

COMEDIA: AN ACTRESS OF COMEDY

THE subject of this paper is a terracotta mould from the Athenian Agora, dated A.D. 250-267.¹ It shows a masked woman reclining on a couch and supporting herself on her left hand. Her right hand, holding a wreath, lies across her body. At the foot of the couch a male figure is seated. He supports his chin in his right hand, and holds a wreath with his left hand. He is wearing a comic mask with the trumpet mouth of a slave. On the space beneath the couch there is a Latin inscription reading: COMEDIA | PYLADES. The inscription is unique, but the same pair of figures is repeated on similar moulds found at Ostia² and Paestum;³ a third one is in the British Museum and the back of a fourth mould is kept in the Museum of Alexandria.⁴ The copy from Ostia was found among roughly two hundred moulds decorated with actors, gladiators, chariots, animals, in a house near the theater. In the same storeroom thirty-five large storage vessels and some jugs were also found. Near the storeroom a bakery was located. A. Pasqui⁵ suggested that the terracotta moulds are cake forms, and related the Ostia finds to a Roman custom according to which rich citizens, usually officials of high rank, offered to the people cakes and wine (*crustulum et mulsum*) on several occasions: dedications of buildings or monuments, birthday anniversaries, *ludi*.⁶ Pasqui's suggestion has been more or less generally accepted,⁷ although M. Squarciapino⁸ rejected it, and made the alternative proposal that the moulds were used for the production of wax ex-votos dedicated to the gods by gladiators, chariot-eers, actors, and so forth, after the happy end of their performances. It is true that the shape of the moulds is too irregular, and the elaborate details of the decorations would probably not have been very well impressed on the cakes. On the other hand,

¹ *Agora*, VI, pp. 58, 85, no. 502, pl. 11; M. Bieber, *History of the Gr. and Rom. Theater*², pp. 241-242, fig. 796; T. B. L. Webster, *Monuments Illustrating New Comedy*, *Bull. Inst. Cl. Stud.*, Suppl. 11, AT 37, pl. V c (henceforth quoted as *M.N.C.*), *Griech. Bühnenerntümer*, Göttingen, 1963, pp. 35, 60, 65, pl. 7. I am indebted to Prof. Homer A. Thompson, Field Director of the Excavations in the Athenian Agora, for suggesting that the interpretation here offered be published.

² Bieber, *op. cit.*, fig. 794; *M.N.C.*, IT 81.

³ *Arch. Class.*, V, 1954, pp. 82 f., pl. 18, fig. 2.

⁴ London copy: *Brit. Museum Catalogue of Terracottas*, E 70; Bieber, *op. cit.*, fig. 795; *M.N.C.*, IT 81, pl. V d. The Alexandria mould is unpublished (Museum number 16354). I owe this information to the kindness of Mrs. Dorothy B. Thompson.

⁵ *Not. degli Scavi*, III, 1906, pp. 372 f.

⁶ *Thes. L. L.*, s.v. *crustulum*; see specifically *C.I.L.*, XI, 3613.

⁷ Bieber, *Denkmäler zum Theaterwesen*, p. 118, no. 52, *History*², pp. 241-242; F. Drexel, *Römisch-germanisches Korrespondenzblatt*, IX, 1916, pp. 17-22; A. K. H. Simon, *Comicae Tabellae*, Emsdetten, 1938, p. 49; Webster in *Agora*, VI, p. 85, *Griech. Bühnenernt.*, p. 35.

⁸ "Formae Ostienses," *Arch. Class.*, V, 1954, p. 98.

the forms are considerably larger⁹ than they seem in the published photographs and all depends on the kind and the substance of the cakes, about which we do not know much.

The first question is whether our mould was imported into Athens, or is a local imitation of an imported one, or a new composition. Color and texture of clay are enough for an expert to decide whether a terracotta is Attic or not, and Mrs. Dorothy Burr Thompson has no doubt that the mould is Attic. The Alexandria copy is made from the same kind of Attic pinkish buff clay. Professor T. B. L. Webster discovered some close analogies between two figurines of actors found in the Agora and the Ostia forms. Seven other non-dramatic moulds from the Agora have analogies with other Ostia cake moulds. Attic lamps were exported to Pannonia in Roman times.¹⁰ It should be added at this point that the custom of offering cakes to theatrical audiences is also attested in Greece: *γλυκισμός, γλυκίζω*; *I.G.*, VII, 190, line 17, Pagai, Megaris, 1st century B.C.; *I.G.*, VII, 2712, line 75, Akraiphia, Boeotia, ca. A.D. 50; distribution of cakes and wine, not in a theater, occurs also in Priene, *Inscr. v. Pr.*, 108, lines 257, 273 after 129 B.C., 109, line 192 ca. 120 B.C., 111, line 238 early 1st century B.C. The custom of offering cakes, wine, and meals to the people is certainly Roman, but it is not far from the original Athenian liturgy of *hestiasis*. These facts may not prove that the cake moulds with dramatic subjects originated in Athens, but they are sufficient to show that such moulds were made in Athens and probably exported elsewhere.

