

**Peisetaerus' 'Satyric' Treatment of Iris:
Aristophanes *Birds* 1253-6***

The messenger goddess Iris alights at *Birds* 1199 in the city of Cloudcuckooland. She has been dispatched by Zeus to instruct mortal men on earth to maintain their sacrifices in honor of the Olympian gods, not yet aware that the birds, with the protagonist Peisetaerus as their leader, have founded this city as the hub of an empire that aims to wrest control of the universe from her divine family. This, however, she learns from a tense exchange with Peisetaerus, who forbids her passage through the birds' aerial domain. He ultimately turns her back to Olympus, and his parting shot is a crude threat of rape:

σὺ δ' εἴ με λυπήσεις τι, τῆς διακόνου
πρώτης ἀνατείννας τῶ σκέλει διαμηριῶ
τὴν Ἴριον ἀυτήν, ὥστε θαυμάζειν ὅπως
οὕτω γέρον ὦν στύβομαι τριέμβολον.
[*Birds* 1253-6]

[‘And you, if you give me any trouble, I’ll lift up the legs of Zeus’ little messenger girl and ram Iris herself right between the thighs, so she’ll be amazed at how this old guy can keep it up.’ (translation mine)]

Scholars have noted the similarities between Iris’ encounter with Peisetaerus and the molestation she suffers at the hands of satyrs, which is depicted on several vases dating to the fifth century and was dramatized in at least one satyr-play during the classical period.² In most of the paintings, the satyrs, usually

* For their helpful and careful comments I thank the editor and referee from *JHS* as well as Guy M. Hedreen, Elizabeth P. McGowan, and David W. Hinkle.

¹ I use the text of F.W. Hall and W.M. Geldart, *Aristophanes comoediae* (Oxford 1906). The text and commentary by Nan Dunbar, *Aristophanes Birds* (Oxford 1995) were not available to me when I submitted this note for publication.

² Most recently, A. Kossatz-Deissmann, ‘Iris I’, *LIMC* v.1 (Zurich and Munich 1990) 751-2; previously C. Daremberg, *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines* iii.1 (Paris 1900) 576, and F. Dümmler, *Archaeologische aufsätze* [= *Kleine schriften* iii], ed. J. Boehlau (Leipzig 1901) 29-30. Kossatz-Deissmann has provided an up-dated list of vases depicting Iris’ encounter with the satyrs. For a reconstruction of the myth and the plot of the satyr-play(s), see E. Simon, ‘Satyr-plays on vases in the time of Aeschylus’, in *The eye of Greece: studies in the art of Athens*, ed. Donna Kurtz and Brian Sparkes (Cambridge 1982) 125-9; also D.F. Sutton, *The Greek satyr play* (Meisenheim am Glan 1980) 69-72, and F. Brommer, *Satyrspiele*² (Berlin 1959) 21-3 and 70.

Achaeus’ satyr play *Iris* (= Achaeus fr. 19-23 Nauck and *TrGF*) is dated to the second half of the fifth century BC; so Simon 130 n. 49, citing *TrGF* i 20.1. Simon, *ibid.*, has suggested that the scene on London BM E65, attributed to the Brygos Painter and dated to 490-80 BC, was inspired by an earlier satyr-play by Pratinas, an older contemporary of Aeschylus. (For photograph, see *LIMC* iii.2, 531 [Dromis 1].) Brommer 70 has posited other dramas ‘wie ein solches beispielsweise für Achaïos überliefert ist’; so also Kossatz-Deissmann, *ibid.* Such may have inspired the painting on Tarquinia, Mus.Naz. RC 1122 (*LIMC* v.2, 496 [Iris I 117]), which is dated to c. 450 BC and depicts Iris making an oratorical gesture toward a satyr.

ithyphallic, either advance threateningly toward the goddess or grab hold of her. They attempt to molest her, it is generally agreed, because, at the behest of the jealous Hera, she has interrupted their sacrifices in honor of Dionysus; only the last-minute intervention of Heracles prevents them from doing so.³ Thanks to these vases, we know that the myth is to be dated at least as early as 490 BC and also that it enjoyed currency throughout the fifth century.⁴ It is therefore well to inquire whether it may lie behind Peisetaerus’ threat of rape in the *Birds*.

