Alciphron

Complete Works

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The Complete Works of

ALCIPHRON

(fl. 2nd century AD)

Contents

Version 1

The Complete Works of

ALCIPHRON

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Complete Works of Alciphron

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The Translations

View of Athens' ancient agora. No biographical details about Alciphron have survived. The majority of his works are set in Athens or its surrounding demes, soon after the reign of Alexander the Great.

The Letters of Alciphron, 1896 Translation

LITERALLY AND COMPLETELY TRANSLATED FROM THE GREEK, WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

Translated by the Athenian Society, 1896

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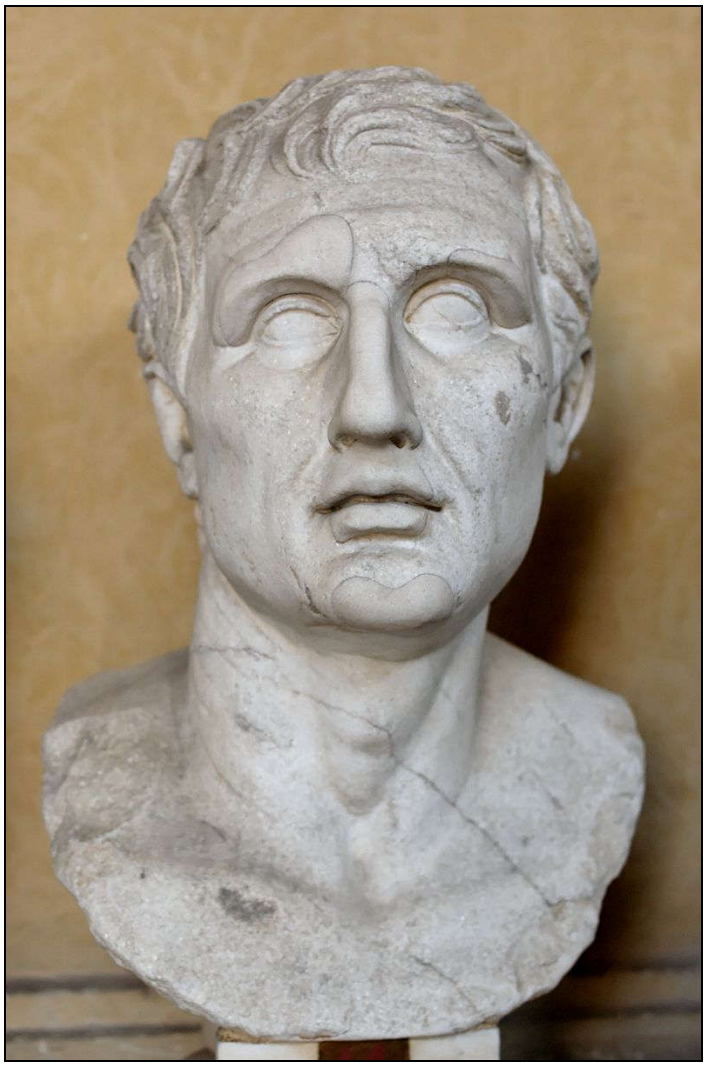

Roman bust of Menander after a Greek original (c. 300 BC) – Menander was an important influence on the style of Alciphron.

INTRODUCTION

ALCIPHRON was a Greek sophist, and one of the most eminent of the Greek epistolographers. We have no direct information of any kind respecting his life or the age in which he lived. Some assign him to the fifth century A.D.; others, to the period between Lucian and Aristaenetus (170-350 A.D.); while others again are of opinion that he lived before Lucian. The only circumstance that suggests anything in regard to the period at which he lived is the fact that, amongst the letters of Aristaenetus, there are two which passed between Lucian and Alciphron; and, as Aristaenetus is generally trustworthy, we may infer that Alciphron was a contemporary of Lucian, which is not incompatible with the opinion, true or false, that he imitated him.

It cannot be proved that Alciphron, any more than Aristaenetus, was a real name. It is probable that there was a well-known sophist of that name in the second century A.D., but it does not follow that he wrote the letters.

The letters, as we have them, are divided into three books. Their object is to delineate the characters of certain classes of persons by introducing them as expressing their peculiar sentiments and opinions upon subject with which they are familiar. For this purpose Alciphron chose country people, fishermen, parasites, and courtesans. All are made to express themselves in most elegant and graceful language, even where the subjects are low and obscene. The characters are thus to some extent raised above the ordinary standard, without any great violence being done to the truth of the reality. The form of these letters is very beautiful, and the language in which they are written is the purest Attic. The scene is, with few exceptions, Athens and its neighbourhood; the time, some period after the reign of Alexander the Great, as is clear from the letters of the second book. The New Attic comedy was the chief source from which Alciphron derived his material, and the letters contain much valuable information in regard to the characters and manners he describes, and the private life of the Athenians. We come across some remarkably modern touches, as the thimble-rigger at the fair and the *claquers* at the theatre. Alciphron perhaps imitated Lucian in style; but the spirit in which he treats his subjects is very different, and far more refined.

