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Aristophanes in Philoponus: Did he Get the Joke?

The sixth-century Alexandrian Miaphysite polymath and exegete John Philoponus frequently illustrated his works, especially the philosophical commentaries, with references to classical culture.¹ This was a common practice at the time, as one might expect. It kept the audience for so serious a work as a commentary on Aristotelian philosophical texts reassured that they were persons of *paideia*, who understood those references as a matter of course.² On the other hand, our picture of Christian Alexandria in the reign of Justinian³ does not usually include study of so free-spoken a classical author as the comedian Aristophanes. And yet nearly fifty years ago Ursula Treu showed that even a figure thought of as dour and severe, the fifth-century Upper Egyptian abbot Shenoute, quoted Aristophanes in his writings.⁴ We do know that the Athenian writer was read in Byzantine Egypt.⁵ And as it happens, Philoponus quotes Aristophanes twice: once in his commentary on the *Gen.Corr.* (CAG 14:22.7–9), and once in that on the *Physics* (CAG 16:263.8). They are apposite quotations. Was he just using an anthology for decoration, or did he – and his audience – see the humor?

First, in the commentary on *Gen.Corr.*, composed, it seems, under Anastasius (before 517).⁶ The context is a discussion of change

¹ For a recent and unusual look at him and his work see E. W. WATTS, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*. Berkeley 2006, 237–255.

² Cf. WATTS, *City and School*, 2–21, 224–227, 229–231, 235–236.

³ C. WILDBERG, *Philosophy in the Age of Justinian*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, ed. M. MAAS. Cambridge 2005, 316–340.

⁴ U. TREU, *Aristophanes bei Shenute*. *Philologus* 101 (1957) 325–328.

⁵ P. MERTENS, *Les papyrus d'Aristophane*, in: *Odoi dizesios: studi F. Adorno*, ed. M. FUNGHI. Florence 1996, 335–343, esp. 337–339.

⁶ For dating of Philoponus' works see, e.g., C. SCHOLTEN, *Antike Naturphilosophie und christliche Kosmologie in der Schrift "De opificio mundi" des Johannes Phi-*

(μεταβολή) and movement (κίνησις), and in the explanation being given, γένεσις is a change but not a movement.⁷ Philoponus the philologist adduces the archaic and poetic use of an accusative instead of a genitive, both in Homer and in what he (mis)calls the *Ecclesiazusae* but is actually *Lysistrata* 408–410.⁸ In the context of the ancient play, the magistrate is complaining that ‘we men’ actually encourage tradesmen to take sexual advantage of our wives during our absence: in a recent translation,⁹ “Goldsmith, about that choker you made me: my wife was having a ball the other night, and now the prong’s slipped out of the hole.” (Continuing: “so if you’ve got time, by all means visit her in the evening and fit a prong in her hole.”) Then *Lysistrata* comes out and, rallying the women to fight back, puts forward her famous plan to end war by means of a sex strike. Could this quote by Philoponus be a jab at (a) Anastasius’ Persian war policy¹⁰ and (b) the supposedly domineering role of the empress Ariadne, by virtue of being married to whom Anastasius held the throne in the first place?¹¹ This coy passage from classical literature is not the first bit that might spring to an academic’s mind by way of trying to explain (grammatical) change. Yet the audience, probably mixed pagan and Christian, would have recognized the context and found occasion for laugh-

loponos (*Patrist. Texte u. Stud.* 45). Berlin 1996, 120–121.

⁷ Philoponus On Aristotle’s On Coming-to-Be and Perishing 1.1–5, trans. C.J.F. WILLIAMS. Ithaca 1999, 41–42.

⁸ For Aristophanes in Byzantium see also A.C. HERO, Aristophanes, in *ODB*. New York 1991, 1:170–171.

⁹ Trans. J. HENDERSON (Loeb Classical Library). Cambridge, MA 2000, 323.

¹⁰ For Anastasius’ need for support from the eastern provinces for his Persian war see most recently G. GREATREX, Byzantium and the East in the Sixth Century, in: *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, ed. M. MAAS. Cambridge 2005, 477–509, here 480–481; and J.-E. STEPPA, John Rufus and the World Vision of Anti-Chalcedonian Culture, 2nd rev.ed., Piscataway, NJ 2005, 53–55. Amida was lost to the Persians in 502 and recovered in 504. Cf. now A. LOUTH, *The Eastern Empire in the Sixth Century*, in: *The New Cambridge Medieval History 1: c.500–c.700*, ed. P. FOURACRE, Cambridge 2005, 93–117, here 96–97.

