

THE POET INSPIRED?

(PLATES I-II)

THERE is in the Ashmolean Museum (1968.777) a Hellenistic plaster relief with a festive scene of a most intriguing character (PLATE IA).¹ Its mood, I should like to think, is not alien to some of the lighter emotions which play round a celebratory volume; and perhaps this note, beginning from a re-interpretation of one detail of that scene, may end by adding a little to its claims on the manifold interests of the volume's distinguished recipient—not least if we find that it has some connection, of whatever kind, with the world of Greek drama.

The relief is a cast, made in a mould taken from a metal cup. The class of artefacts to which it belongs has been illuminated by a discussion from Miss Gisela Richter;² in 1964, while still in private hands, and not long after its acquisition by purchase in Egypt, this particular specimen achieved the distinction of publication in an extensive and very fine study by Mrs Dorothy Thompson; what I have to add here, it will be seen, is in the nature of a tentative excursus to that work.³

A brief description, though it takes much careful observation for granted, may serve to bring the scene into focus. As preserved, it falls into two panels either side of a palm-tree. To the left, a dancing-girl, with a vigorous female piper as accompanist; to the right, a young man, reclining somewhat languidly on a couch, with a deep drinking cup or bowl in his left hand; nearby, a basket of fruit; with him on the couch is a female companion who has a triangular harp, and is equipped—problematically—with what seem to be bat-like wings; a small Eros is in attendance, helping to support a corner of the harp. In the background is the object which is the cause of our present concern, namely a line of rounded shapes, originally interpreted as cups on a *kylikeion* or cup-shelf, after some consideration of the possibility that it might be a crenellated wall.⁴ What we do not have, but can postulate as having existed from Mrs Thompson's reconstruction (148 f.), are the figures who balanced the dancer and piper in the lost right-hand part of the scene, and made up one whole side of the cup; remoter still is the balancing scene on the cup's opposite side; yet further away, the pair of scenes on the companion piece it is likely to have had.

We return to the ostensible cup-shelf. I should like to suggest that the row of rounded shapes on its top level represents not cups but dramatic masks. The suggestion is based on the point that, even allowing for the condition of the cast, and the possibility that relief-cups were intended, the roundels supposed to represent them are remarkably irregular, and differ unexpectedly from each other; the right-hand one, to my eye, has irregularities which look like the features of a comic Leading Slave.⁵ Rows or groups of masks are known in various

¹ By courtesy of Miss Alison Frantz and Mrs D. B. Thompson.

² Gisela M. A. Richter, 'Ancient plaster casts of Greek metalware', *AJA* lxii (1958) 369-77.

³ Dorothy Burr Thompson, *IIANNYXIS*, *JEA* 1 (1964) 147-63, later cited by author's name alone. I am grateful to Mrs Thompson for her encouragement to pursue this topic and to write on it, as well as for helpful discussion and comment, both in Princeton in 1971, when I had the privilege of Visiting Membership of the Institute for Advanced Study, and later in letters. A first presentation of the interpretation here offered was read to a group of colleagues in Princeton; I am grateful again (while

wishing to implicate no-one but myself in the result) for the benefit it received.

⁴ Thompson 151, quoting, *inter alia*, Athenaeus xi 460d.

⁵ Professor T. B. L. Webster (whom I should like to thank for personal discussion and correspondence) tells me he inclines to agree: on the typology of slave-masks, see his remarks in *Monuments illustrating New Comedy* [= *MNC*], ed. 2 (1969) 5-14 and in *JdI* lxxvi (1961) 100-10. The identification is suggested by the hints I see of hair round the head in a coil or *speira*, prominently marked eyes, and a large mouth; the mask appears to be slightly in-turned (or leftwards as we see it) on the shelf. The small size of



(a) Plaster relief; Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 1968.777



(b) Apulian calyx-krater: New York, Metropolitan Museum L.63.21.6

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Dionysos visits a poet: relief in the British Museum (2190)

