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THE ARISTOPHANIC SLAPSTICK (*NUB.* 537-44)*

Revising *Clouds* for publication some five years after its third-place showing in the City Dionysia of 423 B.C., Aristophanes retooled the first parabasis (lines 510–626) to praise the play's propriety, omitting as it did distasteful matter and gratuitous buffoonery, which—along with the judges' crassness—accounted, he says, for its failure. He writes (537–44):

> ὡς δὲ σώφρων ἐστὶ φύσει σκέψασθ', ἥτις πρῶτα μὲν
> οὐδὲν ἦλθε ῥαψαμένη σκύτινον (σκύτιον, Dobree) καθειμένον
> ἐρυθρὸν ἐξ ἄκρου, παχύ, τοῖς παιδίοις ἵν' ᾖ γέλως.
> οὐδ' ἔσκωψεν τοὺς φαλακρούς, οὐδὲ κόρδαχ' εἵλκυσεν. 540
> οὐδὲ πρεσβύτης ὁ λέγων τἄπη τῇ βακτηρίᾳ
> τύπτει τὸν παρόντ', ἀφανίζων πονηρὰ σκώμματα.
> οὐδ' εἰσῆξε δᾷδας ἔχουσ' οὐδ' 'ἰοὺ ἰού' βοᾷ.
> ἀλλ' αὐτῇ καὶ τοῖς ἔπεσιν πιστεύουσ' ἐλήλυθεν.
>
> Consider how temperate [my comedy] is by nature, who firstly has not come
> having stitched to herself a hanging leather phallus
> red at the tip, thick, so as to be a laugh for little boys;
> nor has she mocked bald heads, nor dragged in a can-can;
> nor was there an old man who, as he spoke his lines, beat
> his neighbour with his stick to hide feeble jokes;
> nor did she rush in holding torches, or shout, 'ow! ow!';
> but has come trusting in herself and her dialogue.

The word σκύτι[ν]ον makes clear that, like its cousin, the dildo (*Lys.* 108-10, Herod. 6.72), the theatrical phallus was made of leather (σκῦτος), and so hails from the cobbler, who, moreover, made it just for the comic stage; phalli used in Dionysiac processions, often enormous, were likely of stiffer stuff (Hdt. 2.48-9; Ar. *Ach*. 243).[1] The present note argues that the stick (βακτηρία), also mentioned here, has the same provenance.

Martin Revermann has shown that the few stage directions (παρεπιγραφαί) in Aristophanes' MSS are likely from a hand later than his own.[2] While he embedded some *mise en scène* into his dialogue, we should recall Eduard Fraenkel's dictum, taken as a rule of thumb by Oliver Taplin, that 'it is never allowable to invent stage directions which are not related to some definite utterance in the dialogue'.[3] Aristophanes affords few such hints.[4]

* This note owes much to an anonymous reader for *CQ*.

[1] A.B. Lloyd, *Herodotus: Book II* (Leiden, 1976), 2.220-1, on 2.48.

[2] M. Revermann, *Comic Business: Theatricality, Dramatic Technique, and Performance Contexts in Aristophanic Comedy* (Oxford, 2006), 325.

[3] E. Fraenkel, *Aeschylus Agamemnon* (Oxford, 1950), 3.641, on 1371; O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford, 1977), 28.

[4] K.J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Oxford, 1972), 10.

