

## LEKYTHOI IN ARISTOPHANES' *ECCLESIAZUSAE*

At three points in the latter part of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* a young man who is being pressed with demands for sexual services by three old women under the laws of Praxagora's newly instituted communal state implicitly or explicitly compares one of them to a λήκυθος. The basic point of the comparison is clear: the lekythos is a funeral gift, and the old women are very close to death. A further comparison of the masks worn by the actors playing the old women to the white ground technique of funeral lekythoi and the consequent attention directed to the masks as masks have been somewhat obscured in the recent discussions. I suggest that in these passages Aristophanes not only employs a traditional, aggressive comic topos about old age but also plays in characteristic fashion with the masking conventions of his theatre.

The first occurrence is at line 996. In answer to the first old woman's demand for a kiss, the young man pleads fear of her lover. When she asks who this may be, he replies:

NEA. τὸν τῶν γραφέων ἄριστον. ΓΡ. Α. οὗτος δ' ἔστι τις;  
NEA. ὃς τοῖς νεκροῖσι ζωγραφεῖ τὰς ληκύθους.  
(995-996)

Who is the old woman's lover, this "best of painters"? B. B. Rogers' translation sensibly does not identify him, though his note (*ad* 992) suggests that he is «the 'undertaker', who paints the oil bottles carried out and buried with the dead»<sup>1</sup>. R. G. Ussher in his commentary (*ad* 995-7) asserts that the painter «is surely Death himself, who 'paints' (i.e., causes to be painted) the funeral oil flasks for the dead»<sup>2</sup>. At the risk of breaking this butterfly upon the wheel, we must enquire a little more closely into the dynamics of this insult. The young man is attempting to defend himself against the old woman's demands (which the newly enacted sexual communism has authorized) by improvising a fantasy in which she has a jealous lover<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Bickley Rogers, *The «Ecclesiazusae» of Aristophanes*, London 1902, 151.

<sup>2</sup> R. G. Ussher, *Aristophanes: Ecclesiazusae*, Oxford 1973, 214-15. I cite the text of *Ecclesiazusae* from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> In this he is simply responding to her earlier fantasy of herself as a young girl: she says that he is surprised (θαυμάζεις, 992) to find her out of doors (as indeed it would be surprising to find an unmarried girl of respectable family).

He continues this fantasy in line 997 when he tells her to get away from the door, lest her lover see her flirting with a strange man. If the young man's fear were real, we might more readily believe that this lover was Death: the young man would fear that Death, coming to investigate, might carry *him* off, too.

This exchange falls into the category of what David Bain (and others) have termed bomolochic remarks<sup>4</sup>. The old woman pays no attention to the young man's insult but simply continues with her original purpose. We must understand the old woman's "lover" then not in relation to any fear on the young man's part, but solely in relation to herself. While on one level this lover indeed must be associated with death, why is he particularly a painter, rather than any other funerary figure?

The answer lies in the striking and peculiar appearance of her mask, whose most prominent feature is its dead-white color, representing the use of the white lead-based cosmetic called ψιμύθιον. Practically the first thing we learn from this old woman's lips is that she has covered her face with this cosmetic (878, καταπεπλασμένη ψιμυθίῳ) in order to be ready for the arrival of the young men. The young girl in her singing contest with the old woman refers to her use of both rouge and white lead cosmetics (928, ἤγγουσα μάλλον καὶ τὸ σὸν ψιμύθιον). When the third old woman appears, she too is "filled up with white lead" (1072, ἀνάπλεως ψιμυθίου). On stage the unusual color of the masks of the three old women would be one feature immediately visible to every spectator in the vast open-air theatre.

The first woman's face then is painted in the white ground technique of funeral lekythoi: presumably black to outline the features on the white background with some added red<sup>5</sup>. For this and other reasons, J. H. Quincey suggested that in 996 we have a reference not only to the artist who paints funeral lekythoi but also to «the man

<sup>4</sup> See David Bain, *Actors and Audience*, Oxford 1977, 88-90, and especially his very apt comparison (88 n. 4) to the technique of Groucho Marx's remarks to Margaret Dumont, which the latter simply ignores.

