

NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

PSEUDARTABAS AND HIS EUNUCHS: *ACHARNIANS* 91–122

One of the most puzzling scenes in Aristophanic comedy occurs early in the poet's first extant play, *Acharnians*. After Dicaeopolis' opening monologue the assembly at long last convenes, and the first speaker whom the *prytaneis* consent to hear is an Athenian ambassador returning from the court of the Persian king. The ambassador brings with him not only the promise of financial aid but also a man whom he introduces as a Persian official, ὁ βασιλέως ὀφθαλμός, "the eye of the king";¹ he is given the comic name Ψευδαρτάβας (in Douglass Parker's translation, "Shambyses"). Pseudartabas' appearance before the assembly, however, is less than successful; Dicaeopolis deciphers his garbled Greek and it becomes clear that no help from the king is forthcoming. Presently Dicaeopolis also appears to expose the eunuchs attending Pseudartabas as frauds, for he claims (vv. 117–22) to see through the disguise assumed by the Athenian effemines Cleisthenes and Straton. Two interrelated issues remain unclear in this scene: (1) the identity of Pseudartabas and his attendants; (2) the stage action that accompanies Dicaeopolis' ostensible exposure of Cleisthenes (119–21). Most modern scholars take Dicaeopolis' words at their face value and believe that the eunuchs are indeed Athenian impostors; some are thereby led to the logical conclusion that Pseudartabas, too, is an Athenian in disguise.² I wish to argue, however, that the Persian delegation is actually Persian, as K. J. Dover once affirmed;³ that the mention of Cleisthenes and Straton is merely a joke made in passing at their expense; and that the stage business itself in 119–21 is intended to poke fun at Persian custom and character.

The controversy surrounding this scene has two sources: the lack of visual information in 119–21 and Aristophanes' willingness to ignore logic for the sake of a good laugh.⁴ Since logic is not an essential element of Aristophanic comedy, the role that it ought to assume in the byplay involving Pseudartabas and the eunuchs is difficult to assess. Yet any interpretation of this scene that involves

1. For a brief discussion of the office, which is historical, see C. Autran, "L' 'oeil du roi': concept politico-administratif commun à l'Iran, à la Chine et à l'Hellade," *Humanitas* 3 (1957): 287–91.

2. Among the most recent discussions, C. Whitman, *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 60, believes that the entire delegation is Athenian; J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse* (New Haven, 1975), p. 59, A. Sommerstein, ed. and trans., *Aristophanes: "Acharnians"* (Warminster, 1980), ad loc., and L. Edmunds, "Aristophanes' *Acharnians*," *YCS* 26 (1980): 4, all think that the "eunuchs" are Cleisthenes and Straton in disguise, but have little to say about the status of Pseudartabas. For a summary of earlier views, see V. Gordziejew, "De prologo *Acharnensium*," *Eos* 39 (1938): 462–63.

3. "Notes on Aristophanes' *Acharnians*," *Maia* 15 (1963): 7–12. I share Dover's general outlook but will argue the case in greater detail and with some dissent: we disagree most significantly in the interpretation of the stage action accompanying 119–21.

4. See K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1972), pp. 41–45. The basic premise of *Lysistrata* affords a striking example: the women of various Greek states, desperate for sex because their husbands are away from home on military duty, resolve to end the Peloponnesian War by refusing to make love with their missing mates.

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Athenian impostors introduces serious logical contradictions which the playwright could easily have avoided without weakening the impact of his comic assaults; and I do not believe that Aristophanes violates logic out of carelessness or simply for the sake of doing so, without some specific dramatic advantage(s) in mind.

If we examine the utterances of Pseudartabas by themselves, without reference to Dicaeopolis' later accusations, they surely suggest that he is an Aristophanic caricature of a Persian magistrate. The "king's eye" speaks only two lines, the first of these an apparent attempt to deliver the message that he brings to Athens from his king (100):

<i>ιαρταμάν ἐξάρξαν ἀπίσσονα σάτρα</i>	ΑΓ
<i>ιαρταμάν ἐξαρξας πισόναστρα</i>	Ρ ⁵

Scholars disagree concerning the language in which this line is written as well as its meaning. No Greek version of the line is convincing, and it is impossible to say with certainty whether we have here real Persian transliterated into Greek or mock-Persian, that is, nonsense which reproduces the most prominent sounds of the language. Even if we assume provisionally that Pseudartabas is no impostor, the utterances of other vocal *barbaroi* in Aristophanes shed little light on the situation, since the comedies contain no undisputed example of a foreigner's speaking either utter gibberish or a recognizable foreign language.⁶ When we also consider the violence that well-meaning scribes are likely to have wrought on a foreign or pseudo-foreign language, our chances of recovering Aristophanes' original text seem very remote indeed.⁷ There is, however, no mistaking the dramatic point of Pseudartabas' words, which is their absolute unintelligibility. Dicaeopolis readily admits that he could not understand Pseudartabas,⁸ and the ambassador's own misinterpretation (102), though possibly willful, is soon brought to light as well. When the envoy asks Pseudartabas for clarification about the Persian gold

