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978-0-521-11140-9 - Literacy and Democracy in Fifth-Century Athens

Anna Missiou

Excerpt

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Introduction

Background, concepts and issues

In a collective volume under the title *Literacy: Interdisciplinary Conversations*¹ various new literacies – visual literacy, mathematical literacy, media literacy, computer literacy – appear as additions to the traditional definition of literacy, that is, ‘the ability to read and write’ (*OED*). In the same year (1994) another collective volume, focusing on ancient systems of communication in the New World, was published under the title *Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*. The traditional distinction between writing, on the one hand, and symbol systems or iconography, on the other, was strongly denounced, while it was underlined that ‘speech may be the most efficient manner of communicating many things, but it is noticeably deficient in conveying ideas of a musical, mathematical, or visual nature, for example’.² Quite evidently, complications abound in defining literacy,³ and in placing it in the cultural and cognitive development of human beings.

We can pick up the story in 1963. In a seminal article of that year, ‘The Consequences of Literacy’, the anthropologist Jack Goody and the literary historian Ian Watt argued that the alphabet is linked directly to the distinction of myth from history, the development of individualism, the emergence of scepticism, scientific thought and even democracy.⁴ In the same year the classicist Erick Havelock claimed that the Greek adaptation of the Semitic alphabet, which was superior to earlier writing systems, enabled the easy

¹ Keller-Cohen 1994. ² Boone 1994: 9.

³ This had been pointed out almost sixty years ago by W.S. Gray in his UNESCO monograph *The Teaching of Reading and Writing*. Cf. Resnick and Resnick 1977; Scribner 1984; Kaestle 1985; Langer 1988; Venezky 1993; Roberts 1995.

⁴ Goody and Watt 1963.

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acquisition of the skills of reading and writing; the easy dissemination of these skills was the most important moving force in the Greek intellectual breakthrough.⁵ Since then, a gap has opened up between two main approaches involving anthropologists, psychologists, educationalists, sociolinguists and historians on both sides. There are, first, those scholars (among them Goody and Watt, and Havelock) who consider the distinction between non-literate and literate societies 'illuminating',⁶ and regard the simplicity of the alphabet as the key to the 'superiority' of Western civilization, and writing – or printing – as playing a crucial role in the development of a society;⁷ secondly, there are those who downplay the significance of the alphabet as a superior script and do not regard literacy as a precondition for social order. For the latter, literacy is 'a *social* achievement', 'acquired by individuals only in the course of participation in socially organized activities with written language'.⁸ Over the last forty years, many scholars⁹ have distanced themselves from the 'grand dichotomy' theory,¹⁰ emphasizing instead the need to study literacy in the context of social, cultural, political and economic practices.

Meanwhile in the 1960s the study of literacy gained impetus from the interest of historians in activities and beliefs of ordinary people. Harvey's article 'Literacy in the Athenian democracy', a thorough collection and analysis of the relevant literary and archaeological evidence from classical Athens, appeared in that context.¹¹ Previously,

⁵ Havelock 1963; 1976: 28, 41, 44; 1982: 185–8; and 1986: 98–116.

⁶ Goody and Watt 1963: 305. On the refinement of Goody's theory with regard to literacy being an agent of change (Goody 1977 and 1986), see Lloyd 1979: 239–40; Street 1984: 44–65; and R. Thomas 1992: 16–18.

⁷ See, for example, Olson 1977 (but see Olson 1994: 16); Eisenstein 1980; Ong 1982 and 1986.

⁸ Scribner 1984: 7 and 8, respectively.

⁹ See, for example, Freire 1970; Clanchy 1979; Graff 1979 and 1981; Scribner and Cole 1981; Furet and Ozouf 1982; Pattison 1982; Street 1984 and 1995; Finnegan 1988; Bloch 1989; etc.

¹⁰ That is, the division of human experience or societies into non-literate vs 'literate'; cf. also similar dichotomies: 'primitive' or 'simple' vs 'civilized' or 'advanced', 'pre-logical' or 'pre-rational' vs 'logical' or 'rational': Goody 1977, ch. 8: 'The Grand Dichotomy Reconsidered'.

