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THE DANCE IN JEST

MANY WRITERS HAVE called attention to the fact that the Greeks derived a great deal of enjoyment, and indeed just plain fun, from some of their religious rituals. This was certainly the case with many of the rituals which involved dancing. The very Muse who presided over choral dancing was called Terpsichore—"she who joys in the dance"; and even the austere and learned (*pánsophos*) Polyhymnia, who according to one account, at least (*Anth. Pal.* 9.504), actually "invented" the art, is described as the discoverer of "the joy of the dance"—*térpsias orchethmoio*. We may recall that Plato (*Laws* 2.653-4, 672-3) saw the dance as originating in the natural desire of all human beings, and even of animals, to express joy by movement of their bodies, and he (erroneously) sought the origin of the word *chorós*, "dance," in the word *chará*, "joy."

We are not surprised, then, to find certain very jovial dances among those offered to the gods at Greek festivals. For example, the *asko·liasmós* was a dance in honor of Dionysus, in which the participants jumped or hopped up and down on greased wineskins—an activity which suggests to the mind of the modern American the logrolling contests of the lumbermen of the North-

west rather than any conceivable religious ritual! Similar astounding spectacles, from the modern point of view, would be the hilarious animal dances of various sorts performed with much gusto by masked and costumed votaries in honor of divinities—e.g., the "bear dances" of small girls in honor of Artemis Brauronia at her shrine near Athens¹; the "flirt the tail" or "lizard" dances offered to Artemis at Ephesus; and the rapid and obviously spirited mummary of the "dancing beasts" (women with animal masks) portrayed on a piece of marble drapery found in the shrine of Despoina at Lycosura.² And, of course, pre-eminent among such rituals would be the famous "goat songs" and dances in honor of Dionysus, if that is what they were.³

The ancient Greek was blessed with an excellent sense of humor. Not only did he enjoy dancing, but he frequently made jokes about dancing and dancers; and Greek literature, from earliest times down to the very threshold of the Middle Ages, is happily rich in such "orchestic jests."

Performers in Dionysiac dances, for instance, sometimes joke about their own convivial condition. Archilochus confesses (*Frag.* 77 Diehl) that it is

when he is “smitten with wine” that he knows how to act as leader of the dithyrambic dance; similarly a character in the *Philoctetes* of Epicharmus remarks that “when you drink water, it isn’t a dithyramb.”⁴ Even apart from the Dionysiac rituals, there is jesting about the dance inspired by wine. An old Greek proverb⁵ warns that wine makes even old men dance against their will. As early as the *Odyssey* (14.463-6) there is a reference to “crazing wine, which stirs even a wise man to song and silly laughter, and makes him jump up and dance.” The comic poet Alexis, in his *Tarentines*,⁶ says that the Athenians “all dance immediately if they only perceive the smell of wine.” He goes on to describe a wine-inspired dance of guests at a dinner party: You would say you were gazing upon the effects of some terrible accident (*sumphorán*), he declares, if you suddenly came upon these ugly fellows writhing, and rolling the whites of their eyes; and he personally would be happy, he declares, to execute them all—presumably to put them out of their misery! The opposite side of the coin, so to speak, is to be found among the Romans, in Cicero’s bitterly ironic jest:⁷ “Nemo enim fere saltat sobrius, nisi forte insanit. . . .”

The idea of a compulsive dance, in which the dancer cannot stop even if he wishes to do so, is often found in Greek literature. Sometimes it is discussed seriously, as in stories of “dance mania” of the mythological period,⁸ and in Plutarch’s reference (*Quaest. conv.* 9.15) to dancers so affected by certain types of music and song that they dance in spite of themselves, in the manner of puppets pulled by strings. Occasionally, however, we find a jesting treatment of the theme—as, e.g., in the *Peace* of Aristophanes (321-34). There Trygaeus keeps urging

the chorus of farmers to stop their vigorous and lively dancing, and to get down to the work of rescuing Peace from the deep pit into which she has been cast. The farmers, however, insist that they are trying very hard to cease dancing, but that their legs, overjoyed at the prospect of an end of the war, are dancing entirely of their own accord. First the right leg goes up, they say, and then the left leg must have its turn; both legs are, indeed, entirely out of control!