¹¹ W. HAHN, Die Münzprägung für Aelia Ariadne, in: *Byzantios. Festschrift für Herbert Hunger*. Vienna 1984, 101–106 with plate. Notable is the hybrid issue with a standing Victoria with cross-staff, derived from a type originally introduced by Theodosius II as propaganda for his Persian war (103). Ariadne is herself depicted on coins, which will not happen for another Byzantine empress until Sophia, wife of Justin II (106 n. 18).

ter in suddenly seeing a snippet of classical literature made relevant to their own world.¹²

Second, the *In Phys.*, which does explicitly mention the absolute date of Pachon 10, Diocletian year 233,¹³ = 5 May A.D. 517. Here the context (discussing *Phys.* 195b33) is the question of whether τύχη is a cause (αἴτιον); the wider context is asking whether τύχη is real, and if so, what it is.¹⁴ To illustrate a notion of spontaneity, Philoponus quotes a line from the *Knights* (l. 1374), a play that makes fun of demagogues and deceiving politicians who inflate military ‘victories’ at the people’s expense. When “Demos” has proclaimed that no beardless man is to ἀγοράζειν from now on, the “Sausage Seller” – rogue turned ‘nice guy’ – asks “So where are Cleisthenes and Strato [presumably beardless] going to do their ἀγοράζειν-ing?”¹⁵ This was of course familiar language to the audience: Alexandria certainly had an agora.¹⁶ But there was an even stronger echo in Byzantine times: already in the fourth century Athanasius had contemptuously referred to the pagan and Arian louts who had nothing better to do than hang out on corners and attack churches as *agoraioi*.¹⁷ So Philoponus’ hearers would have immediately intuited the subtext question “Where are heretical types [Chalcedonian monks, perhaps?] going to hang out?”¹⁸ (With the implied answer; “Not in *our* agora!”)

In addition, for this whole portion of the *In Phys.*, we must remember how strong the concept of Tyche, especially Alexandria’s civic Tyche, continued to be.¹⁹ Oaths by the emperor’s *tyche* were sworn in

¹² On the general unpopularity of Anastasius’ policies particularly among the governing classes cf. A. LANIADO, *Recherches sur les notables municipaux dans l’empire protobyzantin*. Paris 2002, 40–46.

¹³ R.S. BAGNALL – K.A. Worp, *Chronological Systems of Byzantine Egypt*, 2nd ed., Leiden 2004, 148, 163. It is noteworthy that Philoponus employs the Diocletian year.

¹⁴ Philoponus *On Aristotle Physics 2*, trans. A.R. LACEY. London 1993, 73.

¹⁵ Lacey translates “marketeer”; HENDERSON (Loeb Classical Library), Cambridge, MA, 1998, 401, translates “rendezvousing”.

¹⁶ C. HAAS, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity*. Baltimore 1997, 31.

¹⁷ HAAS, *Alexandria*, 275–276, 283.

¹⁸ In the fifth century B.C. Cleisthenes and Strato would of course have recalled the Athenian democrat and possibly a judge. In the early sixth century A.D. it is hard to reconstruct what contemporary figures might have been perceived under these cover names (if such they were taken to be).

¹⁹ Briefly, G. PODSKALSKY, Tyche, in *ODB*, 3:2131; see now L. JAMES, Good Luck and Good Fortune to the Queen of Cities: Empresses and Tyches in Byzantium, in:

Anastasius' reign,²⁰ and indeed continued to be so until the end of Byzantine rule. I think a case can be made that Philoponus' elite-class students, who both learned about philosophy – a philosophy relevant to burning questions of their day²¹ – and functioned as witnesses to family land transactions, would have laughed at such a reference to agora louts in the middle of a lesson on causation and *tyche*.

In short, amidst the list of classical poets and playwrights Philoponus quotes in his philosophical commentaries – Euripides and Sophocles, Apollonius Rhodius, Aratus, Bion and Moschus, Hesiod, Menander, and even Pindar in the *De Opificio Mundi* – Aristophanes seems to have been a lively figure in his mind and in the minds of his sixth-century Alexandrian audience.²²

Personification in the Greek World, ed. E. STAFFORD and J. HERRIN. Aldershot 2005, 293–307.

²⁰ K.A. WÖRZ, Byzantine Imperial Titulature in the Greek Papyri: The Oath Formulas. *ZPE* 45 (1982) 199–223, here 209, 218–219, 223; BAGNALL and idem, *Chronological Systems*, 2nd ed., 282. The emperor's *tyche* that is sworn by is always described in oath clauses, in time-honored classical/Christianized fashion, as *θείαν καὶ οὐράνιον τύχην*.

²¹ L.S.B. MACCOULL, A New Look at the Career of John Philoponus. *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995) 47–60.

²² Thanks to the Interlibrary Loan Service of Arizona State University Library for access to sources. – In loving memory, as always, of Mirrit Boutros Ghali (Luke 7:47).