

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

Much recent work has enhanced our understanding of dithyramb's identity as a "circular chorus," primarily by clarifying the ancient use of the phrase "circular chorus" as a label for dithyramb (Käppel 2000; Fearn 2007, ch. 3; Ceccarelli 2013; D'Alessio 2013). Little of that work, however, has investigated the meaning of the phrase "circular chorus," which is most often assumed to refer to dithyramb's distinctive choreography, whereby the members of a dithyrambic chorus danced while arranged in a circle around a central object (Fearn 2007: 165-7; Ceccarelli 2013: 162; earlier, Pickard-Cambridge 1962: 32 and 1988: 77). In this paper, I examine one of the earliest moments from the literary record of ancient Greece when dithyramb is called a "circular chorus," the appearance of the dithyrambic poet Cinesias in Aristophanes' *Birds* (1373-1409). I argue that when Aristophanes refers to dithyramb as a "circular chorus" here, he evokes not just the genre's choreography, but also its vocabulary, poetic structure, and modes of expression and thought.

In *Birds*, the poet Cinesias arrives in Cloudcuckooland boasting of the excellence of his "dithyrambs" (τῶν διθυράμβων, 1388) and promoting himself as a "poet of circular choruses" (τὸν κυκλιοδιδάσκαλον, 1403), thus equating the genre of dithyramb with the label "circular chorus." Scholars have long noted that, upon Cinesias' entrance, Peisetaerus alludes to circular dancing with his question "Why do you circle your deformed foot here in a circle?" (τί δεῦρο πόδα σὺ κυλλὸν ἀνὰ κύκλον κυκλεῖς;, 1378; cf. Lawler 1950; Sommerstein 1987: 290; Dunbar 1995: 667-8). Another allusion to dithyramb's circular choreography may be detected when Cinesias prepares to depart and Peisetaerus chases him around the stage (1398-1402). While a focus on choreography is prominent throughout Cinesias' appearance, that topic does not exhaust the scene's commentary on dithyrambic matters. Even Peisetaerus' question about Cinesias'

circular movements seems to evoke other aspects of dithyramb, such as the genre's penchant for periphrasis, alliteration, pleonasm and irregular metrical units. Elsewhere, Cinesias mentions his dithyrambic "preludes" (ἀναβολάς, 1385), which were a structural feature of the genre, and both he and Peisetaerus use riddling expressions and elaborate compounds, which implicate dithyramb's stereotypical vocabulary and subject matter (1385-90, 1393-4, 1402). In the "circular choruses" that Cinesias creates, one can find opaque language, insignificant content, and an irregular structure, all in addition to circular dancing.

From a detailed reading of this scene, I turn briefly to two other moments when Aristophanes uses the phrase "circular chorus" to refer to dithyramb. Earlier in *Birds*, an anonymous poet claims expertise in composing "many fine circular songs" (κύκλιά τε πολλὰ καὶ καλὰ, 918), and, in *Clouds*, Socrates includes the "songbenders of circular choruses" among the devotees of the comedy's titular goddesses (κυκλίων τε χορῶν ἄσματοκάμπτας, 333). On these occasions no attention is paid to dithyramb's circular choreography, unless the use of the phrase "circular chorus" itself is understood as a reference to dithyrambic dancing. Instead, dithyramb is associated most closely with its structure and language, and the genre's identity as a "circular chorus" again encompasses much more than its usual choreography.

In conclusion, I set Aristophanes' expansive understanding of the dithyrambic "circular chorus" against other attempts at defining and understanding the genre of dithyramb in antiquity. In most ancient sources, dithyramb is identified only ever by means of a single attribute, such as its cultic and ritual context, its choreography, its venerated history, or the gender and age of its performers. In contrast to those atomizing approaches to dithyramb, Aristophanes adopts a holistic view, one that attends to multiple aspects of dithyramb at once and which is epitomized in his use of the phrase "circular chorus."

## Bibliography

- Ceccarelli, P. 2013. "Circular Choruses and the Dithyramb in the Classical and Hellenistic Period: A Problem of Definition," in B. Kowalzig and P. Wilson (eds.), *Dithyramb in Context*. Oxford: 153-70.
- D'Alessio, G.B. 2013. "'The Name of Dithyramb': Diachronic and Diatopic Variations," in B. Kowalzig and P. Wilson (eds.), *Dithyramb in Context*. Oxford: 113-32.
- Dunbar, N. 1995. *Aristophanes: Birds*. Oxford.
- Fearn, D. 2007. *Bacchylides: Politics, Performance, Poetic Tradition*. Oxford.
- Käppel, L. 2000. "Bakchylides und das System der chorlyrischen Gattungen im 5. Jh. v. Chr.," in A. Bagordo and B. Zimmermann (eds.), *Bakchylides: 100 Jahre nach seiner Wiederentdeckung*. Munich: 11-27.
- Lawler, L.B. 1950. "'Limewood' Cinesias and the Dithyrambic Dance." *TAPhA* 81: 78-88.
- Pickard-Cambridge, A.W. 1962. *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rev. by T.B.L. Webster. Oxford.
- 1988. *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. and with a supplement by J. Gould and D.M. Lewis. Oxford.
- Sommerstein, A.H. 1987. *Aristophanes: Birds*. Warminster.