¹¹ Harvey 1966. In this part I do not intend to present all the modern works on literacy but only those that systematically focus on the diffusion of literacy in Athens. This explains why R. Thomas (1989, 1992, 1995, 2001) is not mentioned in this short survey. Yet, it should be noted that R. Thomas emphasizes the complex relation between orality and literacy in archaic and classical periods, and interprets Athens as a society that experienced the dynamic interaction between orality and literacy very intensely during the fifth and, in particular, fourth centuries. Further, Sickinger (1999 and 2002) and Pébarthe (2005a, 2005b, 2006) are not included here, for they are mainly interested in the question of record keeping,

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literacy appeared rarely in historical discussions of fifth-century Athens, and when it did appear, there was a marked tendency to connect it with Athenian democracy. Seventy years ago, Benjamin Meritt¹² claimed that the proliferation of public inscriptions in Attika from the mid-fifth century BC onwards should be linked specifically with the origins and elaboration of democratic practices. Some years later, E.G. Turner asserted: 'What I take as axiomatic is this: widespread ability to read and write is a basic assumption of the Athenian democracy. No other explanation will account for the costly engraving on marble of the transactions of the sovereign people.'¹³ Harvey asked the simple question 'how many Athenians in the fifth and fourth centuries could read and write?', and his answer was that 'The great majority of Athenian citizens were . . . literate'.¹⁴ Like Meritt, Harvey also considered the formulae 'so that all who desire may know' (*ἵνα πάντες οἱ βουλόμενοι εἰδῶσιν*) and 'so that anyone who desires may see' (*σκοπεῖν τῷ βουλομένῳ*) as reliable indicators of the literacy of the majority; if illiterate Athenians were the majority, the formulae would have been a 'charade'.¹⁵ Although he believed that 'democracy and literacy do not necessarily go hand in hand', he concluded that 'the high degree of literacy at Athens was not entirely unconnected with the fact that she was a democracy'.¹⁶

Recently, however, the optimistic view of Harvey and other classicists¹⁷ has lost ground to the thesis of 'restricted literacy' associated with Havelock, and then, very influentially, with Harris, in his book *Ancient Literacy* (1989).¹⁸ Harris moreover did not rely simply on evidence supplied by tragedy, old comedy, inscriptions and artifacts, such as vase paintings with school scenes or gravestones with readers. He also brought into play research done by anthropologists

the former expressing an optimistic view from the sixth century onwards and the latter emphasizing the monumentality of public inscriptions.

¹² Meritt 1940: 89–93; see also Hedrick 1994 and 1999 on Meritt's claim.

¹³ Turner 1952: 9. But such an assertion disregards the fact that the kings of Egypt and Persia had earlier commissioned the costly production of inscriptions.

¹⁴ Harvey 1966: 628; and on 629 he adds that the Athenians 'enjoyed the benefits of reading and writing'. For a different interpretation, see Hedrick 1999.

¹⁵ Harvey 1966: 600. ¹⁶ Harvey 1966: 590 and 623, respectively.

¹⁷ For example, Immerwahr 1964: 17; Ryle 1966: 22; Woodbury 1976: 349; Flory 1980: 19; Burns 1981: 371; Knox 1985: 11; Detienne 1988a: 46, n. 60; etc.

¹⁸ Harris 1989a. See reviews by C. Thomas 1991: 240–1; R. Thomas 1991: 182; J.D. Thomas 1993: 430.

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as well as by historians of pre-modern and modern Europe, through comparative studies of literate and non-literate cultures. According to Harris, economic, social, ideological or political preconditions similar to those that enabled mass literacy to be achieved in some modern societies did not exist in Athens.¹⁹ Rather, conditions conducive to restricted literacy prevailed – that is, an agrarian economy and a lack of subsidized schools and of inexpensive writing materials. He concluded that the extent of literacy was no higher than 5–10 per cent of the free population of Attika (male and female) and approximately 15 per cent of the adult male citizen population.²⁰

The application of the comparative method was greeted with enthusiasm.²¹ It is impossible not to agree with Harris that the ‘comparative method is of crucial importance for discovering the extent of ancient literacy’,²² in particular since historians, and scholars in other disciplines, have been concerned with the social experience of literacy.²³ Analogies can help us to recognize aspects of phenomena which would otherwise remain hidden from us. On the other hand, they can lead us down false trails. And in fact it has been seriously questioned whether printing, industrialization, economic progress and schooling are sufficient preconditions for mass literacy.²⁴ Specifically, cognitive psychologists, anthropologists and historians have questioned the literacy–schooling equation,²⁵ and have shown that even signature literacy rates dropped during the second half of the eighteenth century in the new industrial towns of England.²⁶ Further, as Pleket noted,²⁷ Harris does not always

¹⁹ Harris 1989a: 12, 15, 94–5; 1989b: 40–1.