5. Differences in accentuation between Α and Γ, which do not affect the argument, are not noted. Unless otherwise indicated, the source of all quotations in this article is Coulon's Budé text of 1952; I have made minor changes in Coulon's punctuation.

6. We may compare the speech of the Triballian god in *Birds* and the Scythian policeman in *Thesm.* The utterances of the latter (1001 ff.) are immediately recognizable as fractured Greek. The language of the Triballian is more difficult to interpret and controversial, but all would agree, I think, that in the course of his appearance on stage the Triballian makes remarkable progress in his command (or approximation) of the Greek tongue. When asked for his opinion of the proposed treaty between the birds and the gods, the Triballian replies *ναβαυσάτρεν* (1615), which was either totally meaningless to a Greek audience or perhaps suggested an oath of some kind: Coulon prints *Να Βαυσάτρεν*, presumably to parallel Poseidon's *Νή τόν Ποσειδῶν* in 1614; and J. Whatmough, "On Triballian in Aristophanes," *CP* 47 (1952): 56, proposes (unconvincingly, to my mind) *νῆ (νὰ) Βελισούρδον* (a Thracian epithet of Zeus). When Heracles later asks contemptuously if the Triballian would like to be beaten, he answers *σαννακα βακταρικρονστα* (1628–29). Here at least two relevant Greek roots are beyond reasonable doubt (*βακταρι-*, *-κρονστα*), and Van Leeuwen et al. read *σαῦ νάκα βάκταρι κρούστα*, i.e., *σαῦ τὴν νάκην (τὸ νάκος) τῇ βακτηρία κρούσω* ("tibi fuste excutiam pellem," Van Leeuwen). The Triballian's longest utterance and his final verdict on the negotiations between birds and gods is printed by Coulon as *καλαν κοραναν καὶ μεγάλα βασιλιναν / ὄρνιτο παραδιδωμι* (1678–79), which is crude but comprehensible Greek, like that of the Scythian policeman.

7. Dover's reconstruction of 100 in Persian ("Notes," pp. 6–7) has the king's eye identifying himself as "Iarta by name, son of Xerxes, satrap." See, however, the response by M. L. West, "Two Passages of Aristophanes," *CR* 18 (1968): 5–7, who accepts the text of ΑΓ with the sole change of *ναμε* for *μανε* and understands the line as "gibberish made from Persian noises"; West notes traces of the names Artaxerxes, Xerxes, Pissouthnes (a satrap seated in Sardis), and of the word *satrap*.

8. *Μά τόν Ἀπόλλω γ'αὖ μὲν οὐ* (101). The oath by Apollo possibly calls to mind the incoherent utterances of the inspired Pythia at Delphi, which had to be interpreted and put into writing for the inquirer by male priests.

so coveted in Athens, he responds in fractured but comprehensible Greek (104), οὐ ληψι χρυσο χαυνόπρωκτ' Ἴωναν. This is the kind of broken Greek spoken at much greater length by the Scythian who enlivens the final scenes of *Thesmophoriazusae*. But it is the tone of these words which is especially noteworthy; for they are gratuitously insulting and should reflect the attitude of a hostile foreigner—not, as some have thought, a native Athenian collaborating with the ambassador to deceive their fellow citizens. Χαυνόπρωκτος has the shameful connotation of passive homosexuality,⁹ and since the Athenians disliked being called Ionians (cf. Hdt. 1. 143, 5. 69), Ἴωναν may also be contemptuous; alternatively, it could be due to the ignorance of a Persian who assumes that all Greeks, those inhabiting the mainland as well as Asia Minor, are properly called "Ionians." In either case, it strains credibility to explain away 104 as a slip of the tongue from an impostor in danger of being exposed;¹⁰ the line is better understood as a heartfelt expression of Persian disdain for Athens, offered freely and without instigation. Thus Pseudartabas' own words support the ambassador's claim that he is Persian. The duplicity suggested by his name presumably reflects Athenian (or at least Aristophanic) distrust of Persians in general, and need not imply that Pseudartabas himself is a fraud.