<sup>5</sup> For the technique see Donna C. Kurtz and John Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs*, London 1971, 102-05 and Donna C. Kurtz, *Athenian White Lekythoi*, Oxford 1975, xx and passim. For the painting techniques on white marble funerary lekythoi, see B. Schmaltz, *Untersuchungen zu den attischen Marmorlekythen*, Berlin 1970, 70-74 and passim.

who paints the cheeks of old women who have one foot in the grave»<sup>6</sup>. He then sees an allusion to real cosmetics on the face of the old woman which the young man fears will be rubbed off on his own face during the kiss. Quincey is right to search for something more here than a general allusion to death and its ceramic trappings, but his man who paints real old women's faces in an unfortunate invention. Most women undoubtedly applied their own cosmetics or had maids to do it<sup>7</sup>; no man (who might be the ἐραστήν of 994) would be involved.

The lover is fiction, but the painter is real: I suggest line 995 calls attention to the mask of the actor as art object, a creation in the same technique as white ground vases. The painter here is the mask-maker. This interpretation has the further advantage of explaining the specificity of the verb ζωγραφεῖ. Not all funeral λήκυθοι would have been decorated with human figures; some were quite humble and simple objects. Only the finer examples would have called on the artist's talents for representing the human face, the talent above all demanded

<sup>6</sup>) J. H. Quincey, *The Metaphorical Sense of ΔΗΚΥΘΟΣ and ampulla*, CQ 43, 1949, 40. Earlier in the article Quincey discusses the aryballos and the resemblance of its spherical shape to the inflated cheeks of the face when blowing. The term aryballos is a modern convention. Fifth century Greeks termed both the squat, round oil flask (which we call an aryballos) and the tall, cylindrical funerary vase a λήκυθος. See J. Henderson, *The Lekythos and Frogs* 1200-1248, HSCP 76, 1972, esp. 135-37. Aryballoi were not white ground vessels, as those discussed in *Ecclesiazusae* are. Quincey ignores this distinction. In our present passage he visualizes the old woman's mask as a white ground lekythos viewed from above, with the lips considered as the mouth of the vessel. There are problems with this view. First, looking down on the shoulder of a lekythos is hardly the customary view (unlike the squat aryballos); also, while the white ground predominates on the body of the vase where figural decoration is placed, the usual floral motifs in black glaze dominate the shoulder. Second, while it is undoubtedly a wonderfully comic idea to imagine the old woman's mask with lips perpetually pursed for a kiss, it is doubtful how well such a feature could be seen from a distance or whether the actor's voice could be successfully projected through such a restricted opening. Finally, in such an exaggerated preparation for kissing, the cheeks do not distend but if anything contract inward.

<sup>7</sup>) The old women of *Ecclesiazusae* are doubtless too poor for servants. If they had had money before the institution of the communal system, they could have afforded to buy the services of a lover, as does the old woman of *Wealth*. She too paints her face with white lead (1064), but before *Wealth's* redistribution she uses her money to acquire and control a young man.

of the mask-maker<sup>8</sup>. The artist who paints funeral lekythoi not only works in the same medium (white ground) but also exercises the same talent for representing the living figure. The old woman's lover then is a painter in white ground of both funeral lekythoi and theatre masks<sup>9</sup>.

It is not entirely clear whether Aristophanes refers here to the ceramic white ground lekythos or the monumental version in white marble. The ceramic white ground vase declined sharply at the end of the fifth century, in tandem with the rise of the white marble funerary lekythos as grave marker<sup>10</sup>. The painting technique for the two forms is essentially the same: the figures picked out in paint against a white background, though one key difference is that the figures on the marble lekythoi are usually sculpted as well<sup>11</sup>. The fact that the *painter* of lekythoi is here singled out speaks in favor of the ceramic lekythos as comparandum. We know that potter and painter were by no means necessarily the same person; it is further clear that such a painter's activity can be described as ζωγραφεῖ. On the other hand, one wonders if a sculptor would employ a separate painter to work

