.3). Tyrtaeus is radical enough: „No public memory, and no esteem whatsoever for the best athlete unless he is a good soldier too, unless he shows fierce courage on battlefield“:

- 1 Οὐτ' ἄν μνησαίμην οὐτ' ἐν λόγῳ ἄνδρα τιθείην
οὔτε ποδῶν ἀρετῆς οὔτε παλαιμοσύνης...
9 οὐδ' εἰ πᾶσαν ἔχοι δόξαν πλήν θούριδος ἀλκῆς.

And Solon is reported to have introduced a measure curtailing excessive rewards for victorious athletes in favor of those for the fallen on

² Cf. M. Marcovich, „Xenophanes On Drinking-Parties and Olympic Games“, *Illinois Classical Studies* [U. of Illinois Press] 3 (1978) 1 ff.

battlefield (ἀλλὰ μόνων ἐκείνων τῶν ἐν πολέμοις τελευτησάντων, DL 1. 55). Tyrtaeus (cf. *Laws* 629 ab; 660 e — 661 a) and Euripides open the way to Plato, who dismisses athletic training competitions as inappropriate to the physical education of the future soldiers: *Laws* 832 e 1; 795 e 7; *Republic* 404 a 5; 410 b 5.

(3) As for Euripides' lines 4—9, I know of no likely source. However, traces of the fifth-century Hippocratic reaction to the shortcomings of athletic training (with its overspecialization and exaggerations in dietetics) seem to be visible. Compare, e. g., Hippocrates *De alimento* 34, διάθεσις ἀθλητικῆ οὐ φύσει· ἕξις ὑγιεινῆ κρέσσων ἐν πᾶσι, „The physical condition of the athletes is not natural: a healthy state of body is superior in every respect“, „where this „in every respect“ may hint at endurance in hardships of war, adversities, old age. Anyway, the statement that an athlete is slave to his jaw and subject to his belly (line 5) alludes clearly to the reaction to athletic dietetic handbooks³.

(4) The suggested interpretation of Euripides' diatribe against the athletes depends in part on the proposed text in lines 14—15. I feel that the text as transmitted does not make sense. C. B. Gulick (The Loeb Athenaeus, IV, 1930, p. 373) translates, „and pay them the honour useless pleasures to grace a feast“. The word ἡδονὰς seems to be out of place here: probably it is a makeshift introduced into the text after ἐπιδόντες had been mistakenly dropped. Another makeshift is to be found in line 22: στὰς.

Scholars seems to take σύλλογος to refer to „athletic festivals“ (so *TGL*, s. v.; Wilhelm Nestle has „Turnvereine“⁴, and Victor Steffen writes recently, „The Greek custom of organizing festivities to celebrate absolutely useless whims of the sportsmen is also to be condemned“⁵). I think σύλλογος stands for ἐκκλησία, and δαιτὸς χάριν refers to the privilege of σίτησις for the athletic winners.

Compare again Xenophanes B 2.8 f., καὶ κεν σίτ' εἶη δημοσίων κτεάνων/ἐκ πόλεως. Plato *Apology* 36, d 6, πρέπει... τὸν τοιοῦτον ἄνδρα [scil. as Socrates the educator] ἐν πρωταγείῳ σιτεῖσθαι, πολὺ γε μᾶλλον ἢ εἴ τις ὑμῶν ἵππῳ ἢ συνωρίδι ἢ ζεύγει νενίκηκεν Ὀλυμπίασιν. Plutarch *Aristides* 27.2 καὶ ταύτη [sc. to Polycrite] σίτησιν ὄσσην καὶ τοῖς Ὀλυμπιονίκαις ὁ δῆμος ἐψηφίσατο. What Euripides seems to say in lines 14—15 is, „the Greeks call an assembly of people for the athletes' sake and pay the honor to these useless citizens after granting them the favor of free food“.

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³ Cf. Plato *Republic* 404 a 5; Xenophon *Sympos.* 2. 17; Plutarch *Philopoem.* 3. 2—4; Galen *Protrept.* 10—11, and Julius Jüthner, *Philostratos über Gymnastik* (Leipzig, 1909; reprint 1969) 30—43 and 51—59.

⁴ W. Nestle, *Euripides, der Dichter der griechischen Aufklärung* (Stuttgart, 1901) 492.

⁵ V. Steffen, „The Satyr-Dramas of Euripides,“ *Eos* 59 (1971) 214.