

DWORA GILULA

THE *CHOREGOI* VASE – COMIC YES, BUT ANGELS?

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The Apulian bell-crater (New York, Fleischman coll. F93), which inspired Taplin to name his recent book *The Comic Angels* after it, represents a phlyax scene of four actors on a low stage, two inscribed ΧΟΡΗΓΟΣ and the two others ΑΙΓΙΣΤΟΣ and ΠΥΡΡΙΑ[Σ] respectively. Trendall dated the vase to 380 BC and suggested identifying the *choregoi*, one old and one young, as “the two leaders of the semi-chorus”, and Pyrrhias as a slave. He was puzzled by the presence of Aigisthos, a figure from the world of tragedy in an embroidered garment, “for which the scene itself at present gives little hint of a solution”¹.

Taplin accepted Trendall’s view that the two *choregoi* are members of a chorus, and of a semi-chorus at that, but preferred to understand the term *choregos* as bearing “the standard meaning of the word” in fifth-century Athens, that is, a wealthy citizen footing the expenses of a theatre production, “in the American idiom, an angel” (p. 58), an interpretation that Trendall rejected in his first, preliminary description of the vase². The two *choregoi*, according to Taplin, represent “a whole chorus of wealthy *choregoi*, half younger and half older” (p. 59). Aigisthos is a representative of tragedy and the slave Pyrrhias of comedy; the older semi-chorus supports tragedy, the younger – comedy (pp. 62–63), and the entire scene “brings out the paired opposition of tragedy and comedy” (p. 66). He dates the play which the vase represents to “somewhere between 430 and 380” (ibid.), in accordance with his theory that the vases of South Italy show affiliations with Athenian fifth-century comedy, as, for example, does the “Würzburg Telephos” vase which reflects the Telephos-scene in Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazousai*³.

Taplin’s interpretation indeed offers attractive ‘solutions’ to several of the scene’s puzzles and is supported by an impressive array of arguments and evidence. However, it leaves some questions unanswered and raises several new ones. A reconsideration of the evidence, and of its interpretations, may lead to a somewhat different understanding of the scene.

The *choregoi* are not chorus members. The obvious objection to the identification of the two *choregoi* as members of a chorus, each representing an entire semi-chorus (an objection to which Taplin addresses himself), is the fact of their appearing on the stage and not in the orchestra. He offers three arguments to counter this objection: (a) He argues that the evidence in favour of his interpretation, that is the identical dress of the *choregoi* and their

¹ *RVAp. Supp. II* = A. D. Trendall & A. Cambitoglou, *The Red-Figured Vases of Apulia*, Supp. II (*BICS*, Suppl. 42, 1992) 8; the vase was recomposed from fragments with some restoration; O. Taplin, *Comic Angels* (Oxford 1993), esp. pp. 55–66.

² Trendall identifies the *choregoi* in his first description as “the leaders of the two semi-choruses, and not the producers of the play”, A. D. Trendall, “Farce and Tragedy in South Italian Vase-Painting”, in T. Rasmussen & N. Spivey (eds.), *Looking at Greek Vases* (Cambridge 1991) 164; fig. 67.

³ See E. Csapo, “A Note on the Würzburg Bell-Crater H5697 (“Telephus Travestitus”)”, *Phoenix* 40 (1986) 379–392; O. Taplin, “Phallology, Phlyakes, Iconography and Aristophanes”, *PCPhS* 33 (1987) 92–104; idem, *Comic Angels*, 36–41.

identification not by name but by a shared function, overrides this objection. (b) He states that we do not know “how far at this period the stage and orchestra were differentiated as the territory of actors and chorus respectively, neither in Athens nor South Italy” (p. 57); and finally (c) he resorts to a special pleading, arguing that this is an exceptional case in which theatrical accuracy was compromised by artistic demands of composition.

Let us look more closely at these arguments.

(a) Identity of costumes need not signify membership in a chorus. There are choruses whose members are each differently dressed, as for example the chorus members in Aristophanes’ *Birds*, and several semi-choruses known to us have a more distinctive differentiation of dress of the two groups, such as the old men and old women in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, and most probably the rich men and poor men in Eupolis’ *Marikas*⁴. Taplin himself acknowledges this. When discussing objections to the possibility that chorus members are represented on the “Bari Pipers” vase⁵, he writes “they might have identical costumes because they are companions or rivals rather than because they are members of a chorus” (p. 76).

