

Ἐπιβατεύω IN ARISTOPHANES' *FROGS*

(v. 48)

Some readers of my recent discussion of words for animal intercourse used of human copulation¹ may have been surprised to find in it no mention of the verb ἐπιβατεύω which occurs in a famous passage in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. This was an oversight, but in any case a discussion of the passage in question would have unbalanced my article since, having serious doubts about the presence of a sexual innuendo in this passage, I would have been obliged to argue my case at some length. Since, however, the majority of editors and interpreters have taken a different view from mine, it is appropriate now to reexamine the question. I acknowledge that it is very difficult to disprove the existence of a sexual innuendo in any given passage of Old Comedy and I also confess that I do not have absolute confidence in the case I am making. Nevertheless it seems worth while drawing attention to some problems that have been largely neglected by interpreters.

The passage to which I am referring is the dialogue between Dionysus and his brother Heracles which commences when Heracles has been summoned out of his house and has reacted with astonishment and amusement at the sight of Dionysus' strange attire (Ar. *Ran.* 44ff.):

Ηρ. ἀλλ' οὐχ οἶός τ' εἶμ' ἀποσοβῆσαι τὸν γέλων
ὀρῶν λεοντῆν ἐπὶ κροκωτῶι κειμένην.
τίς ὁ νοῦς; τί κόθορνος καὶ ῥόπαλον ξυνηλθέτην;
ποῖ γῆς ἀπεδήμεις;

Δι. ἐπεβάτευον Κλεισθένει ...²

Ηρ. κάναυμαχῆσας;

In answer to Heracles' question ποῖ ἀπεδήμεις; Dionysus replies ἐπεβάτευον Κλεισθένει (Ar. *Ran.* 48). It has often been stated that, while Dionysus is ostensibly saying that he was on board a ship commanded by Clisthenes³ at the battle of Arginusae, his reply has a secondary sexual nuance.

¹ D. Bain, *Greek Verbs for Animal Intercourse used of Human Beings*, «Sileno» XVI (1990) 253-261.

² It seems best to assume that Heracles is interrupting Dionysus' narrative.

³ Aristophanes' ἐπιβατεύω is a denominative formed from ἐπιβάτης («marine» or, in its comprehensive use, «anyone who has boarded a ship»). It is used here exactly like another

This view is first found in the scholion *ad l.*

παίζει· λέγεται γὰρ καὶ ἐπὶ νεῶς τὸ ἐπιβατεύειν καὶ ἐπὶ συνουσίας
κατὰ μεταφορὰν τῶν ἀλόγων ἃ ἐπιβαίνοντα συνουσιάζει.

The interpretation of ἐπεβάτευον propounded by the ancient commentator⁴ has found many adherents in modern times⁵, but there are powerful arguments that can be set against it.

The most compelling of these are contextual and are succinctly stated by van Leeuwen *ad l.* Heracles' immediate response takes no account of any sexual innuendo. What strikes him about what he has just heard is the unlikelihood of his brother acting as a marine (κἀναυμάχησας;). More significant, however, since one might counter that such lack of response to a sexual innuendo is not inconceivable in a playwright like Aristophanes⁶, is his reaction later when he is informed that Dionysus has conceived a desire for a man (57):

ξυνεγένου τῶι⁷ Κλεισθένει;

If ἐπεβάτευον in 48 had a sexual nuance this question would be redundant or else we should have to assume that Heracles was slow on the uptake. This assumption is not of itself a difficult one to make about Heracles in comedy (cf. the way he is depicted in Aristophanes' *Birds*), but when stupidity is manifested in comedy it is usual for attention to be drawn to it by others on stage.

such denominative, γραμματεύειν, which also is constructed with the dative (the correct explanation of the construction of ἐπεβάτευον Κλεισθένει was given by Fritzsche). Other interpretations which involve Κλεισθένει being taken as the name of a ship or as a *παρὰ προσδοκίαν* insertion replacing the expected ship-name are to be rejected. Many commentators ever ready to believe any canard the comic poets hurl at real-life Athenians (for the basis of the accusations of effeminacy raised against Clisthenes see K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* [London 1978], 58f.) make out that the suggestion that Clisthenes might have been a trierarch is *per se* ludicrous. It seems to me rather that the emphasis in line 48 is on the unwarlike character of Dionysus.

