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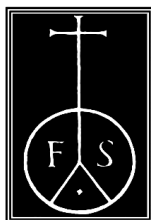
Collana fondata da Bruno Gentili,
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13.

CHOREUTIKA

PERFORMING
AND THEORISING DANCE
IN ANCIENT GREECE

edited by

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1. INTRODUCTION. ANCIENT DANCE AS A RESEARCH TOPIC

Laura Gianvittorio

Background and aims of the volume

Famously defined as a "song and dance culture",[1] archaic and classical Greece is unanimously recognized as a culture where dance held a position of central importance on a civic, ritual, artistic, and pedagogical level. Considering such felicitous premises, it is quite disappointing to remark how scarcely Greek dance has been actually investigated. Against this tendency, the present volume aims at providing fresh insights into dance as one essential component of Greek performance arts – such as theatre, choral poetry, and music – and as a topic of ancient theoretical speculation.

Although the serious methodological fallacies of previous approaches to ancient dance and the need for further research have been assessed already twenty years ago,[2] Classical studies still display a tacitly accepted habit to neglect dance. Claims about the chief role played by dance are frequent, but generic, and often fail to generate specific questions to be explored, wallowing in the mire of scholarly common places. Not even the so-called performative turn, which shifted the general attention from text to performance in many disciplines within the Arts and Humanities, provided much help: while ancient music, poetry, and theatre performance have won the attention they deserve, ancient dance has been very much left behind.

Such a compelling omission defies any straight explanation. As a non-verbal, purely ephemeral performance art, dance naturally eludes the text-centred investigations of philologists and

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[1] Herington 1985; cf. also Rutherford 2001, 3.
[2] See the first chapter of Naerebout 1997.

historians. Yet, the same could be said, for example, of ancient music. In fact, the relevant data available concerning music and dance are basically of the same kind: we can resort to the theoretical texts centred on these arts, to the archaeological evidence depicting the performers, and to the poems used for actual performances. However, while a reassuringly broad and rapidly growing group of specialists chose Greek music as the focus of their research, Greek dance continues to receive limited attention. A further challenge is constituted by the use of musical terminology in ancient theoretical approaches to dance, which makes it hard for modern readers to recognize them. Nonetheless, a substantial amount of information could be gained by considering the implications that literature on poetry and music have for dance.

It is both wise and realistic to acknowledge that, when it comes to ancient dance, little can be ascertained in absolute terms, and in particular that we cannot plausibly (i.e. verifiably) determine how dance performances looked like or how lost choreographies were danced, as Frederick Naerebout will explain in the present volume. A classical scholar who would study ancient dance, music, or theatre with the aim of reconstructing lost choreographies, songs, and theatrical pieces in the way they were originally performed might be compared to an astrophysicist who expects his own work to bring him to some distant planets: not only he would be counting on an outcome which is highly unlikely per se, but he also would fail to recognize that such is not the goal pursued by his discipline and that the object of his research will remain out of the reach of direct experience.

So what can studies of ancient dance actually achieve? Just to mention a few examples, they can give historical, political, religious, aesthetic, and philosophical account of the role and meaning of dance in ancient Greece, thus helping us understand its "song and dance culture". They can provide practitioners such as choreographs, theatre directors, and dancers with reliable knowledge of ancient Greek dance within projects centred on so-called HIP, i.e. historically informed performance. They can recover and analyse dance-related evidence and match such

evidence with that provided by enquiries on ancient theatre, choral poetry, Greek music, aesthetics, and poetics. As far as this last task is concerned, the notion of *Sherlockismus*, which has been formulated with regard to a different area of classical research, applies to the study of Greek dance as well: "[t]he challenge is to recover as much information as possible about the picture that lies behind the assortment of pieces presented to us".[1] Even though such a process can seem unrewarding, it ultimately fulfils the important purpose of adding new pieces to the (lost) picture of several Greek performance arts.

The most recent research outcomes on Greek dance are comparatively easy to overview and can be summarised as follows.[2] Twentieth-century studies, even those concerned with chorus and choral poetry, pay little attention to dance, the most remarkable exceptions dating from the last part of the century.[3] Instead, two different research trends prove to be more productive: on the one hand, there are studies indebted to anthropological and ritual research, along the path showed by Claude Calame's pioneer work on Alcman;[4] on the other, inspiration comes from the oral theories and from their application to Greek choral poetry, especially under the influence of Bruno Gentili and of the 'Scuola Urbinate'.[5] Less text-centred studies, such as those influenced by modern literary theories (ranging from the German Idealism to Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre), tend to focus on the nature and meaning of the "collective body" and look at it from a religious, philosophical or political perspective, rather than from a choreographic and theatrical standpoint. This leads to highly sophisticated theories about "the Greek Chorus" seen as some kind of abstract and often vague concept, but does not help much in under-

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[1] Sommerstein 2010, 63, who writes about the hypothetical reconstruction of fragmentary plays.