<sup>8</sup>) Portrait masks would have demanded the greatest skills. Their use for Cleon in the *Knights* and Socrates in the *Clouds*, has been extensively debated; see for example K. J. Dover, *Portrait Masks in Aristophanes*, in *Aristophanes und die Alte Komödie*, ed. H-J. Newiger, Darmstadt 1975, 155-69 [= *ΚΩΜΩΙΔΟΤΡΑΓΗΜΑΤΑ: Studies in Honor of W. J. W. Koster*, Amsterdam 1967, 16-28]. In any case, the worship of Dionysos through drama would have demanded artistic representations of the human face in general of the highest possible order. The present passage suggests mask-making was more akin to painting than sculpture. The balloon-like mask represented on red-figure fragments from the Agora tends to confirm this for the fifth century: see Lucy Talcott, *Kourimos Parthenos*, *Hesperia* 8, 1939, 267-273, figs. 1 & 2. Here the sculptural modelling seems minimal (although see 272 n. 22 on one reconstruction of the mask-making process), and the details would have been picked out by the painting.

<sup>9</sup>) It is tempting to speculate that a specific Athenian painter, known for his white-ground technique, was employed to paint the old women's masks and is here rewarded with an Aristophanic joke at his expense, but this is of course unprovable.

<sup>10</sup>) Kurtz and Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs*, 127.

<sup>11</sup>) Schmaltz, *Marmorlekythen*, 60-75 on painting techniques: 83-91 on iconographic differences between ceramic and stone lekythoi. It is possible in some later marble lekythoi that the background was painted in a very pale color such as pink, but the marble lekythoi contemporary with our play seem to have had a completely white background to the scene (70-74). See also p. 68 for two surviving marble lekythoi with a purely painted scene.

on a marble lekythos; might he not simply color in the details of his sculpture himself? Though the distinction becomes important for the next two references in the play, here it is in fact a matter of indifference which lekythos Aristophanes has in mind. The essential comparison is that of the technique of color against a stark white background found in both kinds of lekythoi to the appearance of the old woman's mask.

I believe there is a similar self-conscious allusion to the theatrical mask in the second use of the term λήκυθος in the scene with the old women. After the first old woman is driven away by the suggestion that what she proposes to the young man is incestuous, two more old women, even more unattractive, come to dispute possession of him. The young man is horrified by the possibility that he may have to make love first to the second old woman, then to the third, whom he describes as:

Φρύνην ἔχουσαν λήκυθον πρὸς ταῖς γνάθοις.  
(1101)

This passage has left most commentators uneasy. There is a general consensus that Phryne is to be taken as a proper name (i.e., of a courtesan, "Toad"). Rogers and Ussher, following Blaydes, both take the lekythos to be a funeral offering set beside the body on the bier, but why a lekythos (rather than a funeral wreath, for example) and why placed precisely next to her jaws<sup>12</sup>? Quincey, pursuing the notion that the lekythos is a metaphor for swollen cheeks, sees such an allusion here as well<sup>13</sup>. He does not translate line 1101 but seems to imagine that it means «Phryne having an [amorous?] expression on her face». I have suggested above (n. 6) that the shape of the lekythos does not support Quincey's view that the actual shape of the face, is here meant ("with distended cheeks"), nor does his interpretation preserve the funerary connotation.

Only Jean Taillardat has suggested a literal meaning for the lekythos: citing the medical usage of λήκυθος as pustule or boil, he takes line 1101 simultaneously as «a Phryne with a whole jar of

<sup>12</sup>) We do not know where precisely on the bier a funeral lekythos would be placed, but there is no reason to assume that this would be a preferred position.

<sup>13</sup>) Quincey, *Metaphorical Sense*, 40.

cosmetics on her face» and «a frog with a boil on its face»<sup>14</sup>. Ussher objects to this view, citing the sequence of funerary lekythos images and denying that the φλύκταινα of 1057, which Taillardat had suggested was an earlier reference to such a boil, could have this meaning<sup>15</sup>. This seems quite right: if one of the old women's masks were represented with a boil on it (not an easy thing to make visible for the most distant spectators), we would expect to hear of it unequivocally from the text. Nonetheless Taillardat is right to point to the specificity of πρὸς ταῖς γνάθοις; why is the lekythos located here?