²⁰ Harris 1989a: 114 and 328; cf. Detienne 1986: 30. It should also be noted that Havelock was one of the very few classicists who relatively early upheld the view that extant numerous inscriptions should not be taken as an indicator of ‘popular literacy’. He argued that fifth-century Athenians possessed only a minimal literacy, ‘described as craft literacy’, which is defined as one’s ability ‘to write little more than one’s signature’: Havelock 1963: 38–41, quotations from 39 and 40; cf. Havelock 1982: 198–200.

²¹ See, for example, Kenney 1991: 168–9. ²² Harris 1989a: 11, and 1990: 95.

²³ The usefulness of comparative studies for social history has been discussed by Paul Cartledge 1985.

²⁴ See Graff 1979; Laqueur 1983: 46 and 55; Street 1984.

²⁵ Resnick and Resnick 1977; Graff 1979 and 1981; Scribner and Cole 1981; Akinnsa 1992.

²⁶ For a further discussion of the issue see, for example, Sanderson 1972; Laqueur 1974 and 1983; West 1978.

²⁷ Pleket 1992: 418.

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specify in which period and in which region such factors promoted literacy.

All this raises doubts about Harris's minimalist assessment of the extent of literacy in classical Athens. It is obvious, then, that the controversy about how many and which Athenians could write, and to what degree, remains unresolved, and what are at issue are not just percentages of literacy, but the quality of Athenian society and culture.

My primary purpose in this book is to assess the literacy of the Athenians and the values and constraints which shaped its use in the context of their democracy. I am exclusively concerned with the literacy of Athenians in their role of citizens and not in their interactions with other inhabitants of Attika – women, metics, foreigners and slaves – who were completely excluded from political life. I must begin by stating explicitly what I mean by 'literacy' and what my assumptions are. According to the standard dictionary definition, literacy is the 'ability to read and write'. Given the absolute lack of direct evidence on reading ability, I focus on writing. I do not, however, argue that orality is incompatible with writing; on the contrary, I believe that these are complementary, closely interlinked in literacy interactions. Notwithstanding this, I place emphasis on the differences between spoken and written words. Spoken language is ephemeral, occurs in real time and requires ears for listening. It is temporary and temporal, and uses the aural mode. In contrast, written language is presented in space rather than in time, and requires eyes to read. It is thus permanent, spatial and visual. Thus, in writing meaning is supposed to be carried entirely by the text; effective written communication requires sensitivity to the informational needs of the reader and skill in the use of elaborative linguistic techniques. I consider that literacy, therefore, as a form of communication between a writer and a reader through text, involves the ability to create and understand written messages as well as their goals²⁸ and 'the changes that this ability brings about'.²⁹

I wish to make it clear that I do not endorse the thesis alluded to above that the very simplicity of the alphabetic script explains the evolution of democracy. My fundamental assumption is that the

²⁸ According to W.S. Gray 1956: 18 and 24.

²⁹ Cook-Gumperz 1986: 17.

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mere existence of writing cannot effect social change; that literacy is conditioned by the sociopolitical and cultural surroundings and that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of literacy. It is society and not script that determines who can read and in what way: what counts is the use of writing, who uses it, who controls it, what it is used for, how it fits into the power picture, how widely it is distributed. The extent of literacy and the rate at which it expands or declines are the product of historical and social processes and not intrinsic to the script; the functions of writing are necessarily and obviously affected by the size and composition of the literate group.