Moreover, identity of dress may have its source in the painter’s artistic idiosyncrasies or in his models. Trendall associates the “Milan Cake-eaters” vase (also called “The Stealers of Dainties”) with the *Choregoi* vase and reckons that both vases appear to be by the same artist, whom he now calls the *Choregos* painter⁶. On this vase the two slaves, Philonides and Xanthias, have identical costumes, very similar to the costumes of the two *choregoi*. In addition to the shape of the two vessels, the ornamental pattern-work and the treatment of the stage, it is especially the rendering of the tunics of the phlyax male actors on the two vases that led Trendall to assign both, the “Milan Cake-eaters” and the “*Choregoi*”, to the same artist. The tunics appear stiff, almost starched, with flat black borders. But not only are the tunics on the two vases similar – the masks also are. Philonides of the “Cake-eaters” dons the mask of the old *choregos*, Xanthias the mask of Pyrrhias. The same tunics and at least one, if not two, of the masks appear on the “Cheiron” vase, the work of a slightly later follower of the *Choregos* painter⁷. The similarity of the costumes and masks on these three vases may be ascribed to the particularities of style of the painter, his workshop or his close followers, or to his models, if the same troupe of actors with their troupe’s costumes and stage accessories are depicted on these vases.

(b) The chorus’ and the actors’ acting territory.

If the “*Choregoi*” play is an Athenian play dated between 430 and 380 BC, a period to which all of Aristophanes’ extant comedies belong, there is no question as to where its chorus performed, as there is no question as to where the choruses of *Acharnians*, *Wasps*, *Birds*, *Frogs*, and even those of the fourth-century plays, *Ecclesiazousai* and *Ploutos*, per-

⁴ See Taplin (note 1, above) 57–58.

⁵ *RVAp. I* = A. D. Trendall & A. Cambitoglou, *The Red-Figured Vases of Apulia*, Vol. 1 (Oxford 1978) 400, 15/28.

⁶ *RVAp. Supp. II*, p. 7, 6/123.

⁷ London BM F,151; *RVAp. I*, p. 100, 4/252; Trendall considers these vases, and *RVAp. I*, 4/224–5, to be “the work of slightly later followers of somewhat lower quality”, *RVAp. Supp. II*, p. 8.

formed. On the other hand, if the play was transplanted to South Italy in 380 BC, the date of the vase, it must have been adapted to local conventions of performance and new demands of space. The question is: Was there a chorus in South Italy in the phlyax plays and where did it perform? This question must be separated from the question of the choruses' performing space in the stone theatre buildings of Sicily and South Italy, since the phlyaces' stage is wooden, temporary and improvised, and no traces of such stages have survived. The stages on the vases, our only evidence as to their shape and outlook, suggest a performance given outdoors, but not necessarily in a proper theatre building or a designated theatrical space. The "Bari Pipers" vase (370–360 BC) provides a good illustration of a temporary and improvised stage which incorporates in its structure a living tree to which a curtain in front of the stage is attached. Even from the stone theatre buildings there are no remains from the period predating 350 BC, apart from the theatre in Syracuse⁸. Nevertheless, Taplin argues that there were choruses in South Italy in the phlyax plays and that their existence is confirmed by three vases each with an official *aulos*-player. But where did they perform? On the phlyax vases there is no space depicted as orchestra below and in front of the stage. Taplin tends to think that the acting space of the chorus was not on the stage. When discussing the "Bari Pipers" vase, he writes that since the pipers perform on stage, that is "hardly an argument in favour" (p. 76) of regarding them as chorus members, though they are "costumed and acting in an identical manner and they are accompanied by the official *aulos*-player" (p. 75).

The *choregoi* appear on stage. They are not dancing, not even acting in an identical manner – one is speaking and gesticulating, the other cowering in the background – and they are not accompanied by an official *aulos*-player. In sum, they lack all the elements for which Taplin was looking when searching for comic vases that might depict a chorus, and yet he considers the *choregoi* his strongest example of the depiction of a chorus.

