

ΟΡΧΗΣΙΣ ΦΟΒΕΡΑ

Lillian B. Lawler

Hesychius gives us the name of a dance figure which is mentioned as such nowhere else in Greek literature, so far as I have been able to discover. The word is ποίφνγμα, and Hesychius glossed it merely as σχήμα ορχηστικόν. Ensuing entries, however, are helpful: ποιφύζαι εκφοβήσαι ποιφύζεις εκφοβήσεις και το φουσάν και το πνείν [εκ του] ποιφύσσειν ποιφύσσει φοβεί. Meursius (Orchestra, s.v. ποίφνγμα) reasonably concludes of the figure: “Videtur fuisse saltatio quaedam composita ad terrorem incutiendum, dicta από του ποιφύσσειν, quod est έκφοβείν”. Wright (1) seems to speak of the figure as “The Squealer”.

For further light upon this “terrifying” schema in the dance, one may turn to Pollux and Athenaeus. It has been well established (2) that, in matters concerning dancing, Pollux, Athenaeus and Diogenianus (Hesychius) go back to a common source – a comparatively full treatment of the subject, no longer extant, which the three later writers condensed or excerpted, each in his own way. Neither Pollux nor Athenaeus mentions the ποίφνγμα; but in Pollux we find (IV, 103): ο δέ λέων ορχήσεως φοβεράς είδος. The lion dance, then, is one form of the “terrifying” dance. Athenaeus mentions the lion dance (XIV, 629f), but says nothing of its terrifying aspect; in fact, he includes the dance among a group which he calls γελοία! The problem, then, is this: What is a “terrifying” dance? Why is one form of it called ποίφνγμα? How can the lion dance be “terrifying” and “amusing” at the same time?

Let us return to Athenaeus for moment. We find that his list of “amusing” dances includes the μορφασμός, the γλαύξ, and the λέων, merely named, in that order. A few lines later, after several other dances and figures have been mentioned, Athenaeus speaks of the σκώψ and the σκώπευμα- two other owl dances. He adds that the σκώψ is the dance figure of one shading the eyes with the hand, as if looking for something; and he quotes Aeschylus for σκώπευμα.

The corresponding passage in Pollux (IV, 103) contains mention of the μορφασμός, the σκώψ, and the λέων, in that order, but with a sentence about each- to the effect that the μορφασμός is an imitation of animals of all kinds; that the σκώψ, is the same as the σκωπίας, a form of dance imitating the owl as it twists its neck, and tries to get away from its captors; and that the λέων is a form of the “terrifying” dance.

The order is significant. Evidently the original source told something of the μορφασμός, of several owl dances, and then of the lion dance; and it may have added other “terrifying” dances and figures, perhaps including the ποίφνγμα.

The word *ποίφυγμα* is from *ποιφύσσω*, a reduplicated, onomatopoeic word denoting “puff, blow, snort”. (3) Sophron wrote a mime called “Puffing Passion” *Παιδικά Ποιφύξεις* (Athenaeus VII, 324 f). The verb is used of the blowing of the breath upon a hot bowl (Lycophron, 198), and the noun of the wild snorting of a group of excited people (Aeschylus, *Septem*, 281). Various forms of the root are used to denote the whistling of the winds. It is used of the hissing of serpents (Nicander, *Theriaca*, 180, 371), and of the roaring of the sea against the figurehead of a ship (Anth. Pal., VII, 215).

Evidently, then *ποίφυγμα* would seem to denote a snort, a hiss, a roar, a loud cry of some sort. Its use in animal dances would be obvious. Loud animal cries always startled the ancients; witness, e.g., the devastating effect of the trumpeting of war elephants. Even more striking in this connection is the terror inspired in battle by the use of “fluted muzzels” upon war steeds, to amplify their breathing and snorting (Aeschylus, *Septem*, 4633-4; frag. 181 Loeb), and to give it the quality of the piping of flutes. (The word *ποίφυγμα* is not used of this terrifying sound, as it happens, but *πνεύμα* is). Further, I believe that in the dance figure called *ποίφυγμα* a loud cry was probably associated with a sudden lunge at the spectators; for such lunges and cries are a feature of all primitive animal dances today- in Africa, in the South Sea Islands, among the American Indians.