I agree with those historians who hold that literacy was extensive in Athens, but I am also interested in explaining why this was so, and why literacy assumed much greater importance in Athens than in other Greek cities and, indeed, other Greek democracies. I will not be following those scholars who approach literacy through the use of evidence from geographical locations all over Greece or from widely disparate time periods. It is my conviction that fifth-century Athens presents substantial differences in structure, spirit and economic infrastructure from later periods.³⁰

Holding that literacy is a social construct that can be properly understood only in its particular time and place, I focus on the interaction between the Kleisthenic political reforms and literacy, an interaction that has, to my knowledge, not been thoroughly investigated.³¹ I note that the Kleisthenic reforms have been characterized by Harris as 'highly problematical',³² and that other scholars have assumed that literacy advanced the interests of democracy, but without indicating *why* or *how* it did so.³³

My thesis is that the tribal organization of the peninsula of Attika according to the democratic principles of freedom and equality did

³⁰ For example, the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War saw the growth of a *khrēmatistikē* economy together with rural devastation that undermined the cohesion between *asty* and countryside. Cf. Vernant 1980: 5–9.

³¹ It is, for example, missing from the recent important interpretation of Kleisthenes' political reforms by Anderson 2003.

³² Harris 1989a: 62. See also R. Thomas 2001: 74: 'The relation between the political system and the presence or use of literacy seems to be extremely complex.'

³³ See, for example, Meritt 1940; Turner 1952; Harvey 1966; Robb 1994: 135–7; cf. R. Thomas 1989: 18–19, and 2001: 74–5.

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promote literacy, and that the Kleisthenic reforms provided new contexts and new subject matter for writing (chapters 1 and 4). I do not question the predominance of agriculture in the Athenian economy, but I argue that the demes of Attika were relatively self-sufficient nucleated settlements, or villages, that offered a diversity of employment to their inhabitants. The aim of Chapter 1 is to determine how the written word promoted the overall functioning of the democratic tribal organization. I argue that, in the pursuit of political equality throughout the demes and tribes of the large territory of Attika, the Athenians adopted writing as a means of communication that facilitated the exchange of reliable information among the demes of each tribe, between the tribes themselves, and between them and the urban centre, on particular important issues, including the mobilization of the army and the political organization of the citizen body.

Understanding the mechanisms of communication within the Athenian polity is essential to my study of the Athenian literacy. The complete communication process, consisting of sender, message, recipient and feedback, becomes a guideline in the study of the institution of ostracism. In Chapter 2 I conceptualize every *ostrakophoria* as a communication, with ostraka being the medium between the voters (senders) and the vote-counting officials (receivers). Assuming that ostracism as a democratic institution is imbued with the principles of fairness and equality, I focus on the Athenian homonymous ‘candidates’ for ostracism in the context of the cumbersome counting of several thousands of ostraka. I argue therefore that a fixed list of candidates with their full names was a device that enabled the Athenians to resolve the confusion of homonyms.

The ability to write and read exists at different levels. At one end of the literacy spectrum there is ‘full literacy’ or ‘literary literacy’, denoting thorough knowledge of books and literature;³⁴ at the other end there is ‘illiteracy’, denoting the absence of basic skills of reading and writing. Between these two ends of the spectrum, there are, on one hand, semi-literates or persons with a rudimentary, ‘minimal’ or

³⁴ Cf. Clanchy (1983: 16), drawing on H. Grundmann, ‘*Litteratus-Illiteratus*’, *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 40, 1958: ‘*Litteratus* in medieval usage meant to be learned in Latin rather than to have a rudimentary ability to read and write.’

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'craft'/'restricted'/'limited' literacy,³⁵ that is, persons with mere basic skills in reading and writing only familiar messages, and on the other hand, functional literates whose skills in reading and writing enable them to write, read and understand effortlessly new written materials, which could be even lengthy and complicated, and thus to engage in the culture of their society.

According to the current orthodoxy, there was a considerable growth in the functions of literacy in Athens,³⁶ but at the same time the majority of the citizens lacked literate skills and were in regular contact with the widespread literate practices of their urban centre only through assistance offered by trusted family members, friends and associates who were themselves literate.³⁷ That is, the Athenian citizens are seen only as learners of basic literacy skills rather than as participants in literacy practices that had their own sets of principles, demands and limitations, all having an effect on the learning of literacy.³⁸ In brief, fifth-century Athens is seen as a society of 'restricted' or 'craft' literacy. In chapters 3 and 4 I revisit the arguments founded on literacy *through intermediaries* which have been used in support of the thesis of limited literacy among Athenians.