The next question is whether the Pylades mould represents a scene from a play or not. It has been said¹¹ that the pair of figures, one reclining on a couch and another sitting at its foot, belongs to a long tradition of dramatic monuments going back to the 5th century: the Peiraeus relief with Dionysos, maenad, and actors carrying masks;¹² another Attic relief in Cagliari, Sardinia, with a female figure, probably Thalia, holding a mask and sitting at the foot of a couch where Dionysos must have been lying (now missing), and three more masks hanging near the upper left corner of the relief;¹³ the Pronomos vase with Dionysos and Ariadne surrounded by the actors and chorus of a satyr play;¹⁴ the late Roman mosaic from Antioch showing Menander, Glykera, and Comedy holding a slave mask and a walking stick.¹⁵ In all

⁹ The Attic mould is 13.5 x 11.2 cm.; the biggest Ostia moulds are 10 x 10 cm. (Pasqui, *op. cit.*, p. 360).

¹⁰ Webster in *Agora*, VI, p. 85.

¹¹ Webster, *ibid.*, p. 86.

¹² J. N. Svoronos, *Das Athen. Nationalmus.*, II, pp. 512 ff., pl. 82; Bieber, *History*², fig. 113; Webster, *Monum. Illustr. Trag. and Satyr Play*, *Bull. Inst. Cl. Stud.*, Suppl. 14, AS 1.

¹³ Svoronos, *op. cit.*, p. 525, fig. 239; Webster, *ibid.*, AS 6.

¹⁴ Beazley, *A.R.V.*², p. 1336, no. 1; Bieber, *History*², figs. 31-33; A. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb, Tragedy, Comedy*², no. 85, pl. 13; F. Brommer, *Satyrspiele*, no. 4, *Arch. Anz.*, 1964, cols. 109-114; Webster, *ibid.*, AV 25, *Greek Theatre Production*, A 9, pl. 8.

¹⁵ D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, pp. 201 ff.; Bieber, *History*², fig. 321; *M.N.C.*, ZM 4, pl. VI a.

these pictures it is the male figure which is lying on the couch. None of them is a dramatic scene, and in none do the characters represented wear their masks. All could be roughly classified as convivial scenes. In our terracotta it is the opposite; the woman is lying, both figures wear masks, and seem preoccupied with a difficult problem. The posture of the man is known from other terracottas, the earliest and best example being an Attic statuette of the 4th century B.C. showing a slave supporting his chin with his right hand and absorbed in thinking,¹⁶ and is also described by Plautus.¹⁷ A very close parallel to our scene as a whole is to be found in a Roman lamp from Ostia.¹⁸ The woman on the couch looks very much like the sad lady of the moulds, the man is not a slave but a long-haired, clean shaven man. He looks equally distressed. Both hold knives instead of wreaths and seem ready not to defend themselves,¹⁹ but rather to die. The scene has been referred by Webster²⁰ to an apparently popular subject of New Comedy treated by Alexis, Diphilos, and Philemon, in plays with the identical title *Συναποθνήσκοντες* (Plautus based his *Commorientes* on Diphilos' play).

There seems to be very little doubt that the mould in question represents a dramatic scene. But what sort of play is this, and what is the meaning of the inscription? At first sight it looks as if we have here a comedy called "Pylades."²¹ But this is very unlikely for a number of good reasons. Firstly, mythological travesties were out of fashion before the end of the 4th century B.C. Such a comedy might not be entirely impossible but it certainly is highly improbable for the 3rd century after Christ. But even if we assume for a moment the possibility of a mythological comedy, what we know of the tragic and mythological Pylades could hardly provide the material for a travesty. And why should the coroplast of the mould choose a slave and not the main character of the play, that is, Pylades?²² The subjects of mythological comedies were usually stories well known, and capable of adaptation and parody: *Adonis* (Antiphanes, Araros, Nikophon, Philiskos, Platon), *Antaios* (Antiphanes), *Auge* (Euboulos, Philyllios), *Ganymedes* (Alkaios, Antiphanes, Euboulos), *Weaving Odysseus* (Alexis), *Philoktetes* (Antiphanes, Strattis). Illustrations of parodies on 4th century phlyax vases show that the artists chose a crucial scene, and tried to capture the point of the parody. Take for example Zeus and Alkmene,²³ the Rape of

¹⁶ Bieber, *op. cit.*, fig. 198; Webster, *Monum. Illustr. Old and Middle Com.*, *Bulle. Inst. Cl. Stud.*, Suppl. 9, AT 21. For other examples see D. B. Thompson, *Hesperia*, XXXIV, 1965, p. 59, no. 10.