In the great majority of cases the names in the headings of the letters, which seem very clumsy in an English dress, are fictitious, and are purposely coined to express some characteristic of the persons between whom they are supposed to pass.

In the volume of “Lucian” in this series some account has been given of the courtesans of Athens. It will here be interesting to describe briefly another curious class of personages, the *parasites* — a word which has had a remarkable history.

Originally, amongst the Greeks, the parasites were persons who held special functions. They had a right, like the priests, to a certain portion of the sacrificial victims, and their particular duty was to look after the storage and keep of the sacred corn, hence their name. They enjoyed an honourable position, and the Athenians resigned to them even the management of the temples, which gave them rank next to the priests.

Soon, after the example of Apollo, the richest citizens looked out for witty table-companions, to amuse them with jests, and flatter them in proportion to their importance and liberality. By degrees, however, these parasites, lending themselves to ridicule, fell into discredit and contempt. The name, diverted from its etymological signification, was applied to every haunter of the tables of the rich, to every sponger for a free meal, to every shameless flatterer who, in order to satisfy the needs of his

stomach, consented to divert the company and patiently endure the insults which it pleased the master of the house to heap upon him.

At first this was by no means the case with all parasites. Gaiety, audacity, liveliness, good humour, a knowledge of the culinary art, and sometimes even a certain amount of independence lent an additional charm to the members of the profession. One of the most famous of parasites was Philoxenus of Leucas, of whom we read in Athenaeus. It was his practice, whether at home or abroad, after he had been to the bath, to go round the houses of the principal citizens, followed by boys carrying in a basket oil, vinegar, fish-sauce, and other condiments. After he had made his choice, Philoxenus, who was a great gourmand, entered without ceremony, took his seat at table, and did honour to the repast before him. One day, at Ephesus, finding that there was nothing left in the market, he asked the reason. Being told that everything had been bought up for a wedding festival, he washed and dressed himself, and deliberately walked to the house of the bridegroom, by whom he was well received. He took his seat at table, ate, drank, sang an epithalamium or marriage-song, and delighted the guests. "I hope you will dine here to-morrow," said the host. "Yes," answered Philoxenus, "if you lay violent hands upon the market as you have done to-day." "I wish I had a crane's neck," he sometimes exclaimed; "then I should be able to relish the flavour of the food for a longer time." Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, who knew that he was very fond of fish, invited him to dinner, and, while an enormous mullet was set before himself, sent his guest a very small one. Without being in the least disconcerted, Philoxenus took up the small fry, pretended to speak to it, and put it close to his ear, as if to hear its reply. "Well," said Dionysius, somewhat annoyed, "what is the matter?" "I was asking him certain information about the sea which interests me; but he has been caught too young: this is his excuse for having nothing to tell me. The fish in front of you, on the contrary, is old enough to satisfy my curiosity." Dionysius, pleased with the rejoinder, sent on to him his own fish. To perpetuate his memory, Philoxenus composed a "Manual of Gastronomy," which was held in great repute.

Philoxenus, it must be admitted, was a very favourable specimen of his class. As a rule the parasites were among the most abject and worthless of men. "Selected for their profligacy, their impudence, or their wit, they were admitted to the tables of the wealthy, to promote licentious mirth. This being the case, it does not seem at all unnatural that we should at the same time find them the friends and companions of the courtesans. Such characters could not but be mutually necessary to each other. The courtesan solicited the acquaintance of the parasite, that she might the more easily obtain and carry on intrigues with the rich and dissipated. The parasite was assiduous in his attention to the courtesan, as procuring through her means more easy access to his patrons, and was probably rewarded by them both, for the gratification which he obtained of the vices of the one and the avarice of the other."

The name parasite first assumed a dishonourable signification in the works of the writers of the Middle and New Comedy. The first who so used it is said to have been Alexis. In the latter comedians they are stock characters, whose chief object was to get a dinner without paying for it. They are divided into different classes. There were the γελωτοποιοὶ, or jesters, who, in order to secure an invitation, not only endeavoured to amuse, but endured the grossest insults, and personal ill-treatment (cf. Book III., Letters, 6, 7, 49). They had notebooks, in which they kept a collection of

jokes ready for use. The κόλακες, , or flatterers, endeavoured to get invitations by playing upon the vanity of their prospective patrons. The θεραπευτικοὶ, , or "officious" parasites, tried to curry favour by services of the lowest and most degrading character, which are detailed in the sixth book of Athenaeus. They haunted the markets, wrestling-schools, baths, and other public places in search of patrons.