What emerges from my rereading of the evidence is the distinctiveness of Athens. There are two main features that set Athens apart from other societies for which literacy *through intermediaries*³⁹ has been attested: its phonetic alphabet and its democracy, which mitigated class conflicts between rich and poor. While the acquisition of literacy demanded special training in other cultures, the ease with which the alphabet could be acquired facilitated teaching in the context of the family. Meanwhile, the democratic system itself encouraged

³⁵ Arguing that fifth-century Athenians possessed only a minimal literacy, Havelock uses the term 'craft literacy' to denote a person's ability 'to write little more than one's signature': Havelock 1963: 38–41, quotation from 40, and on 39: 'We may be dealing with a situation best described as craft literacy, in which the public inscription is composed as a source of referral for officials and as a check upon arbitrary interpretations.' As I understand, Harris's 'craftsman's literacy' is another term for this degree of literacy: 1989a, *passim* and for a definition 7–8; but note his rather confusing references to degrees of this literacy: 15, 19, 61, 328. On the term 'restricted', see Pébarthe 2006: 18; see also his comments on relevant terms: 33–4. R. Thomas (1992: 11 and 13) uses the term 'phonetic literacy' (cf. 9 and 92); see also her comments on the different degrees of literacy: R. Thomas 1989: 18–19.

³⁶ Harris 1989a: 26–7. ³⁷ Harris 1989a: 90; R. Thomas 1992: 155.

³⁸ Cf. Langer 1988: 42.

³⁹ Known also as 'vicarious literacy': Browning 1993: 72; or 'second-hand' literacy: Harris 1989a: 35; D.J. Thompson 1994: 73.

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and stimulated Athenians to respond to the demands for literacy.⁴⁰ More particularly (Chapter 3), I re-examine Broneer's ascription of the so-called Akropolis ostraka, bearing the name of Themistokles, to fourteen hands, which has been used as evidence in support of the idea that literacy through intermediaries was widespread among Athenian citizens. Observing how the writers of the ostraka adapted the number and size of the letters of the inscription to the size of each ostrakon weakens the strength of Broneer's argument based on the similarity of letterforms. Such individual spatial perception combined with erratic spelling suggests that many hands, almost as many as the ostraka, produced the Akropolis ostraka.

However, the short inscriptions of the ostraka do not indicate the level of writing ability or comprehension that prevailed among the fifth-century Athenians; they do not allow us to assess whether their writers went beyond the level of basic literacy. Hence, in Chapter 4, I focus on official inscriptions with longer texts. Although the majority of these are heavily mutilated, they may allow us to make inferences about the linguistic competence of those who composed them (see also Chapter 5, 'Levels of literacy'). Harris's book was praised by one reviewer for not trying to 'go beyond the evidence',⁴¹ but Harris himself writes that 'the weakness of the scholarly literature on this subject is that it makes no imaginative effort to take account of the writing materials that have not survived'. In Chapter 4 I respond to his challenge and make an 'imaginative effort'⁴² to trace the 'primary working documents'⁴³ of the Athenian committees and officials, written on wooden tablets, whitened or waxed. Literacy emerges as pervading many areas of the democratic administration.

But who wrote the various administrative documents? Is there any evidence that there was an extensive literacy in Attika? Were inscriptions and ostraka written, read and comprehended by people of little means? These are questions of crucial importance for understanding Athenian literacy from a sociopolitical perspective. One critical issue is the involvement of common citizens in the Council (an idea which has been resisted by a number of scholars), where various literacy practices demanded that people go beyond the mere ability to

⁴⁰ Cf. Jeffery 1990: 63. ⁴¹ Cornell 1991: 7.⁴² Harris 1996: 61. Cf. Connor 1974: 34. ⁴³ Term borrowed from Davies 1994: 207.

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identify the written signs for the sounds of the spoken language. My contention is that the probouleutic Council provided the context in which common citizens developed functional literacy (Chapter 5).

Given the character of our sources we cannot know for certain how many among the common people were literate, semi-literate or illiterate. Still, the question cannot be avoided, and the answer given involves our assessment of the quality and character of Athenian democracy and culture.