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contexts of ancient art. For the general appearance of a row such as this, it is perhaps reasonable to quote the stele from Aixone now in the Epigraphical Museum at Athens, and variously dated 340/39 or 313/12 B.C.—five masks, four frontal and the left one inward-looking.⁶ If asked where rows of masks are represented on shelves, one thinks at once of the so-called *aediculae* which are prefixed to the plays of Terence in the group of illuminated manuscripts which have been admirably studied by Jones and Morey.⁷ The ancestry of the *aedicula* is a matter of controversy. Moved by late antique or medieval analogies for the architectural surround or framework which appears in the Terentian examples, some would deny the *aedicula* a basis in the furniture of the classical world;⁸ some appeal for the basic concept to the sets or groups of masks represented in dedications, as well as in work of a more purely decorative character; and of these sets some at least, like those of the *aediculae*, are probably or recognisably connected with particular plays: for example, in their recent publication of the Mytilene Menander mosaics, Madame Kahil and Monsieur Ginouvès illustrate and discuss, alongside a specimen of the Terence *aediculae*, a terracotta plaque of the third century B.C. from Amphipolis in the Museum at Kavalla (240), with a set of six different comic masks (very apt to be those of the principal characters of a particular comedy) arranged as if suspended on a wall in two rows of three.⁹ To say more of the prehistory of the mask-*aedicula* would be a digression, and possibly a spiny one, from our purpose; we may be content here to note that if the Ashmolean plaster is accepted as suggesting that masks, like cups and other objects, might be set out on shelves for display and safe keeping, perhaps as part of one's domestic décor, another particle of background is added to the debate.

One of the fascinating qualities of dramatic masks is their continued power of association, even when far removed in context or time from the reality of theatrical performance. A catalogue of masks found in tombs or on funerary monuments would be a long one; masks in modern theatrical decoration and on programmes are a familiar convention of the Western theatre of our own day, centuries after the abandonment of the mask as an essential of the actor's dramatic *persona*. If our relief scene indeed includes masks, we have to ask what association they carry in that context. It seems, to the general practitioner in Greek drama, that when ancient artists depict people in association with theatrical masks, they normally mean that the people have some connection with the theatre: as actors or poets and their attendants; as Muses or other specially potent patrons. I should like to pursue the possibility that the young man in our scene represents a poet.

the representation and the condition of the surface, whether viewed in the original or in carefully made photographs, give a clear warning to proceed with extreme caution. Moving left, the next two objects on the shelf again look to me more mask-like than cup-like, though I do not offer guesses at their types; of itself the object at the left-hand end is hardly determinable, and the incidence of the palm-tree is not (to me) wholly clear. It is possible, though again I am not clear, that traces of roundels on the level below this also represent masks.

⁶ Webster, *Monuments illustrating Old and Middle Comedy* [=MOMC], ed. 2 (1969) no. AS2; Bieber, *History of the Greek and Roman Theater* [=HT], ed. 2 (1961) fig. 215; Pickard-Cambridge, *Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, ed. 2, revised by Gould and Lewis (1968) fig. 25 (and discussion, p. 49); Trendall and Webster, *Illustrations of Greek Drama* (1971) IV.8a.

⁷ L. W. Jones and C. R. Morey, *The miniatures of the manuscripts of Terence* (1931): vol. i, 202 f. has discussion which is specially relevant here.

⁸ In particular K. Weitzmann, *Illustrations in roll and codex* (1947) 110.

⁹ †S. Charitonidis—L. Kahil—R. Ginouvès, *Les mosaïques de la maison du Ménandre à Mytilène*, *AK Beiheft* vi (1970) pl. 26, 1–2, with p. 103: the plaque is Webster *MNC* no. XT1, the miniatures no. IP2. Dedications: apart from the Aixone stele commemorating the performance of a comedy (n. 6 above) see E. Reisch, *Griechische Weihgeschenke* (1890) 145 f. and Webster, *Monuments illustrating Tragedy and Satyr play* [=MTS], ed. 2 (1967) under nos. AS5, 6, 27, with more references. Decorative groups: e.g. in wall-painting at Pompeii, C. Robert, 'Maskengruppen', *AZ* xxxvi (1878) 13–24, including Euripides, *Andromeda*: Webster *MTS* no. NP5, Bieber *HT* fig. 571; in mosaic at Delos (saec. ii B.C.), Webster *MNC* no. DM1, Trendall and Webster (n. 6 above) IV.8c; in mosaic at Sousse (190/200 A.D.), Webster *MNC* no. FM8; and commonly in Roman relief sculpture, Webster under IS, NS; Bieber *HT* figs 562 ff. *et al.*