It will be noted that if this interpretation of *ποίφυγμα* is correct, the figure would be appropriate to the three dances bracketed together in Athenaeus and Pollux- the *μορφασμός*, the animal dance in general; the owl dance; and the lion dance, which is specifically called “terrifying”.

The owl dances are particularly interesting. (4) We recall that the owl is associated with things dark and mysterious and terrifying, and that the cry of some species is particularly blood-curdling. Also, the word *γλαύξ* is regarded by some linguists as a hypocoristic form of *γλαυκώπις*, and is associated by them with *γλαυκός*. Hesychius glosses *γλαυκή* as *φοβερά*, *γλαυκίων* as *φοβερόν βλέπων*, and *γλαυκώπις* as *φοβερά εν τω όράσθαι*. Whether the etymological connection here is or is not correct, the owl, as seen at night, with its big eyes, can be very frightening; and a “terrifying” figure in an owl dance, in which the dancer uttered an unearthly cry and “flew” at the spectators, would be quite appropriate.

Lion dances are fairly iniform, the world over; and in all of them, roars and lunges at the spectators are practically inevitable (ef. the Lion’s reassuring words to his public in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act V, Sc.1). We recall that one of the satyr plays of Aeschylus was called *The Lion*; it may have dealt with Heracles and the

lion of Nemea. Other satyr plays which made use of the Heracles story may have touched upon the Nemean episode. In all satyr plays there was dancing; and in Aeschylus' play, at least, there must have been some form of lion dance, probably in burlesque.

Animal dancers, as seen in primitive societies today, almost invariably perform with masks. Disguised in this way, the dancer strives to enter into the nature of the sacred animal which he is portraying. Incidentally, the mask lends anonymity to the dancer, and increases the terror inspired in the audience by his ferocious dance. When the African animal dancer, a strange and fearsome creature in his great mask, rushes at the spectators, roaring, they invariably retreat, with startled cries.

The Greek animal dances were probably done with masks, also; in the drama they were certainly so performed. In early times, animal dances were solemn rituals, and the terror they inspired must have been real. As time goes on, however, and a race becomes sophisticated, such dances always become sources of amusement rather than of dread. One notes this fact particularly among the American Indians. They still watch with close attention the various animal dances of their tribe, and they still instinctively draw back as the dancer lunges and roars at them; but their cries are ejaculations of amusement as much as of alarm; and even the squeals of the children contain delight and excitement as well as fear.

In our own motion picture theaters a similar effect is sometimes produced by experimental "three-dimensional movies" in which balls that are apparently thrown straight at the spectators's eye, pieces of machinery that seem to poke at his nose, and animals that roar and leap out into the auditorium at him evoke screams of mingled anguish and amusement.

A dance figure involving lunging and a loud animal cry, then, can be *γελοῖον* and *φοβερόν* at the same time. I believe that we can with reasonable certainty restore such a figure in the animal dances of the Greeks, and identify it with what Hesychius calls *ποιφύγμα*.

Hunter College.

Footnotes

1. F. A. Wright, *The Arts in Greece* (London, 1923), p. 24.
2. Kurt Latte, "De Saltationibus Graecorum Capita Quinque", *Religionsgesch. Versuche and Vorarbeiten*, XIII, 3 (1913), Caput I.
3. Émile Boisacq, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Heidelberg and Paris, 1923), s.v.

4. Lillian B. Lawer, "The Dance of the Owl" *T. A. P. A.*, LXX (1939), pp. 482-502. Cf. *C. V. A.*, Robinson Coll., I, p. 57, Pl. xlvi.



Lawler02.doc