Of a somewhat similar tone is the famous conclusion (1474-1537) of the *Wasps* of Aristophanes, in which there is a detailed description of a spirited dance contest participated in by Philocleon and the three sons of Carcinus, a tragic poet of Aristophanes’ day. We shall not here enter into the long controversy whether these dances are meant to represent the *emmeleia* of tragedy, the *kordax* of comedy, the *sikinnis* of the satyr play, or dances characteristic of courtesans. Suffice it to say that the lines of verse give us a vivid picture of the dances—and also a choice mélange of imprecations, threats, puns, and name-calling. Philocleon, for instance, threatens to “eat up” one of his rivals, and to “destroy him with an *emmeleia* of the knuckles” (1503), for, as he says, “in rhythm he is nothing.”

Although the dance was actually held in high regard in Greece, there are many passages in Greek literature in which “dancer” is used as a term of reproach. There are two in the *Iliad*—the one (16.617-8) in which Aeneas contemptuously calls Meriones a “dancer” for his skill in evading blows in single combat, and the other (24.261) in which Priam, rebuking his surviving sons, calls them liars, thieves, and, ironically, “dancers, very good at striking the floor in a dance.” At the other end

of the span of Greek literature — in the *Greek anthology* (11.11) — we find dancing treated in scornful terms: Epicrates must be a tragic poet or a flute-player or something of the sort, says the writer, for when he is asked out to dinner he always has a “chorus” of hangers-on who come “dancing” along with him, and who must be fed, too. Among the Romans, of course, we find the dance regarded as *omnium vitiorum postremum*, and *saltator* as a term of invective.⁹

A famous dancer in Greek literature who meets not only with scorn, but even with disaster, for his dancing, is Hippocleides.¹⁰ The favored suitor for the hand of the daughter of Cleisthenes, tyrant of Sicyon, he celebrated prematurely his victory over the other suitors by dancing on a table, at a feast given by the ruler. Then, warming up to the occasion, he “rested his head on the table” and danced with his legs in the air. In shocked horror Cleisthenes announced that Hippocleides had “danced away his marriage.”

In the works of Aristophanes and his contemporaries a great deal of invective and ironic jest is poured out upon the poet-dancer Cinesias. This unfortunate person was a leader in the “new movement” which favored unconventional and less sedate patterns of verse, music, and the dance, particularly in the field of the dithyramb. An unknown comic poet, traditionally Pherecrates,¹¹ has a character called Mousike, who complains of the “mutilations” and “inharmonious twists” (*exarmoníous kampás*) which she has suffered in Cinesias’ dithyrambs. Aristophanes speaks of the same man and his verses as wobbly, shaky, lame, and twisted (*Birds* 1378-9). He emphasizes his “high-flown” style (*Birds* 1372-1409), and ironically calls his overly active and contorted gestures and postures “the

Pyrrhic dance of Cinesias” (*Frogs* 153).¹² Other writers of the day, too, use the word *kámpto*, “twist,” and its derivatives in speaking of Cinesias’ dances. They, like Aristophanes, deplore the effect of his dances upon the morals of the day. May we perhaps see in his performances the prototype of the current “twist”?

In the same period we find a beginning of the lament that the dance as a whole is declining from its earlier standards of “orderly beauty,” harmonious grace, and disciplined austerity. Plato Comicus is quoted as saying that if people danced in former days, it was “a wonderful thing” to see; but that now the dancers “do nothing, but, like men who have suffered a stroke, they stand motionless, and howl!”¹³

A little later Menander excoriates in similar fashion the choral singers and dancers of his day. Not all of them perform, he says; “two or three stand by silent, just to make up the number. . . . They fill up space, but there is no real life in them.”¹⁴

Inept dancers do not only “just stand there” in the complaints of their critics. In the Greco-Roman and later periods, particularly, writers lament that even when some persons do dance, they perform as if they were made of wood, or stone, or lead. Libanius¹⁵ speaks of dancers who act as if they have been “transformed into lead” instead of being “winged things,” as dancers should be. In a poem of the *Greek anthology* (11.253), Lucilius asks a dancer from what oak tree he was cut, or from what millstone he was quarried, that he danced so ponderously; he calls the dancer the “breathing image of Niobe,” and conjectures that he, too, must have offended Leto, to be thus turned to stone! In another poem in the same collection (11.255; cf. also 254), Pallas remarks that a dancer portrayed Niobe and Daphne, and quite appropri-

ately, too—Daphne in wooden fashion, and Niobe as if he were made of stone. Libanius (106) cautions that if a dancer overeats, as a performer he will be “not much better than a stone.”

Conversely, we have references to statues and reliefs of stone or metal which portrayed dancers so skillfully as to give the illusion of motion or impending motion.¹⁶ Figures by Daedalus, indeed, are spoken of as actually triumphing over the substance of which they are made, and “moving in the dance.”¹⁷ On the other hand, we sometimes have jesting criticisms of statues of dancers. Agathias Scholasticus, e.g., criticizes a statue of a Bacchant in Byzantium¹⁸: She looks, he says, as if she does not even know how to make use of the cymbals in her hands, and hopes that everybody will go away before she starts to dance to them!