[2] See Naerebout 1997 and 2003 for a detailed discussion of the scholarly approaches to ancient dance.

[3] E.g. Mullen 1982; Henrichs 1996; Naerebout 1997; Ceccarelli 1998.

[4] Calame 1977 (and later editions). See also Lonsdale 1993.

[5] E.g. Gentili 1984 (and later editions, including the English translation by Thomas Cole).

standing choruses as dancing groups and in enlightening any aspect of their performances. Investigations on chorus and chorality have multiplied and almost boomed in the twenty-first-century,[1] but the issue of dance still tends to be neglected.[2] Recent enquiries have analysed the problematic role of the chorus in modern theatre and drama theory[3] as well as in re-performances of ancient drama,[4] even surveying the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of the would-be "ancient dances" recreated by modern choreographers.[5] As a consequence of the renewed interest in non-canonical theatre, considerable attention has been paid to pantomime, a genre especially popular during the Roman period, consisting of dumb shows by one single performer who, through body and hand *schemata*, impersonates different characters.[6] Far less light, however, has been shed on other dance genres. Furthermore, the artistic research concerned with ancient dance continues to be very much alive not only in Greece but also, for example, at the London-based *Thiasos Theatre Company* directed by Y. Zarifi-Sistovari and M. J. Coldiron, and within the project *Ancient Dance in Modern Dancers* carried out in Oxford.

While considering this research background, the focus of *Choreutika* is, on the one hand, on Greek dance seen as an essential component of choric and theatre performance and, on the other, on ancient concepts and notions regarding dance. In particular, within this field of investigation, it is the archaic and classical age from the seventh until the end of the fourth century B.C. that earned our attention. In this period, choral and dramatic poems are usually danced by the choruses. Poetry, music, and dance interplay closely with each other, build-

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[1] See for example Wilson 2000; Bierl 2001; Perusino-Colantonio 2007; Swift 2010; Athanassaki-Bowie 2011; Billings-Budelmann-Macintosh 2013; Gagné-Hopman 2013.

[2] For exceptions see e.g. Lazou-Raftis-Borowska 2003; David 2006; Csapo 2008.   [3] See Billings-Budelmann-Macintosh 2013.

[4] For example Baur 1999; Heeg 2006; Lee 2013; Bodenburg *et aliae* 2016.

[5] Naerebout 1997; McIntosh 2012.

[6] E.g. Easterling 1997; Lada-Richards 2007; Garelli 2007; Webb 2008; Hall-Wyles 2008; Schlapbach 2009; Hall 2013; Petrides 2013; Gianvittorio 2016.

ing those inter-medial performance arts to which the Greeks referred through terms that are rather difficult to translate into modern languages, such as *mousike*, *molpe*, and *choreia*. Once living memories of such ephemeral arts are lost, texts are virtually all that remains. For this reason, the poetic texts that accompanied dance performances – often explicitly introducing, praising, and commenting on them – can be regarded as a key resource to understand the meanings, contexts, and functions of archaic and classical dance. In addition to this, we shall consider those philosophical and theoretical texts (mostly written by Plato, Aristotle, and Aristoxenus) that reflect on poetry and music and that are therefore concerned more or less explicitly with dance as well.

From a methodological standpoint, the idea of resorting to texts to understand performances may sound paradoxical for scholars who are familiar with present-day theatre and performance studies. However, in Classical studies, textual sources take on an importance that can hardly be overestimated, just because they are all that is available (even though only partially), while other evidence of performance is completely lost. As it has been rightly pointed out, in our discipline the performative turn simply yielded a novel, performance-oriented way of interpreting texts.[1]

Book structure and contents

The volume consists of two parts. The first, "Performing Choral Dance: Texts and Contexts", reconsiders Greek poetry from the perspective of dance. After establishing some methodological essentials of research on ancient dance, this part examines a sample of authors and works, from the archaic time until the end of the classical era, whose performance relied on dance: namely the (choral) poetry of Stesichorus and the choral songs of Aeschylus and Euripides. The second part of the volume, "Elements of Ancient Dance Theory", offers a selection of ancient theoretical approaches to dance. Here, the