The scene in which Peisetaerus confronts Iris is full of reminiscences of tragedy, and it is evident that Aristophanes was indebted to tragedy generally and perhaps a specific tragedy—i.e., the *Prometheus Bound*—for his conception of this encounter.⁵ But he plainly derived inspiration for his comic creations from a variety of sources, and there is no reason to suppose that either the plastic arts or satyr-plays were off limits to him. J.R. Green has argued that the *Birds* in particular shows signs of the influence of satyric drama; the evidence indicates that the comedian contemplated satyr plays (or a particular satyr play) while he designed costumes for the chorus and also developed the role of the Hoopoe.⁶ In addition, D.F. Sutton has suggested that situational similarities may have encouraged him to model the resurrection of the goddess Peace in the comedy of that title upon a scene in Sophocles’ *Pandora*.⁷ Such similarities could have likewise led him to borrow the finishing touch for the encounter in *Birds* 1199-1261 from the familiar myth of Iris and the satyrs, as it was dramatized on the stage and also depicted on vases. For, in the *Birds* as in this myth, Iris has been dispatched from Olympus to make sure that sacrifices on earth conform to divine will, and

³ Kossatz-Deissmann 751; also Simon 126-7 and Brommer 23. But Simon 127 n. 24 has minimized the ‘erotic intentions’ of the satyrs, remarking that their aim in laying hold of Iris is to retrieve the offering (in plain view on Berlin, Staatl. Mus. F 2591 (*LIMC* v.2, 495 [Iris I 113]), dated to c. 460 BC) that she stole from their altar. Simon has identified this offering as a tongue, but, given its size and shape, the contention that it is a tail seems far more plausible.

⁴ I am informed by Guy Hedreen that the cup by the Brygos Painter (London BM E65) is the earliest reliable evidence for a story about Iris and satyrs. T.B.L. Webster, *JHS* lxx (1950) 85-6, in his review of Brommer, *Satyrspiele*¹, suggested that the myth appeared as early as 540 BC. But the goddess represented on the black-figure lekythos, upon which he based this date, is not identifiable as Iris.

⁵ So R. Bees, ‘Zu Aristophanes, “Vögel” 1197 f. = fr. adesp. 47’, *WüJbB* N.F. xviii (1992) 125-32 (with bibliography); vs. Peter Rau, *Paratragodia: Untersuchungen einer komischen Form bei Aristophanes* (Munich 1967) 176-7, who has argued against the influence of *Pr.* in Av. 1197 ff.

⁶ J.R. Green, ‘A representation of the *Birds* in Aristophanes’, in *Greek vase paintings in the J.P. Getty Museum* ii (Malibu 1985) 111, 117-8. Green’s concluding hypothesis (118), that Aristophanes and his fellow dramatists drew inspiration for their plays from costumes and props, lends credence to the idea that they also looked to other objects such as painted vases.

⁷ D.F. Sutton, *Two lost plays of Euripides* (New York 1987) 68. A.H. Sommerstein, ed., *Aristophanes: Peace* (Warminster 1985), n. on 296-8 (with bibliography), has posited the influence of Aeschylus’ satyric *Netfishers* upon this scene in the *Peace*.

the mission on both occasions puts her at odds with male figures who accordingly challenge her. Peisetaerus, moreover, is at this point no longer fully human, but rather an amalgamated man-bird creature, and his hybrid appearance could have provided Aristophanes with an additional incentive to have him assimilate an act originally attributed to satyrs, who are themselves hybrid creatures combining human and animal characteristics.⁸

Aristophanes' male characters frequently ogle and fondle females in their midst, and Peisetaerus' notion of using rape in order to punish a female figure for what he considers a transgression finds precedents in the *Acharnians* and *Wasps*.⁹ But the satyrs depicted on vases are perpetual would-be rapists, persistently pursuing unwilling nymphs.¹⁰ Moreover, what we know from paintings on vases and satyr plays confirms that they are extremely quick to see sexual violence as an appropriate punishment for females who have in their eyes erred. Iris is one such potential victim, and so apparently was Helen in Sophocles' satyric *Marriage of Helen*.¹¹ Helen is also the object of the ire and threats of satyrs in Euripides' *Cyclops*, in which the chorus envisions gang-rape by the victorious Greeks as just deserts for the faithless wife. The parallelism in language and tone of *Cyclops* 179-82 and *Birds* 1253-6 adds probability to the view that Peisetaerus' tough talk to Iris may borrow literally as well as figuratively from the 'vocabulary' of satyrs.¹² If so, his threat constitutes an outrageous 'punch-line' that caps off with irreverent travesty an encounter heretofore brimming with tragic resonance.

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⁸ One red-figure vase (Florence, Mus. Naz. 4218 (*LIMC* v.2, 499 [Iris I 167]), attributed to the Kleophrades Painter and dated to c. 480 BC), which depicts centaurs pestering Iris, may show what is in fact a variant of the satyr myth. If so, this variant may have set a precedent for Aristophanes in replacing satyrs with another type of hybrid creature.

It is unlikely that Peisetaerus was ithyphallic; so L. Stone, *Costume in Aristophanic comedy* (Salem, NH 1984) 85 and 116 n. 45. In this regard Peisetaerus would have differed from his satyric counterparts with, I imagine, humorous obviousness.

⁹ I thank the editor and referee for calling my attention to *Ach.* 271-5 and *V.* 768-9.

