

Ancient Greek dance as therapy

Marie-Hélène Delavaud-Roux, Université Européenne de Bretagne UBO - HCTI EA4249,
Brest, France

Ancient Greeks say often that dance is a good activity for society and religion. For Xenopho, *Economic*, VIII, 20, the order in a house must be as in the choir dance. So the choir dance is a model for all the social groups and it is more than that. In *Io* 534b, Plato writes dance is "a light, winged and holy thing". So it was the best act people could practice to honor the gods. We know that ancient Greeks danced in all circumstances : birth, wedding, death, private or public festivals for gods. We know ancient Greeks often danced and loved doing it but did they use dance as therapy ? First, we will speak about what physical and mental kindness brought dance to Ancient Greeks. Second, we will study the Corybantes' dance which was really practiced as therapy. Third, we will research how ancient doctors from Hippocrates to Galenus spoke about dance and if they used it as therapy.

I- The kindness of dance according to ancient Greeks

1-A soft physical activity

Dance is soft and old people can practice it. As says Xenopho, *Symposion*, II, 17-18, Socrates did not like acrobatics but he enjoyed dancing. He did not praise technical feats but loved the beauty of gestures, and he would take willingly lessons with the syracusan ballet teacher. He said also that dance could help to reduce his tummy. The dance that Socrates spoke is good for old people (1). It is without physical danger and it shows the qualities that ancient Greeks associated with old age, *sophrosunè* and *sophia*.

According to Pindarus, fr. 6, the Hyperborean men's myth told about their dance and said they were never ill or old. So dance can be considered as an ideal. For the most of Greeks, dance was especially for the young because they connected it with beauty. That explains why the most of Socrates' s companions smiled when the philosopher wanted to learn dancing because he was already an old man.

Ancient writers recognized the kindness of dance for body. For Lucian, *Saltatio*, 71, dance brings flexibility and lightness. It is a balanced sport. And the unceasing movements of dance are good for people. For this last idea, Lucian depends on Plato (*Laws*, VII, 790c-e) who writes that the movement is very important to sleep babies. Dance was also curative for Plutarch (*De Valet. Tuenda* VI, 15)

2- A good activity for spirit

According to Anacreo (fr. 37), dance helps to keep a young spirit. For philosophers, dance was good. In the Pythagoras' way of life, dance was important (Porphyre, *Pythag.*, 32)

For Plato, *Laws*, VII, 814e-816e, dance is a good sport for spirit but only if you practice a beautiful dance : pyrrhic i.e. war dance and emmeleia i.e. pacific dance are fine for the philosopher. As says Plato beauty or ugliness influences your soul. So performing an unattractive dance, as the *kordax* of comedy, makes an unsightly spirit. And even he does not classify Dionysian dances, he thinks they are not for the citizen and the citizen's women and girls. In *Law*, VII, 795, Plato says that dance is a part of gymnastic with the fight. Pyrrhic is the most beautiful dance because it prepares the ware and the knowledge of war is very useful for ancient Greeks The philosopher speaks about physical qualities (dance is a part of gymnastic) but more about mental (classification in beautiful and unattractive dance). Plato's conception was not shared by his contemporaneous. In the IVth century BC, time where Plato

writes, people practiced pyrrhic in competition but preferred Dionysian dance : this type of choreography brings the feeling of freedom, especially for women who could be in a trance.

In all ancient Greek dances, we know only one dance who was practiced by people for therapy. It is simultaneously a war and Dionysian choreography : the Corybantes' dance (Strabo, X, 3, 7 = C466).

II- Corybantes' dance, a therapy

1- The myth

In the myth, the Corybantes' dance is very noisy with the jumps and the shock of weapons. It is performed by the Corybantes who were the seven Combeus and Sôcos's sons : Prynneus, Mimas, Acmon, Damneus, Ocythoos, Idaelos, Melisseus. They are from Evia but their parents hunted them and after they traveled through the Greek world (See P. Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine*, PUF, Paris, 1951, sv. Curetes p. 110). In other stories, Corybantes are Gaia's sons or Hera and Zeus' sons or Danais and Apollo's sons and their number can change. In Phrygia, they reared Dionysus (Nonnos, *Dionysiaca*, IX, 162-166) and they danced around him to protect him from Hera's jealousy. They are like the Curetes, who did the same thing to protect Zeus from Cronos's voracity (Strabo, XIV, 1, 20 ; Lucian, *Saltatio*, 8) but they are not exactly the same because they are Dionysian (Strabo, X, 3, 21 = C 473)

2- The Corybantes in the cult

As says Strabo, Corybantes are Cybel's priests and they dance in a trance (Strabo X 21 = C473). They are very ancient because they are quoted by Alcman (fr. 146) at the VIIth century BC. The Corybantes' trance is defining by Plato (Phedre, 228c) as a frenzy and this delirium provokes a temporary mental disorder (Plato, *Io*, 534a). When they dance, Corybantes can have auditory delusions. According to Plato (*Symposion*, 215d), Corybantes believe hear *auloi*.

