



Blinding Radiance and the Greek Dance

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Notes

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BLINDING RADIANCE AND THE GREEK DANCE

In a most interesting note, "The Blinding Radiance of the Divine Visage," in *CLASSICAL JOURNAL* XXXVI (1941), 485-488, Dr. Eugene S. McCartney collects and discusses instances in ancient, medieval, and modern literature of the blinding effect upon human beings of the gaze of divinities, royal personages, or individuals of divine beauty. He mentions (p. 488) the use in Cretan art of a gesture similar to the modern military salute. His source (Otto Kern, *Die Religion der Griechen*: Berlin, Weidmann [1926], I, 25) interprets it, correctly, I believe, as an example of a ritualistic shielding of the eyes from the radiance of a deity. I should like to go a step further and to suggest that the gesture did not end with the Cretans but passed on to the Greeks; that they used it, with ritualistic significance, in the drama and the dance; and that in one form of the drama it fused with a similar gesture and so lost its original meaning.

The Cretans seem to have had an elaborate code of gestures, all of great religious or secular importance, which they were able to use almost as a symbolic language. The Greeks often spoke of the skill of the Cretans in devising dance-gestures and dances and in fact even looked upon them as inventors of the whole art of the dance (Athenaeus v, 181B). From them the Greeks borrowed many dances, figures, and gestures. Among the dances which seem to have been taken by the Greeks directly from the Cretans was the *sikinnis*.¹ As time went on, the Greeks used this dance in their satyr plays, and it became the characteristic dance of that type of

¹ Cf. *POLLUX* IV, 14; Athenaeus I, 20 and XIV, 28; Suidas, *s.v. sikinnis*; and schol., Pind., *Pyth.* II, 127.

performance. Interestingly enough, among the *schemata*, or figures, specifically associated with the dance of the satyr play by ancient writers is one usually called *skopos* (sometimes *skops*, *skopeuma*, or *cheir hyposkopos*), in which the dancer shields his eyes with his hand.²

The origin and development of the *skopos* figure is not a simple matter. There is evidence that one source of the schema, as it was used in the dance of the satyr play, was the Arcadian shepherd dance to Pan Aposkopos.³ In this the dancer mimetically shielded his eyes from the sun as he looked for his sheep (cf. Silius Italicus XIII, 341 f.). Basically, of course, this is the same gesture as shielding the eyes from divine radiance. As the cult of Pan spread through Greece and combined to some extent with that of Dionysus, the *skopos* figure appeared in ritual dances to the latter deity, and representations of dancing satyrs using the gesture began to be abundant in Greek art. Later the figure was influenced by certain ancient mimetic owl-dances. It is entirely possible, however, that in the original Cretan dance, before its association with the Greek satyr play, some form of the Cretan gesture of shielding the eyes may have been used;⁴ this fact may even have emphasized the similarity between the Dionysiac dances and the Cretan *sikinnis*, and have furthered the adoption of the latter for the satyr play. Once adopted, the *sikinnis* came to be thought of as essentially Dionysiac; and quite logically at that point the Cretan significance of the gesture would have yielded to the Pan-Dionysus significance of "peering."

Even apart from the *sikinnis*, however, I believe that the Greeks knew and used the Cretan gesture of deference as such down through most of their history. The gesture, or something very like it, is seen in dancing figures on vases as early as the seventh century.⁵ Among non-dancing figures which show a variant of the ges-

² Cf. Athenaeus xiv, 629 f.; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* xxxv, 138; Hesychius, s.v. "hyposkopon chera"; and Photius, *Lexicon*, p. 527, 7.

³ Cf. Lillian B. Lawler, "The Dance of the Owl," *Trans. Am. Phil. Assoc.* LXX (1939), 496-498.

⁴ Cf. Lawler, *op. cit.*, p. 498, n. 73. It is interesting to note that the *sikinnis* is sometimes called a ritual dance—*hieratike*.

⁵ Cf., e.g., Maurice Emmanuel, *Essai sur l'Orchestre Grecque Antique*: Paris, Hachette (1895), 256, fig. 524.

ture are an eighth-century bronze statuette (36, 11, 8) and a fifth-century terra-cotta figurine (unnumbered; in room J 3) in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

From the nature of the gesture, it could have been used in religious rituals and, later, in tragedy. Dr. McCartney's note contains references which would indicate its appropriateness in connection with the deities Apollo, Athena, and Zeus; it would apply equally well to most other divinities. In tragedy it could be used with great effectiveness in every play in which a *deus ex machina* appears, or in which a character of particular radiance is introduced (e.g., in Aeschylus, *Persians* 150–152, where the radiance of the queen is likened to that of the gods). In this connection it seems significant that Athenaeus (xiv, 630A) lists the *skopos* with five other schemata which Pollux in a similar passage (iv, 105) specifically says belong to the dance of tragedy. This is not to be regarded as a contradiction of what has been said above concerning the *skopos* in the dance of the satyr play; for the same schema sometimes appears in both the satyr play and tragedy.

I believe, then, that we are justified in recognizing in the *skopos* of the Greek dance the gesture regularly accompanying the phenomenon so well discussed by Dr. McCartney.⁶

LILLIAN B. LAWLER

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⁶ Dr. McCartney has read this note, and made valuable suggestions.

TWO PARAPHRASES BY A. E. HOUSMAN

Familiar to readers of Greek lyric poetry is the following couplet usually ascribed to Sappho:

Δέδουκε μὲν ἂ σελάννα καὶ πληιάδες· μέσαι δὲ
νύκτες, παρὰ δ' ἔρχεται ὥρα· ἔγω δὲ μόνα κατέειδω.¹

On page ix of his Preface to A. E. Housman's *More Poems*,² Laurence Housman thus concludes his explanation that many of the poems included in the book are "workshop material," and that some obviously of this type have not been included:

¹ E. Diehl, *Anthologia Lyrica*: Leipzig, Teubner (1922), No. 94.

² New York, Alfred A. Knopf (1936), authorized publisher in the United States, who has given his permission for the use of these quotations.