We recall that the Aristophanic Euripides kept dramatic gear in his house, several sets of pathetic rags, and was indeed wearing a set when Dikaiopolis interrupted him, composing with his feet up and his mind not at home, to beg for the tragic stock-in-trade of Telephus (*Ach.* 393–479). But we shall not press this; on any account the content of comic imagination is likely to be high; and nothing is said—for understandable dramatic reasons—of masks, or indeed of the devastating possibility that Dikaiopolis might actually have become Telephus by borrowing one. A poet with masks, very possibly Aristophanes himself, is the subject of an early fourth-century grave relief from the Kerameikos in Athens, now in Lyme Park, Stockport.¹⁰ For T. B. L. Webster, in a brief essay on ‘The poet and the mask’, this is the first of a series of representations of poets contemplating masks in an act of composition;¹¹ a much later representative of the type, which can stand here as a token of its persistence, is the seated poet with a roll (as the ‘Aristophanes’ once had) and two masks, whom we see in a mosaic dated to the third quarter of the second century A.D. from Thuburbo Maius in the Bardo Museum, Tunis.¹² But plainly our poet (if poet he is) is much less engaged with his masks than these, and there is much more to the scene than him and them.

An example of a symposium scene with some apparent theatrical connection may lead us further: namely, a scene on one side of an Apulian calyx-krater of the second quarter of the fourth century B.C. in New York (PLATE 1b).¹³ The central figures, as in the Ashmolean relief, are a young reclining banqueter and a woman playing the harp who shares his couch; he holds a long-handled cup, or kantharos; above the pair, a white long-haired female mask with fillet, and a sprig of ivy; to left, a woman with thyrsus and incense-burner; to right, a silen with thyrsus, holding the banqueter’s open left hand at the wrist. ‘Dionysus?’ suggests A. D. Trendall (quoted n. 13); Dionysus was considered by Mrs Thompson as a possibility for the young banqueter of the Ashmolean scene, but she was moved against that interpretation by the presence of a female companion in the unexpected rôle of a harpist and by the apparent lack of the expected signs of Dionysus’ identity:¹⁴

If the youth is Dionysus the setting is unusual, and the absence of satyrs, maenads, and symposiasts is striking unless we can relegate them all to the other side of the vase. Nor do the common Dionysiac symbols appear: there are no thyrsoi, no lagobola, no kantharoi; not even a jar of wine or a sprig of ivy. In view of the plethora of such objects on late Hellenistic vessels, it seems unlikely that we are in the presence of that god.

One sees that by these criteria the banqueter of the Apulian calyx-krater has several claims to be considered as Dionysus; and if we have masks in the background of the Ashmolean scene, it is tempting to suppose that he and his harpist may carry that with them. But the caution of the experts gives food for further thought, and the value of the description ‘Dionysus?’ finds a ready-made test from a similar and contemporary Apulian scene which Trendall helpfully illustrates in a plate alongside that of the vase we have quoted:¹⁵ there we have at the left, silen with torch and situla; right, woman with incense-burner; above,

¹⁰ Webster *MOMC* no. AS1; Bieber *HT* fig. 201; and recently illustrated by K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (1972) pl. 4.

¹¹ In *Classical drama and its influence: Essays presented to H. D. F. Kitto*, ed. M. J. Anderson (1965) 3–13.

¹² Inv. 1396: † Charitonidis—Kahil—Ginouvés (quoted n. 9) pl. 16.1 and p. 29: ‘il s’agit sans doute de Ménandre’; and see in general the admirably documented discussion of portraits of Menander over pp. 27–31, including the very well known Vatican/Princeton relief which belongs in the series we are discussing: Webster *MNC* nos AS6 and IS10; Bieber *HT* figs 316–17. Add, on portraits of Menander,

Bernard Ashmole, *AJA* lxxvii (1973) 61, and *cf.* also n. 24 below.