One obvious question seems to remain: If the Persian king had no intention of sending money to Athens, why did the Athenian ambassador bring Pseudartabas home with him to face questioning before the assembly? In fact, however, this is an obvious question for the modern reader only—not for an ancient playwright or playgoer. Aristophanes wrote for the stage, not for the study; the assembly scene is raucous and fast-paced, and a spectator in the theater of Dionysus would have had little occasion to wonder how the misunderstanding arose between Pseudartabas and the ambassador. Of course, possible explanations exist, if one wishes to pursue the matter logically: the ambassador may have been encouraged to expect Persian aid while at the king's court, only to have Pseudartabas blurt out the truth at a most inopportune moment; or the ambassador may have known of the king's unwillingness but convinced him to dispatch a Persian official as apparent proof of the success of his mission, hoping that the Athenians would be utterly unable to understand their foreign guest. Still, I seriously doubt that Aristophanes had thought the matter through to this extent; his main concern was to present his comic vision of the relations between Persian and Athenian ambassadors, the former ridiculous and unreliable, the latter selfish and either deceitful or incompetent (perhaps both).

At line 110 Dicaeopolis dismisses the Athenian ambassador brusquely and undertakes to question Pseudartabas himself.¹¹ Threatening physical violence, Dicaeopolis asks whether the Great King will send gold to Athens; Pseudartabas

9. See Henderson, *Maculate Muse*, pp. 59, 211.

10. W. J. M. Starkie (*Aristophanes: The "Acharnians"* [Amsterdam, 1968], ad loc.) explains his behavior thus: "It is quite natural that the Persian, who was really a disguised Athenian, should have broken down in 104 when he had to face a situation which he had not rehearsed." But to this point the ambassador has merely asked Pseudartabas to explain whether the king is willing to offer financial aid to Athens, and any native Athenian familiar with the workings of the assembly would certainly have expected and "rehearsed" this situation, if none other.

11. Ἄλλ' ἀπὸθ' ἐγὼ δὲ βασιανῶ τοῦτον μόνος. Note the aptness of βασιανῶ, since Dicaeopolis is in fact testing the genuineness of Persian gold; and the use of μόνος in emphatic final position (cf. 29, 52, 131, 290), marking Dicaeopolis' isolation in his advocacy of peace. By contrast, later uses of this device (1020, 1057) indicate Dicaeopolis' sole possession of the many benefits of peace.

nods no, and (to judge from 115, quoted below) the eunuchs follow his example.¹² When they all nod assent to a second question, indicating that the Athenians are indeed being deceived by the ambassadors, Dicaeopolis turns aggressive, saying (115–22):

Ἑλληνικόν γ' ἐπένευσαν ἄνδρες οὗτοι.
 κούκ ἔσθ' ὅπως οὐκ εἰσὶν ἐνθὲνδ' αὐτόθεν.
 καὶ τοῖν μὲν εὐνούχοιν τὸν ἕτερον τουτονὶ
 ἐγὼ δ' ὅς ἐστι, Κλεισθένης ὁ Σιβυρτίου.
 ὦ θερμόβουλον πρωκτὸν ἐξυρημένε,
 τοῖόνδε δ', ὦ πίθηκε, τὸν πάγων' ἔχων
 εὐνούχος ἡμῖν ἦλθες ἐσκενασμένος;
 ὁδὶ δὲ τίς ποτ' ἐστίν; οὐ δῆπου Στράτων;

The joke in 115 sets the tone for the rest of the passage: Dicaeopolis jests that “these men here” gave a distinctly Greek nod, as if this were yet another respect in which Greeks differ from non-Greeks.¹³ Now “these men here,” whose manner of nodding is said to betray their local origin, surely include Pseudartabas himself, even though his own words in 104 seem to indicate that he is a Persian. In 117 Dicaeopolis narrows his focus and isolates the pair of eunuchs specifically, because it is they alone whom he now attacks.¹⁴ But it must be emphasized that Dicaeopolis accuses Pseudartabas, too, of being a fraud, and since (as I have argued) the charge is unfounded in his case we have little reason to believe that his attendants are Greek either. As Dover has seen, Dicaeopolis does not mean to suggest seriously that the Persians are impostors, but he does manage to kill two birds with one stone, ridiculing Cleisthenes and Straton for effeminacy while victimizing befuddled foreigners who know too little Greek to defend themselves against his spirited assault. In no way does Aristophanes’ lampooning of Cleisthenes and Straton require their presence on stage: Dicaeopolis need only suggest that they could pass for the eunuchs before him, and the poet’s aspersion is cast. Aristophanes uses a similar technique in the parabasis of *Birds*: while the members of a chorus enter one by one, the spendthrift Callias is ridiculed as a bird plucked clean by informers and women (284–86), the corpulent Cleonymus as a “gobbler” (288 *κατωφαγᾶς*). Of course neither Callias nor Cleonymus is seen on stage: the appearance of the chorus members simply inspires insults at their expense. To return to *Acharnians*, nothing is gained dramatically if we accept the mixed delegation that some editors envision (a Persian ambassador with Athenian eunuchs), and its logic is elusive: for if Cleisthenes and Straton undertook their charade for the sake of duping their fellow citizens, why should they have chosen subordinate roles that prevent them from exercising any control over the notably undiplomatic Pseudartabas?