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Even so, he often shows one character (usually a master) threatening to beat another (his slave). The eponymous chorus of *Acharnians* call their sticks their only bulwark against abuse (682). In *Clouds* Strepsiades threatens a slave for putting too thick a wick into his lamp (58–9). Later his son, Pheidippides, gives a reasoned defence of a child's right to strike his parents (1399–451). Twice in *Birds* Peisetaerus uses threatened blows to drive from his colony, Nephelococcygia, interlopers who would profit from the new venture (1029, 1327). At *Wealth* 21-3 Chremylus threatens to pull off his slave Carion's crown to beat him with impunity. Finally, the leader of the chorus of Chremylus' old friends asks Carion how he dare lie to him, given that he has a stick (272).[5]

Moreover, some characters actually beat others offstage with a stick (βακτηρία, vel sim.). In *Wasps* 1292–325 Xanthias describes how the old man, Philocleon, drunk at a party, 'tattooed' him with his stick (yet when the fellow finally comes on stage, he wields a torch instead, 1326). More difficult is *Peace* 741–7, where, in a parabasis much like that in *Clouds*, the chorus say that Aristophanes has purged comedy of such unseemly things as a crying slave brought in so his fellow serf can mock his wounds and ask: ὦ κακόδαιμον, τί τὸ δέρμ' ἔπαθες; μῶν ὑστριχὶς εἰσέβαλέν σοι | εἰς τὰς πλευρὰς πολλῇ στρατιᾷ κἀδενδροτόμησε τὸ νῶτον; ('O wretch, what's up with your skin? Has the cat-o'-nine-tails assaulted your | ribs with a great army, and deforested your back?', 746–7). Given the echo in *Clouds*, the weapon intended may be a stick, with the whip (ὑστριχίς), no more literally than the 'deforestation', a rhetorical part of the mockery. Just once is a beating explicitly administered onstage with a piece of wood (ξύλον)—apparently a walking-stick, viz. *Peace* 1119–21, where the farmer, Trygaeus, orders a slave to beat the oracle-monger, Hierocles.[6]

Certain pots, called Phlyax vases (for historical reasons, though they have nothing to do with Rhinthon of Tarentum's ἱλαροτραγῳδία or φλύαξ, but often illustrate Attic Middle Comedy), arm a quarter of the males they portray with sticks.[7] Likewise, Aristophanes mentions βακτηρίαι in connection with three specific character-types, who carry them as part of their costume:[8] old men like the πρεσβύτης mentioned in our *Clouds*-passage (frr. 141, 142 Kassel–Austin from *Γηρᾶς*), men attending the assembly (*Vesp.* 33, *Eccl.* 74, etc.) and beggars (*Ach.* 448), for whom they serve variously as aids to locomotion, symbols of authority and potential weapons.

[5] At *Lys.* 357 the semi-chorus of old men threaten to beat the women, though their weapons are olive-logs (ξύλον) they have brought to smoke them out of the acropolis (*pace* LSJ s.v. ξύλον II.2, who translate the word in this context as 'cudgel, club'). Philocleon threatens to whip Bdelycleon (ἦ μὴν ἐγώ σε τήμερον σκύτη βλέπειν ποήσω, *Vesp.* 643).

[6] S.D. Olson, *Aristophanes* Peace (Oxford, 1998), 282, on 1119–21 does not speculate on the nature of the ξύλον. In *Frogs* 605–73 Xanthias, disguised as Heracles, fights Aeacus (cf. μάχει; 607—no weapon mentioned), and Aeacus whips (cf. μαστιγωτέος, 633) Dionysus and Xanthias to see who feels pain, and so is mortal. Heracles' club (47, 495), which might have been the perfect instrument of torture, seems to have been set aside at 627.

[7] M. Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater* (Princeton, 1961), 140–1 with figs. 512 and 513; O. Taplin, *Comic Angels* (Oxford, 1993), 48–53; and E. Csapo, 'A note on the Würzburg Bell-Crater H5697 ("Telephus travestitus")', *Phoenix* 40 (1986), 379–92. The ¼ statistic is from A. Hughes, 'The costumes of Old and Middle Comedy', *BICS* 49 (2006), 39–68, at 46, and *Performing Greek Comedy* (Cambridge, 2012), 183. (Hughes, 'Comedy in Paestan vase painting,' *OJA* 22 [2003], 281–301 does not consider the βακτηρία.)