¹⁷ *Miles*, lines 200 ff., especially line 209; cf. Webster in *Agora*, VI, p. 86.

¹⁸ Bieber, *op. cit.*, fig. 797; *M.N.C.*, pp. 201, 207, no. IL 43.

¹⁹ Bieber, *op. cit.*, p. 242, *Denkmäler zum Theaterwesen*, no. 53.

²⁰ *Agora*, VI, p. 86; *M.N.C.*, *loc. cit.*

²¹ Bieber, *History*², pp. 241-242.

²² It is hardly necessary to say that Pylades cannot be the name of a New Comedy slave.

²³ Bieber, *ibid.*, fig. 484; A. D. Trendall, *Phlyax Vases*, *Bull. Inst. Cl. Stud.*, Suppl. 8, no. 59.

Ajax,²⁴ the Birth of Helen,²⁵ Herakles at Delphi,²⁶ and so on. I think the idea of a play called "Pylades" should be dismissed.

Another view expounded by Professor Webster²⁷ is that the names refer to the figures. Pylades is the name of the actor who plays the part of the slave, and Comedia is the personification of comedy who plays the part of the girl because the play was successful, which seems to be suggested by the wreaths held by the two figures. Pylades is a fairly common name at Athens and elsewhere in Roman times.²⁸ A famous pantomime in the time of Augustus was called Pylades (four more pantomimes down to the second part of the 3rd century had the same name),²⁹ and our comic actor may have called himself by this celebrated name, as another comic actor on a relief in Verona was perhaps called Bathyllos after an equally famous pantomime.³⁰ But is it likely that the woman is the personification of comedy? Comedy is dressed like a hetaira in the Archelaos relief,³¹ like a slave in the Antioch mosaic of Menander, but never plays a part in a certain play in any of her allegorical representations known to us.³² However, if Comedia is neither a personification of comedy nor the title of a play, what can it be?

If Pylades is the name of an actor, then it is most likely that Comedia is also the name of an actress. This might seem a logical assumption but there are two stumbling blocks which have to be removed before this assumption can be accepted. The first is the well established fact that the actor's profession was strictly a man's profession. The second is that Comedia is a strange name for a girl. It is not listed in any of the lexica of proper names, and the fact that an Athenian ship was called *Komoidia* in the 4th century,³³ or that the same name (as well as *Tragoidia*) is sometimes given to bacchantes on vases,³⁴ does not help much. However, *Κωμοφδία* is actually attested as a woman's name by Delian inscriptions.³⁵ It was the name of a shopkeeper at whose shop one could buy rose perfume and ribbons. As for the other difficulty, that women

²⁴ Bieber, *ibid.*, fig. 494; Trendall, *ibid.*, no. 80.

²⁵ Beazley, *Etruscan Vase Painting*, pp. 39 ff.; Bieber, *ibid.*, fig. 492; Trendall, *ibid.*, no. 17.

²⁶ Bieber, *ibid.*, fig. 481; Trendall, *ibid.*, no. 30.

²⁷ *Agora*, VI, p. 86; *A.J.A.*, LXVI, 1962, p. 334.

²⁸ *I.G.*, II², 1994, line 11, 2037, line 5, 2062, line 26, 2064, line 12, 2085, line 12, 2217, line 16, etc.; *S.B.*, 7345; Johnson-van Hoesen, *Pap. Princeton*, 2.VII.12, 6.I.2.3., 13.X.8; *P. Tebt.*, 819, line 4.

²⁹ M. Bonaria, *Mimorum Romanorum Fragmenta*, II (consult the index).

³⁰ *I.G.*, II², 5302; *M.N.C.*, AS 8, pl. III, a; cf. *Agora*, VI, p. 85.

³¹ C. Watzinger, "Das Relief des Archelaos von Priene," *Berliner Winkelmannsprogramm*, 1903; Bieber, *op. cit.*, figs. 1-2, *Hellenistic Sculpture*, fig. 497; Webster, *Greek Theatre Production*, A 78, pl. 12.