¹³ Metropolitan Museum L.63.21.6: A. D. Trendall, *Phlyax Vases* [=PV], ed. 2 (1967) no. xxi, p. 95 and pl. XIVb (reproduced here by courtesy of Mr. Jan Mitchell and Professor Trendall).

¹⁴ P. 152, with references. It is good to mention here an important new accession to the literature of the symposium: J.-M. Dentzer, ‘Aux origines de l’iconographie du banquet couché’, *RA* 1971, 215–58.

¹⁵ Chicago, Natural History Museum 27679 (ex Hope 211): Trendall *PV* no. iii, p. 90 and pl. XIVa.

long-haired female mask; centre, seated figure with kantharos—except that this time, ‘Dionysus’ *tout court*, he has no harpist and carries a large thyrsus himself. The distinction between the god and his human votaries in scenes of this kind is, it seems, sometimes a fine one; and there are further niceties when we attempt to sub-distinguish poets from actors. Still in the field of South Italian vase-painting, a good example of a scene with revellers who seem to be actors can be quoted from a Paestan bell-krater of the third quarter of the fourth century by Python in the Vatican:¹⁶ three young men at a party in an arbour with ivy leaves; three different comic masks suspended over their heads, one for each; in attendance a girl piper, a sleeping papposilenos, and a young satyr.¹⁷ The world, I fear, would have to be a tidier place than it is for one to be sure that in such a context the presence of a harpist of itself necessarily betokens a poet.

Python’s scene of the actors’ party does however have the advantage of bringing us a step nearer to our goal: revels or parties with dramatic connections in Hellenistic art. In their description Trendall and Webster (quoted n. 16) note that ‘the tradition of such arbours goes on into the Hellenistic Age: in the great Dionysiac procession of Ptolemy II Philadelphos, Dionysos appeared in a similar arbour, which was carried on a tableau-float’; in Philadelphos’ banqueting pavilion there were tableaux of tragic, comic and satyric figures enjoying symposia with gold cups beside them.¹⁸ Some elements of the context we are seeking appear in a much-discussed Hellenistic relief-scene, sometimes referred to as the Visit to Ikarios, a scene known in many versions, with the theme of Dionysus visiting a poet: we select here the version in the British Museum (PLATE II).¹⁹ A bearded Dionysus with his thiasos of satyrs, Silenos and a maenad (of the last there are only traces in this version) approaches a young man half-reclining on a couch, with a female companion at the foot (again only traces in this version, but she is verifiable from others); to hand, a table, with wine cup and dessert, and four comic masks on top of a low platform or box (these are present in some, but not all, other versions); the background of buildings is diversified, in this version, by a plane tree and a palm; a satyr near the palm hangs up a garland.²⁰

We must recall again that the right-hand part of the scene in the Ashmolean relief is lost, and that with it there the artist’s intention may have been much clearer.²¹ Influenced initially by a sight of masks, and finally by the ‘Ikarios relief’, I am suggesting that he may have imagined his reveller as a poet, and a comic poet at that, in a setting of Hellenistic Egypt given by the palm-tree²² and by the markedly oriental character of the piper and the dancer at the left;²³ Dionysiac figures, or even Dionysus himself, may possibly have appeared at the right to balance the composition; a tragic poet, it can be imagined, could have figured in a scene on the other side or on a companion piece.²⁴ The idea that the poet is

¹⁶ AD1 (17370): Trendall *PV* no. 172; Bieber *HT* fig. 538 and p. xvi; Trendall and Webster (n. 6 above) IV.8b.

¹⁷ Other South Italian scenes with actors: Trendall *PV* p. 89.

¹⁸ Kallixeinos in Athenaeus v 196f–97a, describing the symposion (196a–97c) then the procession; Webster, *Hellenistic Poetry and Art* (1964) 122 f., 163.

¹⁹ 2190: Webster, *MNC* nos AS3 and IS61 with references (pp. 51, 275, 325); Bieber, *Sculpture of the Hellenistic Age* (1955; revised ed., 1961) fig. 656 with p. 154; two other versions, figs 655, 657; our plate by courtesy of the British Museum.