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[1] Perris 2010, 182.

label "ancient dance theory" is not intended to suggest that the Greeks developed a homogeneous system or a shared body of knowledge about dance. The expression refers to what must have been, at the very least, a significant quantity of thoughts, technical terms, and notions that, though not necessarily referring to one another in an explicit fashion and in spite of being disseminated within theories of *mousike* and *choreia*, were nonetheless all concerned with dance. As a matter of fact, dance was a topic of serious investigation both for the most successful dance practitioners and for the most brilliant theorists: just to mention the best known examples on each side, one might think of Sophocles' lost treatise *On the Chorus* and of Plato's *Laws*.[1]

Like any other complex research object, Greek dance needs to be observed from different points of view and to be approached in an interdisciplinary way. The authors of the present volume can be expected to meet this requirement. The work of these classical scholars focuses on a variety of dance-related fields, such as history of dance (Frederick Naerebout), choral poetry (Patrick Finglass), classical theatre (Eric Csapo, Laura Gianvittorio), artistic research concerned with dance (Sophie Bocksberger), ancient music (Stefan Hagel, Eleonora Rocconi), and ancient aesthetics (Anastasia-Erasmia Peponi). Most of these research focuses will also emerge from the papers collected here. The following paragraphs outline the main contents of each contribution.

The volume opens with Frederick Naerebout's survey of the so-called Greek "dancescape" and with a clear-cut methodological manifesto. According to this, scholars of ancient dance should resist the temptation to read mismatched pieces of information about ancient dance as if they built a synchronic and consistent corpus, keeping in mind that a great number of choruses and choral performances existed even though the relevant evidence is lost. Under such premises, Naerebout assesses

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[1] Dance-related aspects of this Platonic dialogue have been recently and thoroughly discussed in Peponi 2013 (here see especially Chapter Two).

with great conceptual sharpness which questions can sensibly be asked concerning ancient dance – and, just as importantly, which ones cannot. His enquiry centres on the complex relationship between choral performance and religion, and eventually deepens into non-theatrical choral dance performed in religious contexts. After defining choruses as "group[s] of mostly non-professional dancers moving in unison", he considers spatial arrangement, number, gender, and age of the dancers.

Moving on to consider poems that were actually danced, the cases of Stesichorus, Aeschylus, and Euripides are discussed in chronological order. Relying on his own critical edition of Stesichorus' fragments, Patrick Finglass engages with the much debated problems of whether or not Stesichorus was a choral poet and whether his poems were danced chorally. Such questions are of manifest importance not only with regard to choral poetry in general, but also to archaic dance practice in particular. To answer them, Finglass examines three types of evidence: the references to dance within Stesichorus' fragments, the performance culture of his homeland in Southern Italy, and above all the historicity and the implications of Stesichorus' speaking name as "Chorus Trainer". To carry out this last task, Finglass reviews the earliest literary and scholarly writings that mention the poet and his works. In the face of such evidence, and against some trends in Anglo-Saxon Stesichorean scholarship, the onus of proof lies firmly on those who would exclude chorality.

Chapters four and five interpret, respectively, some hidden and some prominent references by tragic choruses to their own dancing. From the apparently incoherent occurrences of *eresso* "to row" in two choral dirges, namely Aeschylus' *Persians* (1046) and *Seven* (855), Laura Gianvittorio infers that, at the end of the two earliest surviving tragedies, the mourning choruses performed what may be called a "rowing dance". She then recovers and discusses evidence of such a mourning dance. *Seven* 854-60 clearly shows that the rowing dance was supposed to re-enact the journey of the souls across the Acheron towards Hades. Interestingly, Aristophanes seems to parody such a dance in eminently paratragic situations, such as

Frogs 197-268, where Dionysus, during his *katabasis*, comically rows across the underworld marsh. Finally, looking for possible iconographic evidence of this dance, Gianvittorio offers a novel interpretation of the Basel krater: while the vase is usually regarded as representing a tragic necromantic ritual, a mourning situation is actually more likely.

On the other hand, Eric Csapo investigates the striking references of Euripides' (later) choruses to circular dancing. To this end, he first explains the cultic and artistic conventions underlying circular choral formations. The widespread idea that dithyrambic choruses are consistently circular while dramatic choruses are rectangular is a clear oversimplification. Even so, it is puzzling how often Euripidean choruses speak of circular dance. They do so either by imparting choreographic self-instructions, which is frequent in cultic songs, by imagining themselves as dancing in cultic contexts, or by singing of choruses other than themselves, thus "embedding" fictional, mostly cultic choruses (e.g. Nereids, Kouretes, etc.) within their own performance. Csapo argues convincingly that Euripides insists deliberately on circular dance to stress the cultic, Bacchic and Eleusinian roots of his own art: by flaunting choric hypertraditionalism and the related religious connotations, he meets the artistic and ethical charges moved by conservative critics against the New Music he has embraced.