¹⁰ For the hyper-sexuality of satyrs, see G.M. Hedreen, *Silens in Attic black-figure vase-painting* (Ann Arbor 1992) 158-9, and 'Silens, nymphs, and maenads', *JHS* cxiv (1994) 47-69. For the recurrent theme of sexual assault in satyr-plays, see Sutton (n. 2) 148 *et passim*. Also F. Lissarrague, 'Why satyrs are good to represent', in *Nothing to do with Dionysus?*, ed. J.J. Winkler and F.I. Zeitlin (Princeton 1990) 235-6.

¹¹ R.A.S. Seaford, ed., *Euripides, Cyclops* (Oxford 1988) n. on 177-87; Hedreen (n. 10) 65-6.

¹² *Cyclops* 179-82:

οὐκουν, ἐπειδὴ τὴν νεάνην εἴλετε,
ἀπαντες αὐτὴν διεκροτήσατ' ἐν μέρει
ἐπεὶ γὰρ πολλοῖς ἤδεται γαμουμένη,
τὴν προδότην

['Then, when you caught the young woman, did you all bang her in turn, since she likes to get married to many men, the faithless bitch ...' (translation mine).]

The verbs διαμηρίζω (*Av.* 1254) and διακροτέω (*Cyc.* 180) in particular lend to the casually callous tone of both passages; see J.J. Henderson, *The maculate muse*² (Oxford 1991) 171-3.

Attic Comedy and the 'Comic Angels' Krater in New York

The centerpiece of Oliver Taplin's recent monograph on Greek drama and South Italian vase-painting is an Apulian bell-krater of the early fourth century in a New York private collection (PLATE IV).¹ The vase belongs to the genre conventionally known as phlyax vases, though Taplin would reject that label, since it is the thesis of his book that many, if not most, of these vases reflect Athenian Old Comedy and not an indigenous Italic entertainment, the phlyax play.²

The purpose of this note is not to challenge the brilliant and forcefully argued thesis of Taplin's book, but only to suggest an alternative reading of its eponymous vase. The krater was first published only in 1991, in two brief notices by A.D. Trendall,³ and will surely become the subject of much scholarly discussion. Taplin himself provides most of the evidence for the interpretation I shall propose, but eventually arrives at a quite different and, I believe, overly subtle one. Since, however, he does not present what seems to me the more straightforward and 'obvious' reading, if only to reject it, it may be worthwhile to formulate that interpretation briefly here and to offer it for future comment and, perhaps, refutation.

The scene presents four figures on a stage supported by columns and reached by a flight of steps, all identified by inscriptions: from left to right, Aigisthos, wearing elaborately patterned long garment and pilos and carrying two spears; a white-haired Choregos, leaning on a stick and addressing Aigisthos; Pyrrhia[s], a balding man standing on an upturned kalathos and pointing with outstretched right hand; and a second Choregos, dark-haired, observing the others with a skeptical expression. All but Aigisthos are costumed as comic actors, or 'phlyakes,' with wrinkled hose, mask, and padded phallus.⁴ A half-open door is at the left of the scene.

In his initial publications of the vase, Trendall described the scene as without parallel and did not

¹ O. Taplin, *Comic angels* (Oxford 1993); henceforth referred to by the author's name alone. The vase is New York, Fleischman Collection F93; Taplin pl. 9.1. The vase's home in New York is not on the 17th floor (as Taplin p. 1), but the 34th.

² Most fully stated at Taplin 41-47 and in ch. 9, 'The transplantation of Athenian comedy,' 89-99. The standard work on phlyax vases is A.D. Trendall, *Phlyax Vases*, 2nd ed., *BICS* Supp. xix (1967). For a recent discussion of the vases and of phlyax plays see K. Neiiendam, *The art of acting in antiquity* (Copenhagen 1992) 15-62.

³ A.D. Trendall and A. Cambitoglou, *The red-figured vases of Apulia* [hereafter *RVAP*], Supp. ii, *BICS* Supp. lx (1991) 7-8, pl. 1, 3-4; A.D. Trendall, 'Farce and tragedy in South Italian vase-painting,' in T. Rasmussen and N. Spivey, eds., *Looking at Greek vases* (Cambridge 1991) 164, fig. 67; *idem*, 'A new early Apulian phlyax vase,' *BullClevelandMusArt* 79.1 (1992) 1-15, figs. 7, 8, 11.

⁴ As Trendall (n. 3) pointed out, the vase is unique in combining a character in tragic costume and without mask (on South Italian vases inspired by Attic tragedy, the figures never wear masks) with comic actors. I cannot explain this either, but would only observe that on the famous Paestan fragment that parodies the Rape of Cassandra (Taplin p. 81 and pl. 17.17), the figure of Cassandra does not seem to wear a grotesque mask like Ajax and the priestess.