The Romans also had their parasites. As the stern rigour of the Republic relaxed and degenerated into the splendour and dissipation of a despotic government, the Roman parasites became less respectable and more profligate. But it does not appear that in the most licentious ages of the Empire they ever equalled in meanness or in vice those worthless characters described in such lively colours by Athenaeus, Alciphron, and the comic poets of Greece. Frequent allusions to them are found in Horace, Juvenal, Plautus, and particularly in Terence.

The latinized forms of the names of Greek gods and goddesses (such as Jupiter for Zeus) have been preserved in the translation as being more familiar, although, strictly speaking, they cannot be regarded as correct.

BOOK I.

LETTER I. EUDIUS TO PHILOSCAPHUS.

HAPPILY for us, the sea to-day is smooth and calm again. The storm lasted for three days: the northwinds blew violently from the headlands towards the open; the blackening sea grew rough, the waters were white with foam; the billows everywhere broke over each other, some dashing against the rocks, while others swelled and burst. It was utterly impossible to work: we betook ourselves to the huts on the bank, collected a few fragments of wood, the remains of the oaks which had been felled by the ships' carpenters, and lighted a fire to relieve the piercing cold. At last the fourth day came, a truly halcyon day, as we may conclude from the clearness of the air, and brought us wealth and fortune in abundance. For, as soon as the sun rose, and its first beams glittered on the sea, we quickly launched our little bark, which had lately been drawn up on land, and, putting our nets aboard, set to work. We cast them not far from land. Ha! what an enormous haul we made! The heavily-laden net, carried under water, almost dragged down the corks with it. Immediately the fish salesmen gathered round, with their yokes over their shoulders, from which hung baskets on either side; and, having purchased our fish for money down, hastened from Phalerum[1] to the city. We had enough to satisfy them all, and besides, took back to our wives and children a quantity of small fry, enough to keep them not only for one, but for several days, if bad weather should come on.

ENDNOTES.

[1] *Phalerum:* One of the three harbours of Athens, the other two being Piraeus and Munychia.

LETTER II. GALENUS TO CYRTON.

ALL our labour is in vain, Cyrton! By day we are scorched by the heat of the sun, by night we explore the deep by the light of torches, and yet, in the words of the proverb, we are pouring the contents of our pitchers into the cask of the Danaides[2] — so idle and useless are our efforts! We have not even sea nettles[3] or Pelorian mussels to fill our belly; but the master collects both the fish and the money. But all that he gets from us is not enough for him: he is continually searching our little bark. Only lately, when we sent the lad Hermon to him from Munychia with the fish, he ordered us to bring him some sponges and sea-wool, which grows in fairly large quantities in the pool of Eurynome[4]. Before he had finished giving these orders, Hermon left his load of fishes, the boat, and ourselves, and went off on a rowing-boat, with some Rhodian dyers whose acquaintance he had made. Thus the master has to mourn the loss of a slave; we, that of a true companion.

ENDNOTES.

[2] *The cask of the Danaides:* These were the fifty daughters of Danaus; they were married to the fifty sons of Aegyptus, and all of them, except one, put their husbands to death on the wedding night. As a punishment, they were sentenced, in the lower world, to keep incessantly pouring water into casks which were full of holes. Hence the expression is used to signify “useless labour.”

[3] *Sea nettles:* Fishes called by this name

[4] *In the pool of Eurynome:* There is great doubt about the reading here. Eurynome is supposed to be either the name of a sea-nymph or a place.

LETTER III. GLAUCUS TO GALATEA.

HAPPY is he who lives on land! Husbandry involves no danger. With good reason, then, do the Athenians name it Aneisidora,[5] because it bestows gifts, whereby we live and enjoy health. The sea is cruel, and a sailor's life is full of perils. My judgment is right: I have learnt this by experience and instruction. I remember that, once, when I wanted to sell some fish, I heard one of those fellows who hang about the Painted Porch,[6] a bare-footed wretch with livid features, reciting verses and declaiming against the folly of sailors. He said that the verses were written by a certain Aratus,[7] an astronomer. I cannot repeat all that he said; but, as far as I remember, one of the verses ran as follows:

A thin partition keeps off destruction.