⁴ The *scholia vetera* are followed by John Tzetzes in his commentary (*Schol. in Arist. IV 3*, p. 719).

⁵ It is supported by LSJ *s. v.* and by many commentators and interpreters, *e.g.* Blaydes (1889), van Daele in Coulon's edition, Stanford (1958), W.J.W. Koster in his edition of Tzetzes (see the previous note), P. Rau, «Gnomon» XL (1964) 4, J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*, Yale 1975, 162, Dover (see note 3), 59, M. van der Valk, «AC» LIII (1984) 74, and most recently by Del Corno in his edition of the play (1985).

⁶ For inconsequentiality and lack of sustained realism in Aristophanic dialogue see K.J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (London 1972) 59ff.

⁷ Fraenkel's conjecture τῶι (*Beobachtungen zu Aristophanes*, Roma 1962, 132) and his reasons for excogitating it are misconceived. Clearly one cannot separate the two mentions of Clisthenes. Compare V. Tammaro, «MCR» XXI-XXII (1986-87) 178f.

Dover (note 3) thinks that Heracles' question is proffered as his explanation for Dionysus' longing for a man («[Dionysus] supposedly longs thereafter to have him again»). This is perfectly compatible with a non-sexual meaning for ἐπεβάτευον earlier in the scene.

Corroborative linguistic evidence can be adduced to support the assumption that ἐπεβάτευον has here no sexual connotations. The construction of ἐπιβατεύω plus *dative* is hard to explain under the assumption that the reference in the noun is to someone who is «mounted». If ἐπιβατεύω had a sexual content it should like ἐπιβαίνω⁸ have governed an accusative (or a preposition plus the accusative) whether it is to be taken (with the scholion) as a word of animal intercourse or as a word meaning «board a ship»⁹.

It seems questionable whether there would have been anything particularly suggestive about the use of the word in Athens in the fifth century B.C.: Liddell and Scott refer to their entry *s. v.* ἐπιβαίνω A III 3 by way of justification for the sexual interpretation and it can be argued that βαίνω or a compound of βαίνω might indeed in certain contexts have had such suggestions for an Aristophanic audience¹⁰. But the verb in question is not a compound of βαίνω: it is ἐπιβατεύω, a denominative formed from ἐπιβάτης. Philologists are aware of family connections between ἐπιβατεύω and ἐπιβαίνω. Would even a significant minority of Aristophanes' audience have been able so to link the verbs? There was a Greek verb for animal intercourse containing the element βατ-, namely βατέω, but that as Shipp has demonstrated was a dialect word¹¹. Would it have occurred to an Athenian audience to hear it in ἐπιβατεύω and, supposing it did, to hear it as an obscenity?¹²

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⁸ ἐπιβαίνω constructed with the dative when used of the ass covering the mare in Pseudo-Lucian, *Asinus* 27 can scarcely be used as evidence for the construction of the verb in Aristophanes' time.

⁹ Henderson (see note 4) takes the sexual imagery to be «maritime» (yet he quotes examples of ἐπιβαίνω which are either used of animals or transfers from animal to human intercourse, p. 162 n. 51). For ἐπιβαίνω used in a sexual context in all probability without any hint of an animal connection see my article, pp. 259f.

¹⁰ See my article, pp. 258ff.

¹¹ See G.P. Shipp, *Modern Greek Evidence for the Ancient Greek Vocabulary*, Sydney 1979, 137f. He demonstrates that it is found exclusively in Doric provenances.

¹² There existed in βατεύω a later alternative for βατέω which is in fact the form that survives in modern Greek (see Shipp [previous note], 137 and D. Bain, *Owls to Athens: Essays on Classical Subjects Presented to Sir Kenneth Dover*, Oxford 1990, 301). The two instances of sexual transfers of compounds of this verb cited by Liddell and Scott (D.J. Georgacas, «Glotta» XXXVI [1957-8] 117 is surely correct to regard ἐμβατεύω as having been formed from ἐν and βατεύω rather than as a denominative from ἐμβάτης), ἐμβατεύω (Palaephatus) and προσεμβατεύω (Aristaenetos), are obviously too late to use as support for a sexual interpretation of ἐπιβατεύω in Aristophanes.