I suggest that once again, in addition to referring to a funeral vase, the λήκυθον is here also the white ground mask. The young man shrinks from the prospect of lying down next to a death's head. The mask itself is metaphorically the lekythos, a funerary symbol and an object painted in the white ground technique. This view explains why Aristophanes chooses the lekythos (it is a repetition of the equation in 996) and why the lekythos is πρὸς ταῖς γνάθοις: the mask rides literally on the actor's face. While it is dangerous to place much reliance on the authority of the scholia, the notion that the lekythos is the mask may also help elucidate Σ 1101's cryptic gloss as ὠδηκυῖα and the Suda's λήκυθος δέ, τουτέστι διωδηκυῖα τὸ πρόσωπον. Beneath these garbled notices may be the recognition that it is the somewhat larger than life-size white-painted mask from which the young man recoils.

The final reference to the lekythos occurs at the end of the same speech by the young man. He imagines that the use to which these two old women plan to put him will kill him. He asks for burial and requests that one of the two old women be taken and used as a lekythos to decorate his grave:

καὶ τήνδ' ἄνωθεν ἐπιπολῆς τοῦ σήματος  
ζῶσαν καταπιπτώσαντες εἶτα τῷ πόδε  
μολυβδοχοήσαντες κύκλω περὶ τὰ σφυρὰ  
ἄνω ἴπιθεῖναι πρόφασιν ἀντὶ ληκύθου.

(1108-1111)

<sup>14</sup> J. Taillardat, *Calembours sur des noms propres chez Aristophane*, REG 69, 1956, ix-x; he offers the same argument in *Les images d'Aristophane*, Paris 1962, 64-65.

<sup>15</sup> Ussher, *Ecclesiazusae*, ad 1098-101.

Here the sequence of lekythos images reaches its monumental climax. Though the staging of this scene is far from clear, the two old women are attempting to drag the young man in opposite directions, with one perhaps attempting to pull him into her house and the other resisting<sup>16</sup>. The young man mocks the peril of his own situation by imaginatively transforming the “upper” old woman into a lekythos marking his grave. Note that here the whole figure of the old woman (and not just her mask, though that is the foundation of the image) becomes the lekythos. Quincey erroneously saw here an allusion to the λουτροφόρος which decorated many graves, but its two or three-handled shape was very different from that of the lekythos<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>16</sup>) Rogers, *Ecclesiazusae*, ad 1108 (following Blaydes) visualizes the scene with one old woman κάτω and the other ἄνω. This Ussher, *Ecclesiazusae*, ad 1107-11 rejects, denying that τὴν ἄνωθεν can mean “the one above him”. It is true that nothing designates the other old woman as “below” him. Note, however, that the speech of the young man ends with the exit of all three, presumably into the house of one old woman. It is agreed that in Aristophanic comedy the terms for entering and leaving the stage area are ἀναβαίνω and καταβαίνω, though a long controversy has raged over whether these terms can be taken as evidence for actual vertical movement to and from a raised stage. For a discussion of these terms in Aristophanes, see P. Arnott, *Greek Scenic Convention*, Oxford 1962, 30-34, criticized by O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus*, Oxford 1977, 441-442, who nonetheless concedes the probable existence of a low stage; cf. K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, London 1972, 18-19. My point is not whether the stage was raised (though I do believe in a low stage raised above the orchestra) but the fact that someone would be thought of as ἄνω with respect to someone exiting or already exited. Thus as the young man is dragged back into the skene by one old woman (who may already have disappeared inside the skene), the audience would see the other old woman (the one still onstage) as being ἄνω and then would have translated that stage picture into the image of a grave decoration “above” the young man’s grave. I cannot accept Ussher’s view that τὴν ἄνωθεν and ἄνω taken together simply mean that the tarring of the old woman proceeded from her head downward - what would be the point of such emphatic specificity in this imaginary operation? As spatial indicators on stage, however, they have a clear and natural function.

<sup>17</sup>) Quincey, *Metaphorical Sense*, 40 visualizes the old woman «standing with arms akimbo», but nothing in Aristophanes’ text demands this posture. Quincey may have been unconsciously influenced by the belief held by many archaeologists until recently that the λουτροφόρος was used to mark the graves of those who died unmarried, as the young man of our scene presumably is. This view (along with many notions about the “marriage with death” motif in funerary iconography) has now come into question: see Kurtz and Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs*, 152-53.

Rather, the young man imagines the old woman transformed into a monumental funeral lekythos, standing on a stone base over his grave. This would then be the point of using molten lead to secure the old woman to the base: only a monumental stone vessel would require such secure anchoring.