(c) Finally, Taplin's special pleading is the least convincing of his arguments, as it entirely voids any evidence that can be deduced from the painting. For it cannot be argued that only in the particular instance of the chorus appearing on stage is theatrical accuracy foregone, while it is firmly adhered to in all other aspects and elements. For example, Aigisthos' presence on the comic stage, and his standing firmly on it, cannot be taken as unquestionable evidence of whatever interpretation the interpreter chooses to base on it without consideration of the possibility of theatrical inaccuracy.

⁸ See L. Pollaco & C. Anti, *Il teatro antico di Siracusa* (Rimini 1981) 167–189; K. Mitens, *Teatri greci e teatri ispirati all'architettura greca in Sicilia e nell'Italia meridionale c. 350–50 a. C.* (Roma 1988). Taplin previously wrote that "there is also archaeological evidence of theatre-building in many places in the early fourth century, most significantly in Syracuse", but he did not repeat this in *Comic Angels*; see O. Taplin, "Do the 'Phlyax Vases' have a Bearing on Athenian Comedy and the Polis?", in A. H. Sommerstein, S. Halliwell, J. Henderson, B. Zimmermann (eds.), *Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis* (Bari 1993) 527–539. We know that a theatre existed at Syracuse in the fifth century from literary evidence; the surviving structure is later.

Pyrrhias

Trendall's identification of Pyrrhias as a slave is based not on his costume and mask, but merely on the strength of his name. It connotes a reddish colour and, therefore, Trendall writes, would be a suitable slave-name, perhaps for a Thracian, "since they often had reddish hair"⁹. However, the traditional names of slaves in Old Comedy are Karion and Xanthias (Aeschines 2, 157), not Pyrrhias. As a slave-name, Pyrrhias occurs in New Comedy, but even then it is not exclusively a slave's name¹⁰, nor is red hair in itself a sign of Thracian origin or of servitude. To mention several distinguished persons, not Thracian, named Pyrrhias, of dates close to that of the "*Choregoi*" vase:

- (a) Pyrrhias of Phocis excelled at the battle of Aigospotamoi (Paus. 10, 9, 10);
- (b) Pyrrhias of Tegea was a nomothetes (Paus. 8, 48, 1);
- (c) Pyrrhias of Arcadia was an officer in the army of the Ten-Thousand (Xen. An. 6, 5, 11);
- (d) Pyrrhias appears in a list of Perrhaebic cities and their representatives on a dedication to Apollo Pythios from the second quarter of the 4th century BC (*SEG* 29, 546);
- (e) Last and not least, we know of quite a few Athenian citizens named Pyrrhias¹¹.

Thus reasons other than merely his name must be advanced for the identification of Pyrrhias as a slave, such as, for example, his mask, which is similar to the mask of Xanthias – an exclusively slave-name – on the "Milan Cake-eaters" vase and the "Cheiron" vase, though again this cannot be taken as conclusive proof of Pyrrhias' slave status for the reasons stated above, especially since his dress is more ornate than that of the two *choregoi*. But even if we concede for the sake of argument that Pyrrhias is a slave, it does not follow that a slave could be a symbolic representative of comedy in a play dated between 430 and 380 BC. Slaves move to the center of the comic action only in New Comedy. Even Karion in Aristophanes' *Ploutos* who has a much greater role than the slaves of Aristophanes' fifth-century plays, is not the mover of the action, nor is he its central character¹².

Aigisthos

The appearance of Aigisthos on a comic stage need not be considered surprising or unique. Aristotle, when commenting on reconciliation as proper to the resolving of plots in comedy, writes: "those who, in the piece, are the deadliest enemies – like Orestes and Aigisthos – quit the stage as friends at the close and no one slays or is slain" (*Poetics*, 1453a36, tr. Butcher). Aristotle refers here to a comedy unknown to us, in which the myth was altered for comic effect. Bywater *ad loc.* thought that the reference was to the *Orestes* of Alexis; Halliwell mentions fourth- and third-century phlyaces plays called *Orestes* by

⁹ *RVAp. Supp.* II, p. 8.