[8] These may be identical to the walking sticks of some old characters in tragedy, described as βάκτρα or σκῆπτρα and sometimes raised in anger (Aesch. *Ag.* 74–5; Soph. *OT* 456, a prophecy; Eur. *Andr.* 588, *HF* 108–9, *Ion* 743 and *IA* 311). For their role in comic costume, see L.M. Stone, *Costume in Aristophanic Comedy* (Salem, NH, 1977), 246–7.

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With an eye to the last-named function, the sticks may have been specially fashioned to add sound as well as a visual aspect to the action.[9] Clearly Aristophanes considered this side of stage-business, as when Peisetaerus encourages Euelpides to kick the Hoopoe's rock with his foot, and his companion suggests he hit it with his head instead, 'so the noise will be twice as loud' (*Av.* 54–5).[10] Greeks lavished much care on the acoustics of their theatres;[11] sound effects often had a place in doorway-scenes, for it was an Old Comic convention that knocking, however timid, was always too loud (*Nub.* 136; *Ran.* 39; *Plut.* 1097–102);[12] and machinists and makers of stage properties (μηχανοποιοί, σκηνοποιοί) embraced artificial sound effects like the 'thunder machine' (Poll. 4.130 s.v. βροντεῖον), used—unless the scholia merely infer from later theatrical practice—at *Clouds* 290 (schol. Thomas-Triclinius 292d) and *Birds* 1729.[13]

Indeed, such an 'acoustically enhanced' stick is well known from later theatrical history. The *commedia dell'arte* outfitted Harlequin (who with poetic justice is no master, but rather a servant or *zanni*) with the *batocio* or 'slapstick',[14] consisting of two roughly metre-long laths fastened together at one end over a shim that forced them to flare slightly at the other, which he often used in slapstick-scenes such as Aristophanes ostensibly rejects.[15] Blows dealt by this device cause less pain than noise, like the breakaway sugar glass and balsa-wood furniture used for fight-scenes in modern movies and television. It is child's play to make such a thing, once one has thought of it. But whence could the idea have come?

The branch of the Museum of Greek Folk Art called 'Man and Tools' (22 Panos Street, Athens), which collects tools from all over Greece predominantly from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, displays an object (Catalogue #16839) best described as two roughly metre-long laths fastened together at one end over a shim that forces them to flare slightly at the other. It came from a cobbler's shop, where it served as a pair of giant tweezers or hand-held vice to secure leather, and so protect one's fingers, while cutting it. It is called a τσάκα. The morpheme /ts/ did not commend itself to Ancient Greek, with the possible exception of Cretan,[16] and occurs in the modern tongue mainly in Turkish loan words. Turkish *Hak* is an onomatopoeic representation of clashing metals; *Hakildak* is 'clapper' or 'rattle.'[17] In other words, the τσάκα

[9] Of course, whips (*Vesp*. 643, *Pax* 741–7, *Ran.* 633, cited above) require no additional sound effects.

[10] We may doubt that Euelpides followed his suggestion; N. Dunbar, *Aristophanes* Birds (Oxford, 1995), 153, on 54 has no comment.

[11] Bieber (n. 7), 82, and often. Archaeological evidence for the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens of the Classical period has been irreparably obscured by the Lycurgan reconstruction *c*. 329 B.C. (see H.R. Goette, 'Archaeological appendix', to E. Csapo, 'The men who built the theatres: *theatropolai, theatronai* and *arkhitektones*', in P. Wilson [ed.], *The Greek Theatre and Festivals: Documentary Studies* [Oxford, 2007], 116–21), so one cannot confidently read back the acoustic excellence of—say—the theatre at Epidaurus to that at Athens in the Classical period.

[12] P. Brown, 'Scenes at the door in Aristophanic comedy', in M. Revermann and P. Wilson (edd.), *Performance, Iconography, Reception. Studies in Honour of Oliver Taplin* (Oxford, 2008), 349–73.

[13] Dunbar (n. 10), 751, on 1720–65.