²⁰ A mask-box or table is seen in the mosaic quoted below, n. 27; again, in a context of rehearsal, in a mosaic of the first century A.D. from Pompeii in Naples (MN 9986) probably after a fourth-century original: Webster *MTS* no. NM1, Bieber *HT* figs 36, 62.

²¹ I do not discuss the traces of writing on the plaster (Thompson 161 f.), nor many other points of interesting detail examined in the first publication which may have more contributions to make; and in particular I avoid involvement here in the difficult problems of dating the original cup and the several versions and the original of the ‘Ikarios relief’.

²² Palm-tree: Thompson 150 f., and on the palm of the ‘Ikarios relief’, C. Picard, *AJA* xxxviii (1934) at p. 145 f.

²³ Thompson 155–7, quoting very aptly the poet’s party in Propertius iv 8 (39 *Nile, tuus tibi cen erat . . .*); on the dance *oklasma* (157), cf. the well-documented discussion by E. Roos, *Die tragische Orchestik im Zerrbild der altattischen Komödie* (1951) 66 ff.

²⁴ Poets represented on cups: Webster, *Hellenistic Poetry and Art* 172 f., with references. Note the evidence for groups and pairs of scenes, including parallel comic poet and tragic poet on the terracotta

inspired by his surroundings and not merely celebrating is perhaps more subjective than the rest of this view; and in the scene as we have it one would be happy to make more of the companion with the harp. Following her diagnosis of the presence of bat-like wings rather than fluttering clothes, Mrs Thompson thought of Psyche, but wondered in the end whether the artist had any definite identity in mind.²⁵ It is a well-known fact about poets (to speak only of ancient times) that they are attended by a whole range of female companions of inspirational or utterly dubious character. We lack, so far as I know, a picture of the Inspiration of Cratinus, who in the comedy *Pytine* which defeated the *Clouds* in 423 B.C. presented himself with his wife Comedy and the mistress *Methe* whom she resented;²⁶ we have however a representation of Menander with *Komoidia* and his Glykera,²⁷ and another (the Vatican relief version of Menander composing) with a woman at the right of the relief most likely to be seen as a Muse, but with a short-list of other candidates for her identity;²⁸ we can add, for one more instance, the relief in Istanbul Museum in which Euripides appears with Dionysus behind him and *Skene* before.²⁹ Professor Dodds, who writes in his note on *Bacchae* 370–2 of the Greek poets' way of personifying and objectifying abstractions, and the way in which some of them are endowed with wings, may perhaps accept this final speculative problem by way of a conclusion.

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lagynos of about A.D. 300 in Cairo Museum (86635) discussed and illustrated with earlier and related monuments by Kahil, *Mon. Piot* li (1960) 72–91: Webster *MTS* no. EV1, *MNC* no. EV17.

²⁵ Pp. 153–5. It is perhaps worth noting (*cf.* p. 155, n. 3) that the Psychai and Erotes who appear on Dionysiac scenes in Roman sarcophagi are sometimes musicians: see R. Turcan, *Les sarcophages romains à représentations dionysiaques* (1966) 580, for examples and discussion of their symbolism. On music in later Greek Comedy and its Roman successors, *cf.* Webster, *Hellenistic Poetry and Art* 267 ff., adding *BICS* xvi (1969) 88–101 on the musical scene in Menander, *Theophoroumene*: Sandbach, *Menandri reliquiae selectae* (1972) 144 ff.

²⁶ The principal source is Schol. Ar. *Eq.* 400.

²⁷ Webster no. *MNC* ZM4, Bieber *HT* fig. 321: mosaic of the third century A.D. from Antioch in Princeton University Art Museum, 40–435.

²⁸ Vatican inv. 9985 (once Lateran 487), mentioned above n. 12: not there in the Princeton version. C. Robert, *Die Masken der neueren attischen Komödie* (1911) 79, A.1, rejects Glykera and Muse ('eine Bezeichnung, mit der in der archäologischen Exegese überhaupt viel Mißbrauch getrieben wird'), and favours *Komoidia* or *Paidia*.

²⁹ Webster *MTS* no. AS10, Bieber *HT* fig. 109. In the *Frogs*, of course (1305 ff.), Aristophanes brings on Euripides' Muse as a castanet-dancer.