¹⁰ See, for example, Pyrrhias of Herakleia, the eponymous strategos of Thermos in the year 223/2, *IG IX* 12 31g, lines 45 and 50–51. See also van Leeuwen and Dover on Ar. *Frogs* 730; van Leeuwen understands 730 as an allusion to a politician with red hair (perhaps Cleophon). See also, for example, Pherecrates fr. 155.20–21: ποῖος οὐτοσὶ/ὄ) Τιμόθεος? (Mous.) Μιλήσιός τις πυρρίας.

¹¹ See Πυρρίαξ in M. J. Osborne & S. G. Byrne, *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, Vol. II (Oxford 1994) 389.

¹² See R. L. Hunter, *Eubulus* (Cambridge 1983) 22–30 (esp. 27 n. 1) with examples and literature.

Sopater and Rhinton, and Kassel–Austin add a comedy by Dinolochus, which may have influenced Aristotle’s choice in illustrating endings of comedy¹³. Thus Aigisthos on a comic stage may very well be a character in a mythological or tragic burlesque, a type of drama important in the fifth century and especially prominent in the fourth.

It is highly unlikely that Aigisthos is a defender or a representative of tragedy. He is not, as far as we know, a tragic hero, not an Oedipus or a Thyestes, but appears in tragedies as a minor character¹⁴. As for both Pyrrhias and Aigisthos it is questionable whether a character in a play could symbolize an entire genre. This seems to me a modern concept. What is possible, and was done already in fifth-century comedy, are personifications such as Opora and Theoria, attendants of Peace in Aristophanes’ *Peace*, or Basileia in *Birds*¹⁵.

It seems then that there are sufficient grounds for questioning Taplin’s interpretation of all the characters, and consequently of the meaning of the scene in which they are involved. Who then are the *choregoi*? If they are not chorus members, could they perhaps be actors on stage impersonating “angels”, the wealthy Athenian citizens sponsoring performances? It seems unlikely. Their costumes are not at all indicative of wealth, especially the ostentatious wealth that we have come to associate with the appearance of *choregos*, such as for example the gold crown and the cloak interwoven with gold that Demosthenes, when *choregos*, prepared for himself (*Meid.* 16, 22 etc.), nor does their posture signal such status. Pyrrhias’ costume is richer than theirs and the young *choregos* seems to be barefoot, hardly a symbol of wealth, hardly a Pericles or Demosthenes¹⁶. What other *choregoi* could there have been on a comic stage in South Italy, not wealthy but associated with actors and theatrical performances and identified not by name but by function, or rather by profession?

Fortunately, there are such other *choregoi*, or rather *choragoi*¹⁷, known to us from Roman Comedy. These are the professional furnishers of props and costumes for theatrical performances, and *choragium* is what they furnish¹⁸. Though they are known from Roman

¹³ S. Halliwell, *Aristotle’s Poetics* (London 1986) 272 p. 28; Kassel–Austin, *PCG* II p. 118, on Alexis, *Orestes*. See also T. B. L. Webster, *Studies in Later Greek Comedy*² (Manchester 1970) 57. In Hypothesis II of Euripides’ *Alcestis*, attributed to Aristophanes of Byzantium, we read: ἐκβάλλεται ὡς ἀνοίκεα τῆς τραγικῆς ποιήσεως ὅ τε Ὀρέστης καὶ ἡ Ἄλκηστις, ὡς ἐκ συμφορᾶς μὲν ἀρξόμενα, εἰς εὐδαιμονίαν (δὲ) καὶ χαρὰν λήξαντα, (ἅ) ἐστι μᾶλλον κωμωδίας ἐχόμενα (“The *Orestes* and the *Alcestis* are rejected from tragic poetry in that they begin from disaster and end in joy and delight, which belong to tragedy” tr. Conacher).

¹⁴ Pace Taplin (note 1, above) 62 n. 20, Andocides, *On Mysteries*, 129, and *Against Alcibiades*, 22, do not support the notion that Aigisthos is a tragic figure. In both passages Aigisthos is named as an example of an offspring of an unholy marriage, a mythological parallel used to illustrate the nature of Kallias’ and Alcibiades’ sons respectively; see MacDowell on *On Mysteries*, 129.