Libanius (118) speaks of dancers who halt in statuesque poses “as if glued there”—*hó·sper kekolle·ménoi*. Whether this is a jest or not it is difficult to say. We do know that such poses or “pictures in the dance” were favored, probably from prehistoric times down into the Christian period.¹⁹

There is a good deal of jesting over awkward, too exuberant, or too noisy dancing. Lucian²⁰ objects to dancers who cannot keep time to the music: “Their feet say one thing,” he complains, “but the rhythm says another.” Hermippus, a writer of Old Comedy, deploras the use in dancing of metal castanets, the noise of which “knocks limpets off the rocks.”²¹ In the *Greek anthology* there is a whole series (6.217, 218, 219, 220, 237) of epigrams on one theme—the story of a dancer-priest of Rhea who, walking alone in the woods, encountered a fierce lion. Details differ from poem to poem, but it seems that the priest simply began his customary dance in honor of the goddess, beating

“in wild frenzy” on his *tympanon*, or hand-drum. The noise was so dreadful that the savage beast turned and fled!

An awkward dancer whose nickname was Lakkos, “Tank” (perhaps because of a too-buxom figure—or because he enjoyed the gifts of Dionysus!), fell into a wine jar while he was performing, and called forth from the audience the pleased comment, “The Tank has fallen into the wine jar!”²² Another, appearing in the part of Capaneus (one of the Seven against Thebes, who is said to have been struck by a thunderbolt as he stood on the wall of that city), accidentally fell down while he was dancing—to the delighted jeers of the critics, who declared that he “danced everything according to the story.”²³ But, adds one commentator, “in the case of your performance of Canace you were not so good, for you left the stage alive. That was not in the story.”

Lucian (*On the dance* 76) speaks at some length of the people of the city of Antioch, who in his day were very fond of the dance, very observant, and very frank in their shouts to the dancers. When a small man stepped upon the dancing floor in the role of Hector, says Lucian, they cried out with one voice, “Hi there, Astyanax! But where is Hector?” When a very tall dancer undertook the part of Capaneus, and began to enact the assault upon the walls of Thebes, the audience advised him merely to “step over the walls—you won’t need any ladders!” To an unusually thin dancer they cried out feelingly, “Do take care of yourself!” To an overweight dancer who began a series of leaps, the crowd in Antioch moaned, “We pray you, spare the platform!” Similarly Libanius (96) quotes a complaint that dancers “break down the platform with their feet!”²⁴

In this connection there comes to mind the much debated courtesan Me-

lissa, whom Athenaeus (4.157A) jestingly calls a *theatrotorúne*. The epithet occurs only here in Greek literature. The word *torúne* means "ladle, stirring implement," and some translators have thought that a "theater-ladle" must be something like a "stage-thumper." However, we have ample evidence for lascivious dances in which courtesans "rotate the hips in the manner of a pestle in a mortar," "writhing and twisting." Evidently Melissa was noted for dances in the theater in which she reminded spectators of a ladle "stirring" something in a kettle.²⁵

Speaking of courtesans, we should perhaps take note of one, an unknown, whose connection with an orchestric jest is only indirect, and, as it were, archaeological. A vase skillfully made in the shape of a courtesan's shoe has been preserved.²⁶ The nails on the sole would indicate that it was a dancing shoe — perhaps even the remote ancestor of the modern tap dancer's footgear. But this is not all: The nails are so arranged as to form the word *AKOΛΟΥΘ(Ε)Ι* — "follow me!" We may recall here the recent unfortunate bridegroom upon the soles of whose shoes his friends (?) had painted the word "Help!" clearly visible when he knelt down during the wedding ceremony.

We have noted several jests and anecdotes connected with pantomimic dancers of the Greco-Roman period. There are many more. Lucian, e.g., though defending the *pantomimi* against attacks, yet admits that some of them were not too sure of their mythology: One, he says (80), while portraying Semele being struck by lightning, ran off into the story of Glaucus, "who had not yet been born!" The same author furnishes us with a few glimpses of ancient "audience participation" at pantomimic performances. You can see the spectators

"hating" evil deeds, he says (72), but they receive with tears and sympathy anything pitiable or sad, or a character who is wronged (72, 70). In other words, they react appropriately to the "good guys" and the "bad guys."