³² See D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, p. 203.

³³ *I.G.*, II², 1067 a, line 27.

³⁴ Charlotte Fränkel, *Satyr- und Bakchennamen auf Vasenbildern*, Halle, 1912, pp. 62-63.

³⁵ *I.G.*, XI, 161 A, line 93, 203 A, line 65.

did not belong to the acting profession, this is certainly true for classical, Hellenistic and early Roman times. However, women were very popular as performers of mime (one of them, Theodora, even reached the throne of Byzantium), dancers, etc., throughout Hellenistic and Roman times, and we also have a very good and rather neglected piece of evidence that they mounted the stage of the "straight" drama in late imperial times. Our witness is Donatus commenting on the *Andria* of Terence, IV, 3, 1: "et vide non minimas partes in hac comoedia Mysidi attribui, hoc est personae femineae, sive haec personatis viris agitur, ut apud veteres, sive per mulierem, ut nunc videmus." Donatus lived in the 4th century; our monument is dated to the second part of the 3rd century. This is not a big difference, all the more because all development in drama had stopped long before that time.

Comedia sounds a good name for a comic actress. When women on stage were still a novelty—because at the time of Donatus they apparently were not—an actress must have used this rather whimsical name to underline her talents in the same way as mime actresses used to assume such professional names as Eucharis, Thymele, Luxuria, Mimesis and so forth,³⁶ and women gladiators styled themselves Ἀμαζών or Ἀχιλλία.³⁷ Whether our Comedia belongs to that novelty period or assumed a well established name is impossible to say.

No evidence for lady actresses exists in Greece. Besides, the Latin inscription implies a Latin performance. It would, therefore, seem reasonable to suppose that we have here two Roman actors in Athens. The Greek name Pylades is no difficulty because we know a good many actors with Greek names in Rome. Nor is a Latin comedy in Athens improbable either. There are other examples of Latin speaking performers in Greece and Asia Minor, namely the *rhomaistai* recorded at Delos in the 2nd century B.C.,³⁸ and "Roman poets" among the events of a musical festival at Aphrodisias of Caria in imperial times.³⁹ Furthermore, at a time when the Romans were preoccupied with gladiators, chariot races, and mimes, the theater-minded Athenians (and other Greeks) would be regarded as a favorable audience by a Latin troupe with its lady actresses, an unusual feature on a Greek stage.

Before concluding this paper I feel bound to make an effort to interpret the scene represented by the mould. The shape of the wreaths held by the two characters (the man's wreath is better seen in the Ostia copy) is not round, so they may be garlands of flowers. Garlands and couch suggest a symposium scene. Therefore, the

³⁶ Ch. Garton, *Cl. Rev.*, N. S. XIV, 1964, pp. 238-239.

³⁷ *Gr. Inscr. Brit. Mus.*, 911; L. Robert, *Les gladiateurs dans l'Orient grec*, p. 188, no. 184, pl. XII. (My attention was drawn to women gladiators by Mrs. Thompson.)

³⁸ *I.G.*, XI, 133, line 81; *Inscr. Délos*, 2618, d 8. Their specialty was to utter scurrilous jokes in the Latin language; cf. Appian, *Hannib.* 41; A. Wilhelm, *Jahreshefte*, III, 1900, pp. 49-50. It is noteworthy that the *rhomaistai* in Delos had Greek names. For a Latin mime buried at Philippi see Dessau, *I.L.S.*, 5208.

³⁹ *C.I.G.*, 2758, II 3.

woman must be a hetaira. Plautus provides us with a good parallel. In the fifth act of the *Persa* a (leading) slave holds a convivium to celebrate the liberation of his beloved from the pimp. Couches are brought on the stage (line 759), he offers a garland to the girl (line 770), and later on there is even occasion for the two lovers to get cross, though temporarily, with each other (lines 833 ff.). I do not suggest that the mould is an illustration of this particular scene, but simply that we have in both cases the same elements: garlands, couches, slave and courtesan, both pensive.

To sum up what our terracotta seems to suggest: Comedia and Pylades heading a company of Roman actors arrive in Athens to produce their *palliata*, order some cake forms to be made by a local workshop, and have their names inscribed on them so that their visit will be somehow recorded and remembered. I do not know how much trust should be placed in these conclusions. In any case, the mould strongly suggests that Latin plays were performed at Athens in imperial times, and supports Donatus' statement about women actresses in comedy.

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