It remains only to explain Dicaeopolis’ jibe at Cleisthenes (119–21) and the

12. Since it is clear from 104 that Pseudartabas has some Greek, I see no reason to assume with Dover (“Notes,” pp. 9–10) that the Persians fail to understand Dicaeopolis’ questions in 113, 114.

13. So explained by the scholiast: *τοῦτο εἶπεν ὡς διαφέροντος καὶ τοῦ νεύματος τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ*.

14. Cf. Van Leeuwen ad loc., “Particula enim μὲν in vs. 117 indicio esse videtur non de aliis hominibus loqui ibi incipere Dicaeopolidem,—quod si ita esset, potius καὶ . . . δὲ dicendum erat,—sed etiam in praecedentibus versibus de pedisequis, perinde atque de ipso regis Oculo, fuisse sermonem.”

stage action that accompanies it. The participial phrase in 119 derides, with resounding and obscene paratragic language (the scholiast compares the Euripidean phrase ὁ θερμόβουλον σπλάγγχον), Cleisthenes' alleged habit of shaving his body hair in order to maintain the youthful look of an ἐρώμενος.¹⁵ Line 120 is also a parody, the scholiast notes, modeled on a passage from an epode of Archilochus: τοῖνδε δ' ὁ πίθηκε τὴν πνύγην ἔχων (187 West). The line comes from the Archilochean version of a fable in which, to judge from Aesop's treatment,¹⁶ the jealous fox outwits the king of the animals, the monkey. The fox lures the monkey into a trap that apparently ensnares his rear end, and the recent mention of Cleisthenes' shorn προκτός makes the story an inviting target for parody. But what is Dicaeopolis pointing to or unveiling as he mentions τοῖνδε . . . τὸν πάγωνα? Evidently the eunuch's beard;¹⁷ but τοῖνδε is ambiguous and could mean either "so bushy" or "so sparse." In the context at hand two factors favor the first of these alternatives: the apparently indignant tone of Dicaeopolis' question in 119–21, which suggests that the beard worn by the eunuch (presumably beardless under normal dramatic circumstances) is somehow inappropriate; and the strong likelihood that Aristophanes would take the opportunity to visualize the vivid Archilochean image of the hairy πίθηκος. Many editors imagine that one of Pseudartabas' attendants wears a laughably luxuriant, obviously false beard, which Dicaeopolis pulls from his mask to reveal the impostor Cleisthenes. But Cleisthenes is not at all likely to be found on stage, as we have seen. If the attendants are indeed Persian, however, the point of 120–21 may be ridicule of a distinctively Oriental style of beard—quite plausibly, I think, the kind of beard worn by Persian royalty in Achaemenid reliefs, especially those at Persepolis, which celebrate the reigns of Darius I and Xerxes and are dated between the late sixth and mid-fifth centuries.¹⁸ Persian rulers depicted in these reliefs wear a beard that is long and square-tipped,¹⁹ and the sight of such a beard (assuming that it is not merely artistic convention) must have amused an Athenian audience no

15. Cf. *Frogs* 422–24 τὸν Κλεισθένην δ' ἀκούω / ἐν ταῖς ταφαῖσι προκτὸν / τίλλειν ἑαυτοῦ καὶ σπαράττειν τὰς γνάθους.

16. See fable 83 (I) in Hausrath's edition (quoted by West for Archilochus frags. 185–87).

17. H. Müller-Strübing, *Aristophanes und die historische Kritik* (Leipzig, 1873), pp. 691–92, suggested that πάγων here refers to pubic hair; the suggestion has not found favor, rightly.

18. Professor C. J. Herington has alerted me to the evidence of the Persepolis reliefs. For detailed discussion, see E. Schmidt, *Persepolis*, vol. 1: *Structures, Reliefs, Inscriptions* (Chicago, 1953); briefer, less technical accounts are found in E. Porada, *The Art of Ancient Iran* (New York, 1965), pp. 142–78, and D. Wilber, *Persepolis* (New York, 1969), pp. 77–103.