Lucian also gives us (83-4) a long and circumstantial account of a pantomimic dancer who really "went wild" while performing as Ajax. He tore the clothing of one of the musicians, snatched a flute from another, and beat a bystander over the head with it. He then came down among the spectators — among the senators, indeed! — and seated himself between two ex-consuls, who were obviously afraid of him. Meanwhile the audience, entering into the spirit of the occasion, leaped and shouted and threw garments into the air. The dancer finally returned to his senses, apologized publicly for his conduct, and actually became ill with remorse.

Macrobius recounts (*Sat.* 2.7) a somewhat similar story of the great Pylades, the so-called "inventor" of the pantomimic dance: As he was dancing the part of the maddened Heracles, someone in the audience remarked audibly that he was not using enough restraint. Pylades thereupon removed his mask, shouted "You fools, I am portraying a madman!" and shot real arrows at his critic.

The same dancer was famous for his portrayal of the frenzied Dionysus, leading the Bacchic rout. "Dancing, he filled all the city with unrestrained divinity," says a poet.²⁷ "Thebes knows the Dionysus who was born of fire," he continues. "The heavenly one is this one whom we see created by these speaking hands." Another writer²⁸ says: "If Dionysus had come to holy Olympus dancing with the nymphs and satyrs as the skillful Pylades depicted him . . . Hera would have laid aside

her jealousy, and would have said, 'You lied about Bacchus, Semele; I bore him!' "

Pylades was a sharp critic of his pupils and of other dancers. Once, when his pupil Hylas rose on tiptoe to portray "great Agamemnon," Pylades is said to have commented, "That is 'tall,' not 'great,' Agamemnon." On another occasion, when Hylas was performing the role of the blinded Oedipus, Pylades objected, "But you walk as if you could see!"²⁹

Pylades frequently showed his scorn for the public at large. When an assembled crowd once demanded that Pylades dance for them, then and there, he complied by sitting absolutely still. Asked for an explanation, he replied that he was portraying a great leader, pondering weighty problems.³⁰

There are many anecdotes of the pantomimic dance in which a Roman emperor figures prominently. Augustus, in whose presence two *pantomimi* engaged in an informal contest, is said to have remarked that of the two one was really a dancer, *saltator*, the other merely an *interpellator* — an interrupter!³¹ Caligula, who was fascinated by the pantomimic dances, once was so put out because a storm forced the cancellation of a program that he challenged Jupiter to a duel!³² Nero often went secretly to the theater and took a post in the upper part of the proscenium, from which he could watch the dancers to advantage. When they and their partisans sometimes got into fights, he is said to have joined in the *melée*, throwing various objects down upon the heads of dancers and spectators alike.³³ The emperor Verus brought back so many actors and *pantomimi* from Syria after his Parthian expedition that it was said that it had been not a Parthian war, but a histrionic war!³⁴

All through Greek literature one encounters metaphors drawn from the field of the dance.³⁵ Space will permit us to mention here only a few of these which may be said to be in jesting or humorous vein.

In the *Birds* of Aristophanes (1169) a messenger comes rushing in "looking a Pyrrhic dance" — i.e., "looking daggers." Diogenianus (8.60) uses "a pig comes dancing in" as we use the expression "a bull in a china shop." Zenobius (3.53) speaks of "dancing into the bees" as we would say "raising a hornets' nest." Aristophanes³⁶ and Plutarch³⁷ use the words "to take the cake" in much the same way as that expression was used in the slang of our own country some fifty years ago, to denote "to win the prize, to be the absolute best (or worst!)" in any respect. This particular metaphor seems to originate in the many all-night dancing celebrations common in ancient Greece on various festal occasions, at which "victory cakes" (*niketéria*) were actually given to those dancers who succeeded in staying awake all night. The American usage, too, may stem from dancing contests such as the "cake walk," for which the prize was a cake.

The movements of animals are often called, metaphorically, dances. A fierce lion, roaring and tossing its head and mane, is said³⁸ to have "taught itself the dance of Rhea." In a Greek romance, believe it or not, some sheep "dance" joyously around the heroine!³⁹ Fish, especially dolphins, are often spoken of as "dancing" in the waves.⁴⁰ Even cooked fish dance! In Athenaeus (4.157A) "a large sea perch, rather smelly, comes dancing in" at a dinner party, and, later (7.277B), a whole chorus of cooked fish come in, wagging their tails. The comic poet Euboulus speaks of fish "dancing"

with lambs' entrails in a frying pan.⁴¹ "Truffle," says an unknown comic poet,⁴² "comes dancing in," "artichoke makes an entrance," "beet keeps a definite rhythm," and all the beautiful foods "make an appearance." Sometimes a whole meal "dances" to the table.⁴³ And even the cooking pots and other utensils, harmoniously arranged in the orderly kitchen, form a "dance chorus."⁴⁴

We may perhaps conclude this varied array of terpsichorean jests with one

example of orchestric humor which is certainly unconscious, and which is amusing only in its modern connotation. In an epigram preserved in the *Greek anthology* (6.173), the lady Achrylis, who has often participated in the wild dances in honor of Rhea-Cybele, dedicates locks of her hair to the goddess — and suffers from *thermòn pòda*, a "hot foot"!

