

## Aristophanes and the Definition of Dithyramb: Moving Beyond the Circle

### 1. Dithyrambic Dancing

#### a. Aristophanes *Birds* 1379

Peis: τί δεῦρο πόδα σὺ κυλλὸν ἀνὰ κύκλον κυκλεῖς;

Why do you circle your deformed foot here in a circle?

#### b. Aristophanes *Birds* 1398-1400

Cin. τοτὲ μὲν νοτίαν στείχων πρὸς ὀδόν,  
τοτὲ δ' αὖ βορέα σῶμα πελάζων  
ἀλίμενον αἰθέρος αὐλακα τέμνων.

Cin. Then bearing toward the southern track,  
then directing my body back northward  
cutting a harborless furrow of sky.

### 2. Dithyrambic Structure

#### Aristophanes *Birds* 1382-5

Peis. παῦσαι μελωδῶν, ἀλλ' ὅ τι λέγεις εἰπέ μοι.

Cin. ὑπὸ σοῦ πτερωθεὶς βούλομαι μετάρσιος  
ἀναπτόμενος ἐκ τῶν νεφελῶν καινὰς λαβεῖν  
ἀεροδονήτους καὶ νιφοβόλους ἀναβολάς.

Peis. Stop singing, but tell me what you mean!

Cin. Once I've acquired my wings from you, I intend to  
ascend up high and snatch from the clouds new  
air-rattling and snow-clad preludes.

### 3. Dithyrambic Language

#### a. Aristophanes *Birds* 1387-90

Cin. κρέμαται μὲν οὖν ἐντεῦθεν ἡμῶν ἡ τέχνη.  
τῶν διθυράμβων γὰρ τὰ λαμπρὰ γίγνεται  
ἀέρια καὶ σκότι' ἄττα καὶ κυαναυγέα  
καὶ πτεροδόνητα · σὺ δὲ κλυὼν εἴσει τάχα

Cin. Why, our craft depends on them.  
For the dazzling parts of dithyrambs happen to be  
misty and somewhat gloomy and dark-gleaming  
and wing-propelled. But by listening you'll soon learn.

#### b. Aristophanes *Birds* 1393-4

Cin. εἶδωλα πετηνῶν

αἰθεροδρόμων  
οἰωνῶν ταναοδείρων

Cin. O images of winged,  
air-coursing,  
slender-necked birds

4. Aristophanes *Birds* 1402

Peis. οὐ γὰρ σὺ χαίρεις πτεροδόνητος γενόμενος;

Peis. But don't you enjoy being 'wing-propelled'?

5. Aristophanes *Birds* 1403-04

Cin. ταῦτι πεποίηκας τὸν κυκλιοδιδάσκαλον,  
ὃς ταῖσι φυλαῖς περιμάχητός εἰμ' ἀεὶ;

Cin. Is this how you treat a poet of circular choruses such as me,  
one who is always fought over by the tribes?

6. "Circular Choruses" earlier in *Birds*

a. Aristophanes *Birds* 917-19

Poet μέλη πεποίηκ' εἰς τὰς Νεφελοκοκκυγίας  
τὰς ὑμετέρας κύκλιά τε πολλὰ καὶ καλὰ  
καὶ παρθένεια καὶ κατὰ τὰ Σιμωνίδου.

Poet I have made for your Cloudcukooland  
many beautiful circular songs, and maiden songs,  
and songs in the style of Simonides.

b. 942: ὑφαντοδόνητον ἔσθος (shuttle-throttled vestment); 951: νιφόβoλα πεδία πολὺπορά (snow-clad and many-pathed plains)

7. "Circular Choruses" in *Clouds*

a. Aristophanes *Clouds* 333

Soc. κυκλίων τε χορῶν ἄσματοκάμπτας

Soc. songbenders of circular choruses

b. Aristophanes *Clouds* 335-8

Strep. ταῦτ' ἄρ' ἐποίουν "ὑγρᾶν Νεφελᾶν στρεπταίγλαν δάιον ὄρμάν",  
"πλοκάμους θ' ἑκατογκεφάλα Τυφῶ", "πρημαινούσας τε θυέλλας",  
εἶτ' "ἀερίας διερᾶς γαμψοὺς οἰωνοὺς ἀερονχηεῖς",  
"ὄμβρους θ' ὑδάτων δροσερᾶν νεφελᾶν".

So that's why they used to compose these things: "violent, zig-zagged  
onrush of wet Clouds," "braids of hundred-headed Typhus," "hard-

blowing gales,”and also “curved air-floating birds of the active sky,”  
“showers of water from dewy clouds.”

8. *P. Oxy.* 2368 col I, 9-19

[ταύτην τ]ήν ᾠδὴν Ἀρίσταρχ(ος) [μέν γε διθ]υραμβικὴν εἶ[ναι φησι]ν διὰ τὸ  
παρειλή[φθαι ἐν α]ὐτῇ τὰ περὶ Κασ[σάνδρας,] ἐπιγράφει δ' αὐτὴν [οὔν  
Κασσ]άνδραν, πλανη[θέντα δ' α]ὐτὴν κατατάξει [ἐν τοῖς Π]αιᾶσι Καλλίμαχον  
[            ] οὐ συνέντα ὅτι [τὸ ἐπίφθ]εγ{γ}μα κοινόν ἐ[στι τοῦ δ]ιθυράμβου.

Aristarchus says that this poem is a dithyramb because the story of Cassandra is found in it, and he entitles it therefore *Cassandra*; and he says that Callimachus erred in placing it among the Paeans because he did not understand that the refrain is common to the dithyramb.

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