The statement that the old woman is to be tarred remains puzzling. Ussher explains this both as a method of punishment and of sealing and waterproofing lekythoi<sup>18</sup>, but only small lekythoi which were to contain liquid offerings would require such treatment. It seems most unlikely that such small lekythoi would be secured to the monument base with molten lead. I know of no archaeological evidence for such treatment of small lekythoi, and the vase paintings which show us grave stelai with lekythoi on the base often show these lekythoi overturned or lying on their sides<sup>19</sup>. The least unsatisfactory explanation is to suggest that Aristophanes begins with the image of a small ceramic lekythos, sealed with pitch and then a line later transmutes it into a monumental stone lekythos, the principal marker of the grave.

There may be one further joke concealed in the final transformation of the lekythos image into a monumental funerary marker. B. Schmaltz in his study of the marble lekythoi notes a sharp difference between the iconography of the white ground ceramic vase and the monumental marble version. The former is the realm of youths and maidens, cut down before their time, while the dead represented on the latter are most often full-bearded men and women of mature years<sup>20</sup>. In saying that a lekythos will decorate his grave, the young

<sup>18</sup>) Ussher (above, n. 2) ad 1107-11. Rogers, *Ecclesiazusae*, ad 1108 simply says she is to be «blackened with pitch». The ground of the comparison between lekythoi and the old women's masks has so far been whiteness. There were black-bodied lekythoi: Kurtz, *Lekythoi*, 115-28. How common these would have been by the early fourth century is unclear. Kurtz states (133) that all types of lekythoi were represented throughout the period in the fifth century which she studies, but her discussion of black-bodied lekythoi gives little evidence for these in the late fifth century.

<sup>19</sup>) E.g., Kurtz, *Lekythoi*, plates 18.2, 23.3, 30.1; see also p. 38 n. 4.

<sup>20</sup>) Schmaltz, *Marmorlekythen*, 88: «Bärtige Tote aber, die also im Mannesalter starben, und die als Tote kenntlich dargestellt sind, fehlen auf den weißgrundigen Bildern so gut wie ganz». Cf. 116: the youths of the Attic grave stelai are correspondingly almost completely missing on the marble lekythoi.



man of *Ecclesiazusae* may be saying that the services demanded of him will make him an old man before they kill him - and therefore the lekythos will then be an appropriate grave marker.

The image of the funeral lekythos is first introduced in *Ecclesiazusae* when Blepyrus complains that Praxagora's departure, wearing his cloak, left him as poorly covered in bed as a corpse without even a wreath or a lekythos (538)<sup>21</sup>. With the arrival of the old women and their white masks, the lekythos acquires a sensible presence and an ever-increasing threat, though in retrospect we might even suggest that the young man's first reference (996) has a disparaging connotation. Toward the end of the fifth century, the importance of the funerary white ground lekythos declined, as a resurgence in monumental funerary sculpture took place<sup>22</sup>. The ones that continued to be painted were small and relatively cheap, perhaps considered old-fashioned. The old woman's imaginary lover, the painter of lekythoi was a far less important person in the early fourth century than he would have been a few decades earlier. The young man's insult, then, suggests that the old woman's face is in more than one sense cheaply painted.

From such modest beginnings the lekythos looms ever more ominous. It grows physically, too. At 538 it is only a small funerary offering, in 996 both the vase and the mask. When the lekythos image re-appears in the young man's exit speech (1101) it is now as a grinning death's head mask covering Phryne's face, thus larger and more threatening. By the end, as the despairing young man is dragged "downward" (offstage) into the house of one of the old women, the lekythos has become a monumental stone tomb sculpture, lying none too lightly upon him.

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<sup>21</sup>) This, of course, can only be a small ceramic lekythos (and need not even be painted). The notion of anything larger kills the pathos and therefore the joke.

<sup>22</sup>) Kurtz, *Lekythoi*, 74, 136. The debate over the nature and extent of restrictions on monumental funerary sculpture in Athens in the early fifth century and the revival of such sculpture toward the end of the century is a highly complex one. I merely suggest Kurtz and Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs*, 121-22 as a starting place. That the importance of the white ground lekythos declined at the end of the century is not in dispute, however.