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Ladles, Tubs, and The Greek Dance

There is in Athenaeus, IV, 157, a ἀπαξ λεγόμενον which has furnished some trouble to readers and editors. The passage in question mentions the entrance of two courtesans, Melissa and Nicon. Athenaeus calls Nicon a «dog-fly», κανάμμα, and Melissa a ψ. θεατροτορύνη. It is the latter epithet to which I should like to direct attention in this note

The epithets are evidently bestowed in jest, and they have been translated in similar vein by various editors. Gulick, for instance, renders θεατροτορύνη as «stage-thumper», and comments to the effect that the reference is to Melissa’s clumsy dancing.1 Yonge2 renders two word «spoon of the theater» without comment. The new Liddell-Scott Greek lexicon, s. u., translates the epithet as «stage-pounder».

A τορύνη is a ladle (Aristophanes, Birds, 78,79). The word is related to τορύνω, τορυνάω «stir», as of liquids in a pot. There are in the technical terminology of the Greek dance a great many words of similar significance. Recently3 I discussed the dance known as the ἱγδη, ἱγδις or ἱγδίσμα, the «grinding, pounding» or «mortar» dance, the names of which are derived from * γόδζω. This was a dance of a lascivious nature, common to courtesans. In it the performer rotated the hips and jerked the body in a manner reminiscent of motion of a pestle being used to grind food in a trough or mortar. Often coupled with this dance is a figure called the λύγισμα, λυγισμός, λυγιστικόν, or λυγίζειν,4 «writing, twisting, as a willow wand».

Another dance or figure sometimes performed by women of low repute is called μακτόρα (Hesychius, s.u.) or μακτρισμός. The name is derived from μάκτρα, a «kneading-trough, tub». (Cf. Aristophanes, Frogs, 1159.) But the figure is by no means a «folk dance» using «work rhythms», as some present-day writers on the history of the dance have remarked innocently! Nor is there any kinship with our idiom in «tub-thumping.» Pollux (IV, 101) specifically groups the μακτρισμός with the γόδις and other dances of a lewd nature-notably the ἀπόκινος and ἀπόσεισις- and says it was characterized by a swaying rotation of the hips.

We might note here a passage in the Metamorphoses of Apuleius (II, 117), in which the girl Fotis, stirring a pot on the fire, and attracting a young man’s attention at the same time, sways her shoulders and hips rhythmically:”…illud cibarium vasculum floridis palmulis rotatbat in circulum; et in orbis flexibus crebra succutiens, et simul membra sua leniter illubricans, lumbis sensim vibratibus, spinam mobilem quatiens placide, decenter undatabat.” (Cf. Priapea XVIII, ed. Buecheler.)

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1 Charles Burton Gulick, Athenaeus, the Deipnosophists (Harvard University Press, 1927-41), II, p. 215
2 C. D. Yonge, The deipnosophists, or Banquet of the Learned (Bohn, 1853-4), I, p. 253
3 “A ‘Mortar’ Dance” C.J., XLIII (1947-48), p. 34
4 Suidas, s. νο. ἱγδη, ἱγδίσμα; Schol. Aristoph. Wasps 1487; Et. Mag., 8 ν. ζόδη.
I should like to suggest, then, that the epithet in Athenaeus should not be translated «stage-thumper». There is implicit in the epithet no reference to clumsiness on the part of the dancer. Rather, the skilled dancer Melissa, with her lewd contortions, resembles a ladle «stirring» something in a pot. There may also be a double entendre in the word-some metaphorical connotation of «stirring up» the spectators (θεατρον) with the wantonness of the dancer’s movements. The dance implied might or might not be performed in an actual theater. I should translate the epithet θεατροτορίνη either as «skilled in the stirring-dance of the theater», or as «stirrer-up of the spectators».

Closely associated with the dances which we have been considering is, I believe, another dance, usually classed as one of the «unknowns». In Hesychius appears a lemma δρίτη, universally emended to δροίτη, and glossed πυέλος, σκάφη and «a kind of dance». The word δροίτη denotes a wooden tub, bath-tub, cradle.

Similarly, πυέλος is a trough, vat, tub, bath-tub. One of Hesychius’ glosses of the word μακτήρ, which we have already noted as the name of a lewd dance, is πυέλις-certainly to be emended πυέλος. The word σκάφη denotes a tub, bowl, trough, kneading-trough, boat. Pollux (X, 102, 114) lists μάκτρα and σκάφη together as cooking and baking utensils. It is evident that all these words from a cluster, as it were, of terms denoting wooden utensils of one short or another, in each of which, under certain conditions, a ladle or pestle may be used with a revolving, stirring motion. Accordingly, it seems clear that we may see in δροίτη, when it is the name of a dance, another example of the ἱγδη-μακτρισμὸς group, in which the characteristic motion is a rhythmical and voluptuous rotation of the hips, suggestive of «stirring» or «grinding.»