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¹ Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 645 and schol. ad loc.; Suidas, s.v. *árktos*; Euripides, Frag.767 Nauck.

² *Journal of the British School at Athens* 13(1906-7)392-5 and Plate 14; Guy Dickins, *Hellenistic sculpture* (Oxford 1920)62 and Fig.48.

³ Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449a14.

⁴ Frag.115 Kaibel; ap. Ath.14.628B.

⁵ Athenaeus 4.134C.

⁶ Frag.222 Kock; ap. Ath.4.134A.

⁷ *Pro Murena* 6.13.

⁸ Cf. Lillian B. Lawler, "Dance mania in pre-historic Greece," *CO* 24(1947)38-9.

⁹ Cicero, *Pro Murena* 6.13; 2 *Cat.* 23.

¹⁰ Herodotus 6.126-9; cf. also Athenaeus 14.628.

¹¹ Frag.145 K; cf. Pseudo-Plutarch, *De mus.* 30.1141E.

¹² Cf. Lillian B. Lawler, "Limewood Cinesias and the dithyrambic dance," *TAPA* 81(1950)78-88.

¹³ Frag.130 Kock; ap. Ath.14.628E; cf. Xenophon, *Oec.* 8.20.

¹⁴ Frag.153 Koerte, 165 Kock.

¹⁵ *On the dancers* 107; cf. also 117, 118.

¹⁶ Callistratus 2.11 and 14; *Anth.Pal.* 9.774.

¹⁷ Callistratus 3.8, 9.

¹⁸ *Anth.Pal.* 16.59.

¹⁹ Cf. Lillian B. Lawler, "The lily in the dance," *AJP* 65(1944)75-80; Ernst Riess, "Hesychiana," *CW* 37(1944)240-1; Athenaeus 3.114F.

²⁰ *On the dance* 80.

²¹ Frag.31 Kock; ap. Ath.14.636D.

²² Athenaeus 13.584B.

²³ *Anth.Pal.* 11.254; cf. Ausonius, *Epigr.* 18.

²⁴ The present writer recalls a performance of *La Gioconda* in a small theater in Italy, in which

the Dance of the Hours was rendered by a chorus so well-nourished that the small stage creaked ominously, and the audience uttered audible groans.

²⁵ Pollux 4.101; 10.103; Hesychius, s.v. *maktér*; Athenaeus 14.629F; *Etymologicum magnum* p.464, 49-52; Suidas, s.v. *ígdē*; Lillian B. Lawler, "Ladles, tubs, and the Greek dance," *AJP* 71 (1950)70-2; "A mortar dance," *CJ* 43(1947)34.

²⁶ Daremberg-Saglio, *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, s.v. *solea*; also Fig.4968 s.v. *meretrices*.

²⁷ *Anth.Pal.* 16.290.

²⁸ *Anth.Pal.* 9.248.

²⁹ Macrobius, *Sat.* 2.7.

³⁰ Macrobius, *ibid.*

³¹ Quintilian 6.3.65.

³² Seneca, *Dial.* 3.20.8

³³ Suetonius, *Nero* 26.2

³⁴ *Hist.Aug.*, *Verus* 8.6-11.

³⁵ Cf. Lillian B. Lawler, "All the earth will dance — the dance in metaphor," *CJ* 46(1951)383-91.

³⁶ Aristophanes, *Knights* 277; *Thesm.* 94.

³⁷ Plutarch, *Quaest. symp.* 9.747A.

³⁸ *Anth.Pal.* 6.218.

³⁹ Longus 2.29.1.

⁴⁰ Anacreontics 56 Bergk; Euripides, *Helen* 1454 and *Electra* 432-41; *Anth.Pal.* 7.214 and 9.83; Athenaeus 7.308A.

⁴¹ Frag.75 Kock; ap. Ath.3.108B.

⁴² D. L. Page, *Greek literary papyri* 1 (Loeb Classical Library, 1942) no.49, pp.236-9.

⁴³ Athenaeus 6.230F.

⁴⁴ Xenophon *Oec.* 8.20.