Why, then, wife, should we not be wise, and, even though it be late, avoid a life that is so near death? We have children; and, although our poverty prevents us from leaving them anything considerable, we shall at least be able to leave them in blessed ignorance of the stormy waves and the dangers of the deep. They will be brought up to an agricultural life, and will enjoy a life of security, untroubled by alarm.

ENDNOTES.

[5] *Aneisidora:* Corn is said to have been first produced in Attica; hence its inhabitants gave the earth the name of Aneisidora, "producer of gifts."

[6] *Who hang about the Painted Porch: i.e.*, the Stoic philosophers. It was one of the most remarkable of porticos of Athens; it was so called from the variety of curious pictures it contained. Here it was that Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school of philosophy, taught, and for that reason his followers were called Stoics.

[7] *Aratus:* He wrote two poems on astronomical subjects; he is supposed to have lived about B.C. 270; Cicero translated part of his poems into Latin verse.

LETTER IV. CYMOTHUS TO TRITONIS.

THERE is as much difference between us, toilers on the sea, and those who live in cities and villages, as there is between sea and land. They either remain within the gates and occupy themselves with public affairs, or, devoting themselves to agriculture, wait quietly for the crops that are their support; but we, whose life is spent upon the water, find land death to us, even as the fishes, who are unable to breathe the air. Whatever, then, is the matter with you, my dear Tritonis, that you leave the shore and your yarn, and are constantly running into the city, visiting the Oschophoria and Lenaea[8] in the company of wealthy Athenian ladies? This shows a want of prudence and modesty. It was not for this purpose that your father brought you up in Aegina[9] and gave you to me in marriage. If you are so fond of the city, farewell; go; but, if you love the sea, return to your husband; that is the best thing you can do; but forget for ever these delusive city spectacles.

ENDNOTES.

[8] *The Oschophoria and Lenaea:* Two festivals in honour of Dionysus (Bacchus). The former was properly the name given to a day of the Athenian festival, on which chosen boys, sons of citizens, in women's dress, carrying vine-branches loaded with grapes, went in procession from the temple of Bacchus.

The *Lenaea:* was so called from ληνὸς, a wine-press. Dramatic contests, especially between the comic poets, took place on this occasion.

[9] *Aegina:* A well-known island in the Saronic Gulf, which played an important part in the history of ancient Greece.

LETTER V. NAUBATES TO RHODIUS.

YOU flatter yourself that you alone are wealthy, because you are able to entice my sailors with the offer of a higher salary. And no wonder; for only recently a lucky cast brought you in a quantity of golden darics,[10] probably a relic of the battle of Salamis.[11] Perhaps a Persian ship went to the bottom there with the crew and all the treasures on board, at the time when Themistocles, son of Neocles, in the days of our forefathers, set up his great trophy in honour of his victory over the Medes. I, for my part, am content if I can procure the necessaries of life, by the daily work of my hands. If you are wealthy, do not forget what is just: let your wealth be to you an assistance in performing, not unjust, but good and generous actions.

ENDNOTES.

[10] *Darics:* A Persian gold coin, about equal in value to a guinea. Said to have been first coined by King Darius, but the name is probably derived from the Persian darâ, “a king” — cf. our “sovereign.”

[11] *Salamis:* B.C. 480, when Xerxes was defeated in a naval engagement by the Athenians under Themistocles.

LETTER VI. PANOPE TO EUTHYBOLUS.

WHEN you married me, Euthybolus, you did not marry an outcast or one of the common herd, but the daughter of respectable parents. Sosthenes of Stiria[12] was my father: Damophile, my mother. I was their sole heiress; and they consented to our union, in the hope of our having lawful children. But, notwithstanding, you are ever casting amorous glances upon the women, and are addicted to every kind of wanton pleasure: you neglect me and our children, Galene and Thallassion: you are enamoured of the strange woman from Hermione,[13] who has arrived in Piraeus, to the misfortune of husbands and wives. The young fisherman of the coast hold orgies at her house: each gives her different presents: and she accepts and swallows all, like Charybdis. But you, more lavish than a fisherman can afford to be, are not satisfied with giving her sprats or mullets: although you are getting old, have been married a long time, and are the father of grown-up children, in your desire to oust your rivals, you send her Milesian hair-nets,[14] Sicilian dresses, and even gold. Either give up this insulting conduct, your debauchery, and your madness for women, or I tell you plainly that I will go back to my father, who will know how to protect me and will summon you before the court for your cruel behaviour towards me.

ENDNOTES.

[12] *Stiria:* One of the demes or townships into which Attica was divided.

[13] *Hermione:* In Argolis, in Peloponnesus.

[14] *Hair-nets:* A woman's head-dress made of net, used to confine the hair with, especially indoors, such as are still used in Italy and Spain.

End of Sample