EURIPIDES' ATTACK ON THE ATHLETES

Κακῶν γὰρ ἐντὸν μυρίων καθ᾽ Ἑλλάδα
οὐδὲν κακόν ἐστὶν ἀθλητῶν γένους:
οἴ τρώτα μὲν ζήν οὐτε μανθάνουσιν εὖ
οὔτ’ ἢν δύναντο πῶς γὰρ ὅστις ἔστ’ ἀνήρ
5 γνάθου τε δούλος ἦ’ ἡσσημένος
κτῆσαι’ ἢν ἡλβον εἰς ύπερβολὴν πατρός;
οὔδ’ αὐτοῦ πένεσθαι κάξυπηρετεῖν τύχας
οἰοί τε ἥθη γὰρ οὐχ ἐθισθέντες καλά
σκληρῶς διαλλάσσουσιν εἰς τάμίχανα.
10 λαμπροὶ δ’ ἐν ἡμὶ καὶ πόλεως ἀγάλματα
φοιτῶσ’ ὡστεν θόρακα πικρόν,
τρίβωνες ἐκβάλοντες οἴχονται κρόκας.

Ἐμεμψάμην δὲ καὶ τὸν Ἑλλήνων νόμον,
οἵ τῶν οὗτοι ἔκατον ποιοῦμενοι
15 τιμάθατος [ἡδονάς] διατός ἐπιδόντες χάριν.
τὶ γὰρ παλαιότερον εὖ, τί δ’ ὡκύπωσιν ἄνηρ
ἡ δίσκων ἁρας ἢ γνάθων παίσας καλῶς
πόλει πατρῶι στέφασαν ἥρκεσεν λαβῶν;
πότερα μαχοῦτοι πολεμοῦσιν ἐν χεροῖν
20 δίσκων ἔχοντες ἢ δίκυρ’ ἀσπίδων χερὶ
θείνοντες ἐκβαλοῦσι πολεμοῦσιν πάτρας;
σοῦδεις σιδήρου ταῦτα μωραίνει πέλας [στάς].
<ἀλλ’> ἄνδρας οἵμαι χρή σοφοῖς κάγαθοι
φύλλοις στέφεσθαι ἐκβαλοῦσι κακά
25 κάλλιστα, σώφρων καὶ δίκαιος ὃν ἄνηρ,
ὁστὶς τε μύθοις ἐκβαλοῦσι κακὰ
mάχας τ’ ἀφαιρῶν καὶ στάσεις: τοιαῦτα γὰρ
πόλει τε πάσηι πάσι θ’ Ἑλληνισιν καλά.

7 κάξυπηρετεῖν Galeni Protrept. 10 Kaibel : καὶ ξυνηρετεῖν Athenei cod. A
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 cloak. 

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.

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(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 Athenaeus 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 (εὐ ζῆν, 3). For it does not teach him „the right habits“ (ἔθη χαλά, 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.

In part two (lines 13—28), however, the reason for rejecting the athletic training is a social one. The athletes are useless citizens (ἄχρεοι, 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 ἂνδρες 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 (ἐνομοῖς, 19): only such a wise man as Xenophanes can (ἡμετέρῃ σοφίῃ, 12). And without a good government there can be no prosperity for the city (ἐυδαιμονίη, implied in the phrase, „what fattens the chambers of the city,“ πιαίνεται . . . μυχοῦς πόλεως, line 22).

Xenophanes’ „good government“ coming from „wise men“ seems to be present in Euripides’ phrase, ὅστις ἡγεῖται πόλει/κάλλιστα (line 24 f.). In addition, Xenophanes’ diction can be detected in Euripides: compare Xenophanes 13, ἄλλα 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 ἂνήρ 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 Οὔτ’ ἄν μνησάιμην οὔτ’ ἐν λόγῳ ἄνδρα τιθεῖν
οὔτε ποδόν ἄρετής οὔτε παλαιμοσύνης . . .
9 οὔτ’ εἰ πᾶσαν ἔχοι δόξαν πλήν θούριδος ἀλκής.

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

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 αθλητική οὗ φύσει έξις υγιεινή 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 handbooks.3

(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 ήδονάς seems to be out of place here: probably it is a makeshift introduced into the text after έπιδόντες had been mistakenly dropped. Another makeshift is to be found in line 22: στάς.

Scholars seems to take σύλλογος to refer to „athletic festivals“ (so TGL, s. v.; Wilhelm Nestle has „Turnvereine“, and Victor Steffen writes recently, „The Greek custom of organizing festivities to celebrate absolutely useless whims of the sportsmen is also to be condemned“). I think σύλλογος stands for ἔκκλησια, and δαιτός χάριν refers to the privilege of σίτησις for the athletic winners. Compare again Xenophanes B 2.8 f., καὶ κεν σίτι έις δημοσίων κτεάνων/έκ πόλεως. Plato Apology 36, d 6, πρέπει... toν τοιοῦτον ἄνδρα [scil. as Socrates the educator] ἐν πρυτανείω συμβάει, πολύ γε μάλλον ἐφ’ ἐκ της ὑμῶν ἑπταοκτομήν έπισκέψατο άνδρα Ἐλληνον ἕν ὅ πρέπει... Plutarch Aristides 27.2 καὶ ταύτη [sc. to Polycrite] σίτησιν ὅσην καὶ τοῖς Ἀθηναῖοι δήμος... έκπεκάσατο. 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 Jütherner, 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.