The second part of the volume is devoted, as stated above, to various aspects of ancient dance theory. Due to the intermediality of poetic performance in the archaic and classical time, the discourse about dance can hardly be held apart from that about poetry and music, and the contributions included into part two can be seen as analysing the coalescence of these domains. In particular, chapters six and seven focus on the Greek terminology of dance, while chapters eight and nine give an account of the fundamental connection between dance and rhythm.

Sophie Marianne Bocksberger rethinks the complex relationship of dance and poetics from an unconventional perspective, and argues that it is the dance vocabulary that shapes the (meta-)language of Greek literary criticism. In her view,

terms such as *schema*, *trope*, *pezos* (*logos*), and *metaphora* originally referred to bodily properties and dance movements and were borrowed into the literary vocabulary only later. In particular, *metaphora* would indicate the process of making visible what is said by means of dancing – an explanation which fits well with Aristotle's understanding of *metaphora* as "creating the object in front of the eyes". Once poetic performance was replaced by written texts, the meaning of such terms gradually shifted from the semantic field of dance to that of literary criticism. By looking at the semantic history of these words, we may thus catch a glimpse of what has once been the core of Greek poetry, namely the embodiment of music and dance performance.

There is, however, only one Greek word that, by the end of the classical time, shows a plainly recognizable and well-established technical meaning within the semantic field of dance, and that is *schema*. Eleonora Rocconi offers a new analysis of this crucial term, drawing on works such as Maria Luisa Catoni's, and suggests that, in spite of the obvious necessity of bodily movement in dance performance, *schema* is chiefly conceptualised as a motionless pose. In theoretical discourses about dance (e.g. by Aristoxenus), the abstract notion of non-kinetic poses would allow analysing dance into its minimal components, comparably to how alphabetical letters are used to dissect language and notes to examine melody. With regard to performance, such poses may help in realising distinctive dramatic effects: for example in the dance parody at the end of Aristophanes' *Wasps* and, presumably, in Callias' lost *Alphabetic Show*.

The last two chapters are devoted to rhythm, the most essential link connecting Greek dance, music, and poetry. After defining dance as bodily expression of rhythm, Stefan Hagel enquires into what we actually know about it. The widely accepted, *princeps*-based model holds that long syllables are strong rhythmical positions. With regard to dance, this would imply that syllables *principes* and strong rhythmical movements, such as feet stamping, should naturally coincide. Yet, if that holds true, how could have asymmetrical rhythms like that of the

Aeolic metres been been danced? Following the *princeps*-model, short syllables should carry the rhythmical accent and yield highly irregular dance patterns. However, this is incompatible with the fact that traditional dances are predictably repetitive. Challenging the common assumption about the unity of text and music in the so-called Old Music, Hagel reconsiders the (thin) evidence on which scholars have built such belief and suggests that song rhythm does not always follow that of spoken language.

Finally, Anastasia-Erasmia Peponi examines Aristotle's brief yet influential definition of "the art of the dancers" and focuses on an opaque but key phrase that refers to the function of rhythm in dance. In light of fourth-century B.C. and later discourses, Peponi argues that through the composite phrase *schematizomenos rhythmos*, which brings together the aural and the visual aspects of rhythmic movement, Aristotle captured the essence of dance as a synesthetic activity while also hinting at the kinesthetic impact of rhythm. She also argues that, unlike other discourses that used the term *schema* as a fixed entity, Aristotle, by using instead the participle *schematizomenos* with rhythm as its subject, was able to capture "shaping" as a dynamic process in dance. Translating the phrase into modern languages is difficult, yet it can be effectively paraphrased as "through the rhythms as they are being turned into visual structures".

Together, these papers enhance our knowledge of the strong ties dating from the archaic until the end of the classical age that bound dance to such diverse domains as religion, choral poetry, theatre, poetics, music, philosophy, and aesthetics. In so doing, they shed light on the two sides of Greek dance, presenting it not only as a fascinating performance art but also as a topic of ancient theoretical investigation. Ultimately, it is the synergy of such different approaches that helps us today to grasp the vibrant complexity of ancient Greek dance.

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