19. The most instructive relief for our purposes was, it is now known, the original central panel of the north stair facade of the Apadana (audience hall) at Persepolis: see most recently M. C. Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art*, *Acta Iranica* 19, *Textes et mémoires*, vol. 9 (Leyden, 1979), pp. 86–95. The relief dates to the late sixth or early fifth century, and is illustrated in Schmidt, *Persepolis* I, pls. 119, 121; Root, pl. 17; and most accessibly in J. Pritchard (ed.), *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, 1958), pl. 123. Schmidt (pp. 162–69) and Root (pp. 86–95, 232–33, 236–40) discuss the identification of the figures represented and details of stylistic importance. The relief shows King Darius enthroned at Persepolis. Behind him stand the crown prince Xerxes, two royal attendants, and a pair of Persian guards; before him stand a man dressed in Median costume (perhaps the commander of the 10,000 "Immortals") and another pair of Persian guards. The king and the prince both have extremely long, square-tipped beards with alternating bands of waves and curls; the guards, the Median, and one of the royal attendants all have shorter, pointed beards cut along the jaw line; the attendant standing directly behind Xerxes, whom Schmidt tentatively identifies as the royal chamberlain, wears no visible beard but rather an elaborate headdress of the sort we should imagine Pseudartabas' eunuchs to wear (in fact Schmidt believes that this figure was beardless and therefore a eunuch).

less than the spectacle of native Persian dress. Of course the beard is funnier still because worn by a eunuch, whom Dicaeopolis obviously expects to find smooth-cheeked or lightly bearded; and if fifth-century Athenians associated such a beard not only with Persia but with Persian royalty in particular²⁰ there is an added absurdity: the lowly attendant unveiled by Dicaeopolis bears a striking similarity to the Great King himself. Thus there are perhaps two implications underlying Dicaeopolis' incredulous question: not only "You're too heavily bearded to be a eunuch" but also "With a beard like that you should be a king!" In any case the exposure of a bearded eunuch lends added emphasis to the duplicity that leaves its mark on Pseudartabas' name: as Dicaeopolis sees it, "Shambyeses" is accompanied, appropriately, by a sham eunuch.

In summary, Aristophanes' text strongly suggests that Pseudartabas and his eunuchs are all Persians. Cleisthenes and Straton need not be represented on stage to serve as butts of Dicaeopolis' humor, which is directed against despised foreigners as well as notorious Athenian pathics. When Dicaeopolis claims to expose Cleisthenes, he most likely unveils a eunuch's mask with a long beard, which the Athenian audience recognized as typically and hilariously Persian, perhaps also as a mark of Persian royalty; the bearded eunuch, though mute, offers eloquent testimony to Persian treachery. Finally, if Pseudartabas and his eunuchs are correctly identified as Persians, we can fully appreciate the poet's antithetical portrayals of the Persians and the Thracians, the second foreign delegation which Dicaeopolis confronts in the prologue (155–74).²¹ The Great King refuses to support the Athenian military effort against Sparta, and of the three men comprising the Persian delegation at least two (the eunuchs) will not have worn the phallus. By marked contrast the Odomantians, the most belligerent tribe in Thrace, are threateningly ithyphallic (157–61)²² and eager to ravage Boeotia—for the right price. Aristophanes wastes no time, therefore, in establishing the importance of antithesis as a structural device in *Acharnians*—a device which is put to similar use when Dicaeopolis, at peace with Sparta and her allies, trades first with a starving Megarian, then with a well-fed Boeotian; and which culminates in the elaborate series of contrasts drawn between the reveler Dicaeopolis and the soldier Lamachus in the last two scenes of the play (1071–1142, 1190–1225).²³

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20. The reliefs suggest that beard length reflected social status among the Persians. Schmidt (*Persepolis I*, p. 84) notes, in discussing the beard styles of figures in the Apadana reliefs: "The beards of the dignitaries, intermediate in length between those of the guards and the stately beards of royalty, may also have bearing on rank."

21. Cf. Whitman, *Aristophanes*, p. 61, and Henderson, *Maculate Muse*, p. 118, both of whom assume that the contrast drawn is between Cleisthenes and Straton on the one hand and the Thracians on the other. A contrast between two equal or comparable entities (in the present instance, foreign representatives and potential allies of Athens) is more typical of Aristophanes (and *Ach.* in particular), because symmetrical.

22. See Henderson's discussion, *Maculate Muse*, p. 118.

23. I would like to thank Professors C. J. Herington, A. T. Cole, and S. Morris; M. Dillon; and the Editor and referees of *CP* for helpful criticism of earlier drafts of this paper.