[14] *batocio* < Lt. *battuere* + *bacculum* (= βακτήριον, dim. of βακτηρία). P. Hartnoll, *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (Oxford, 1983[4]), 772.

[15] K.J. Dover, *Aristophanes Clouds* (Oxford, 1968), 169, on ἀφανίζων (*Nub.* 541), writes: '"concealing" by noisy slapstick the poor quality of the verbal humour'.

[16] W.S. Allen, *Vox Graeca: The Pronunciation of Classical Greek* (Cambridge, 1968), 55.

[17] F. Íz, H.C. Hony and A.D. Alderson, *The Oxford Turkish Dictionary* (Oxford and New York, 1992), 100.

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most likely gets its name via Turkish from the noise it makes, rather than from its form or function. This in turn suggests that the noise is distinctive.[18]

Like Attic Old Comedy, the *commedia dell'arte* had close ties to cobblers, since its masks are always of leather.[19] Could Harlequin's slapstick have come, like his mask, from the cobbler's workshop, and could it continue (or reprise) an ancient Greek theatrical invention? True, the phlyax-vases portray actors armed with realistic (i.e. single-slatted) sticks, which of course the βακτηρίαι represent in the world of the play, but so too do depictions of *zanni*.[20] True also, no ancient wooden objects have survived in Greece, nor is a τσάκα among the tools (last [καλάπους], awl, half-moon, knives and soaking basin) in the several surviving shoe-making scenes on black-figure and red-figure vases.[21] Still, a scrap of treated hide from the Netherlands shows that Roman tanners clamped leather to curry it, which implies that this ancillary art at least called for something like the τσάκα.[22]

A cobbler can be as crass a judge of art as those who spurned *Clouds* in 423 (cf. Plin. *HN* 35.36, § 85), yet his humble shop welcomes all who love irony and rail against pretense (cf. Xen. *Mem*. 4.2.1, Diog. Laert. 2.13 [122]), and gave Aristophanes—both man (Pl. *Symp*. 191a) and poet[23]—vivid metaphors. Where better, then, for the poet's heroes to turn in search of arms?

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[18] Italians call the clapperboard that marks scene changes in films and operates on the identical principle *ciac*.

[19] A. Fava, *The Comic Masks in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Evanston, IL, 2007), 15–17.

[20] Many examples in M. Gordon, *Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte* (New York, 1983), 30 fig. vii and *passim*. Those sticks, moreover, are not always straight; see W.K. Zewadski, 'The crooked staff motif', in W.K. Zewadski (ed.), *Ancient Greek Vases from South Italy in Tampa Bay Collections* (*Supplement* 3) (Tampa, 1995), 90–117.

[21] See D.B. Thompson, 'The house of Simon the shoemaker,' *Archaeology* 13 (1960), 234–40, at 239, whose illustrations include a black-figure Attic amphora by the Plousios Painter (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 01.8035), a black-figure Attic pelike from Rhodes by the Nikoxenos Painter or the Eucharides Painter (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 563) and the tondo of an Attic red-figure kylix (London, British Museum).

[22] C. van Driel-Murray, 'Tanning and leather', in J.P. Oleson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Engineering and Technology in the Classical World* (Oxford, 2008), 483–95, at 492 with fig. 19.3, quoting Q. Mould, 'Man pinches leather?', *Archaeological Leather Group Newsletter* 18.1 (2003). Aristophanes preferred cobbling to foul-smelling (cf. *Eq*. 892; *Pax* 753) tanning: Strepsiades threatens to tan Creditor A's ample belly (*Nub*. 1237–8), and various characters lampoon Cleon as the βυρσοπώλης/-δέψης Παφλαγών (*Ach*. 300–1; *Eq*. 136, 315-21; *Nub*. 581; *Pax* 269-70, 648, 669, 753).

[23] J. Taillardat, *Les Images d'Aristophane: Études de langue et de style* (Paris, 1965), 347–8, §§ 593-6.

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