¹⁵ Representation of personifications is very typical of late fifth-century iconography; see L. Burn, “Vase Painting in Fifth-Century Athens”, in *Looking at Greek Vases* (note 2, above) 122–123.

¹⁶ For the involvement of the *choregoi* in productions, we have an interesting description in Antiphon, 6, 11–13 (the oration is probably datable to 419 or 412 BC). The speaker was appointed *choregos* (of a dithyrambic chorus) for the Thargelia. He is a busy man and therefore has appointed four deputies and a man named Philippos to take care of all the needs and whims of the chorus members, to “make any expenditures required [. . .] for the best possible training and equipment of the boys” (tr. Herington).

¹⁷ See Ar. *Lys.* 1315.

¹⁸ *Choragus* (in the Doric form) appears in Plautus twice in the play’s text (*Trinummus*, 858: *ipse ornamenta a chorago haec sumpsit suo periculo*; *Persa*, 159–60: Saturio: Πόθεν *ornamenta*? Toxilus: *abs chorago*

Comedy, the term is Greek and must have come to Rome together with the Greek plays (Roman comedies are based on Greek originals whose action is located in Greek towns), and the Greek performers from South Italy who transplanted them to Rome. The verb χορηγέω already had the meaning of furnishing and equipping in the fifth century (see, for example: τοὺς Ἰβηρας οὐδὲ χορηγεῖς μοι βοηθήσαι δρόμῳ (Arist. *Triphales*, fr. 564.2; the play is dated after 411 BC; “the Iberians you’ve equipped for me must join me at the double” tr. Edmonds). The *choregos* then is the furnisher, whether he furnishes at his own expense or is paid for what he supplies.

Let us look again at the vase. The old *choregos* is clearly the master in charge of the situation; the young one cowering in the background, unsure of himself, servile and self-effacing, is apparently his apprentice, not as yet wealthy enough to afford a pair of shoes. The old *choregos* is accosting Aigisthos, expostulating with him on some issue, apparently something concerning his costume, on which the *choregos* comments rather angrily and vigorously. Aigisthos’ confusion is apparent in his facial expression, which is not necessarily an indication that he wears no mask. The possibility should be considered that we are seeing a melting effect here¹⁹. We know that the features of the phylaces differ frequently from real masks in having an expression appropriate to a particular situation.

What we may have here, then, is an unknown scene, either from an unknown play or featuring, I would tentatively suggest (for very little is certain and unequivocal), preparations for a performance. Pyrrhias is rehearsing his monologue, while the old *choregos* is commenting upon the costume of Aigisthos, who is to appear as one of the characters in the play that the troupe of actors is about to perform. If Aigisthos is one of the characters in the play about to be staged, we have some indication as to its nature, a mythological burlesque in which a character named Pyrrhias is also about to appear. It is also possible to interpret this scene differently. If the play is not a mythological burlesque but a comedy, the scene may be interpreted as representing a mishap – an actor who made a mistake. He was supposed to play Aigisthos in a comedy and instead of dressing accordingly he put on a costume of Aigisthos in tragedy.

As is to be expected when the play is unknown, the particular situation which the vase represents cannot be reconstructed beyond very general, tentative interpretations. Anything more ambitious would read into the painting much more than it is able to support.

sumito. / dare debet; praebenda aediles locaverunt) and once as the designation (by an editor) of a nameless character (*Curculio*, 464: *ornamenta quae locavi metuo ut possim recipere*, etc.); see T. J. Moor, “*Palliata Togata*: Plautus, *Curculio* 462–486”, *AJPh* 112 (1991) 343–362. The aediles contract with the *choragoi* to supply the required equipment: costumes, accessories, stage properties and perhaps even stage decor (*choragium; Captivi*, 61–62: *nam hoc paene iniquomst, comico choragio / conari desubito agere nox tragoediam*).

¹⁹ Taplin (note 1, above) 59, with a reservation (for the mouth is not open): “he has just put on his whole-head mask and is adjusting it.”