3- initiation and dance therapy

But Corybantes do not dance alone. They can give initiation to other people (Plato, *Euthydeme*, 277d) as thinks E. R. Dodds (*Les Grecs et l'irrationnel*, Paris, Flammarion, 1977, p. 86).

We have an example of initiation in Aristophanes' *Wasps*. Bdelycleo wants to take care of his father Philocleo. Philocleo is ill because he loves to judge too much. First, Bdelycleo speaks to his father with kindness. Second, he bathes him for purification (Aristophanes, *Wasps*, 115-118). But Philocleo is always ill. So Bdelycleo takes him to the Corybantes. But the therapy fails and Philocleo runs away with the tympanum (Aristophanes, *Wasps*, 119-120) ! The corybantic therapy is integrated in a group of therapy. But what was it exactly?

The aim of the therapy was to quiet the patient's internal phobia. The corybantic dance could not relieve the external symptoms but could regularize them : it integrated them in a shape of religion. Dodds (*Op. cit.*, p. 103 and n. 102), who depends on Plato (*Io*, 536) thinks that corybantic ritual was a musical diagnosis. The patient listened several types of sacred music. And priests could study the patient's reactions and research what god was responsible for the illness. When the god who sent the disease was known, began the second part of the ritual. It was a sacrifice offered by the patient to this terrible god. Then, followed a dance celebrating the pacified god.

If the therapy failed, the patient thought that no god honored by Corybantes sent the illness. Then he could try to see Asclepius, another quack god. In Aristophanes's *Wasps*, 121-124,

after he Corybantes' cares, Bdelycleo takes her father to Asclepios's sanctuary but the therapy failed, as to say that Philocleo is an incurable patient. The patient could also see a doctor but the cures were very different. For the doctors, to take care is to be opposed to the disease (*Winds* c1 ; *Aphorisms* II, 22 ; See J. Jouanna, *Hippocrate*, Paris, Fayard, 1992). So doctors considered that sacred therapies were charlatanism (*Sacred illness* c1). Doctors could suggest different remedies (to purge, to bleed, to drink pure wine or wine with water, to eat ptisan...). If the doctors did not like the sacred therapy, what did they think about the dance ? Did they consider it is a balanced sport and sometimes a good therapy ?

III- Ancient Greek doctors' views about dance

According to the doctor Oribasios, the dance could help to bring down the bad moods which were in the head (Porphyre, *Pythag.*, 32). The Hippocrates' corpus and the *Hippiatrica* do not give occurrences about the dance. They use the word *orchis* which is a medicinal plant but they never use the words, *orcheisthai*, *orchestès*, *orchestikos*. Galenus and pseudo Galenus speak often about *orchis* and sometimes about dances. In Galenus' works, we find *orcheisthai* three times, *orchestasthai* one time, *orchestès* six times and the adjective *orchestikos* , *è* , *on*, five times. Pseudo Galenus use only time *orchestès* and one time *orchestichè*. Galenus' views are very shaded. He thinks that dance is one of human activities (story of the monkeys who copy human activities, cf. *De usu partium*, 3, 80, 9 ed. Kühn). He writes that dance is a good sport for human people, as pancrace, fight or walk (*De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*, 5, 3, 23, 1 but it is more than that. There is also the idea of good proportions (*De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*, 5, 3, 23, 1) and Galenus's views seem like Plato. As says Plato, dance is good if it is beautiful and if it keep the straightness of the lines (*Laws*, VII, 815b). And he praises the pyrrhic dance. Galenus does not speak about the pyrrhic but pseudo Galenus thinks that courageous men dance especially the pyrrhic (*De partibus philosophiae*, 29, 9). So, Galenus and pseudo Galenus think that dance is particularly a sport.

According to the ancient doctors, the dancer must have some qualities. For Pseudo-Galenus, the dancer is very swift (*De partibus philosophiae*, 29, 12) and the pattern is the famous cretan Merion who know very well war dances in *Iliades* (*Iliades*, XVI, 67). In Galenus' works, the dancer must be flexible (*Quod animi mores corporis temperamenta sequantur*, 4, 778, 11 ed. Kühn).

Third views, the dance can quiet people and this idea is squeezed out two times in Galenus (*Thrasylbulus sive utrum medicinae sit an gymnastice hygieine*, 5, 861, 8, et 5, 855, 4, ed. Kühn) but the dance is not used as a therapy. Galenus does not think that dance can become a therapy. Only one time, he says that dance help to evacuate bad humours (*Quod qualitates incorporeae sint*, 19, 475, 13 ed. Kühn) but he never writes that dance is a therapy

(1) Defining old people in Ancient Greece is not easy : old age begins between 56 and 63 years old. See A. Catrysse, *Les Grecs et la vieillesse d'Homère à Epicure*, 2003, p. 225-226 ; S. Byl, "La vieillesse dans le corpus Hippocratique" in F. Lasserre and Ph. Mudry, *Formes de pensée dans la collection hippocratique*, Genève, 1963, p. 85-95, especially p. 86.

