Actors and Icons
of the Ancient Theater
For Helga Rogers
ERIC CSAPO

Actors and Icons
of the Ancient Theater

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Preface

This book pursues several recent developments in the history of the ancient theater. In some cases new evidence urges new perspectives, in others new perspectives permit a more positive appraisal of old evidence that residual habits of thought once ignored, marginalized, denied, or otherwise sought to contain. The result is a series of investigations of topics conspicuously absent or underdeveloped in such standard historical surveys as Margarete Bieber’s *History of the Greek and Roman Theater* (2nd ed. Princeton 1961) or Arthur Pickard-Cambridge’s *Dramatic Festivals of Athens* (2nd ed. Oxford 1968, reissued with supplement 1988). My aim is to explore what new or newly vindicated bodies of evidence might yield to the theater historian. I hope to show that the marginalization of this evidence was never merited. On the contrary, it directly related to topics that just about anyone would consider central to the history of ancient theatre: the growth of realism in art and acting; the spread of theater throughout the ancient world; the role of theater in the development of the cultural koine of the Greek world; the history of the canonization of its authors; the rise of the acting profession; the consequences of this rise upon acting, drama and popular consciousness; the role of Macedon in transforming Greek theatre; the use of theater and theater imagery in later antiquity; and the development and use of private drama. All of these topics have some connection – often a very direct connection – to the central theme advertised by my title: the changing image of actors in antiquity. By “image” I mean to imply both the way actors presented themselves and the way others represented them.

Though it does in some sense bridge the full millennial span of ancient theater history, this book is not a full, continuous, or consistent survey of ancient actors and their reception. I doubt whether any such history is yet possible. The book is rather prolegomena to such a history where the focus is sometimes more on the raw materials of history than on the finished product. Our evidence comes in disparate clumps unevenly spread across time and different media. I try to make something out of these clumps. In each chapter I am primarily concerned with potential bodies of evidence, whether new or old, that seem undervalued
and underexploited for the purpose of theater history. I am not in all cases the
first to treat this material in recent times. Ancient theater iconography, in par-
ticular, has been exceptionally well-treated in the last fifteen years – to mention
only the chief monographs – by J. R. Green’s *Theatre in Ancient Greek Society*
(London and New York 1994) and Oliver Taplin’s *Comic Angels and Other
Approaches to Greek Drama through Vase-Paintings* (Oxford 1994) and *Pots &
Plays* (Malibu 2007). My approach and my questions are for the most part
different from these works and so, often, are my conclusions.

Part of the reason for the shape and content of this book has to do with its
origins. Four of the six chapters are the revised and annotated Nellie Wallace
Lectures that I delivered at Oxford during Trinity Term 2004. A fifth derives
from a lecture delivered at the same time and place to the Archive of Performances
of Greek and Roman Drama. Beyond limiting myself to the history of the
ancient theater, I chose topics that stood the best chance of seeming both new
and interesting to an audience containing some of the best and most broadly
read classical scholars in the world. I had little concern for continuity of subject
or unity of theme until Al Bertrand, then commissioning editor of Blackwell,
kindly invited me to publish the lectures together in a single volume. No amount
of further work could erase the pluriformity of my initial purpose, but it did at
least permit me to develop the common themes and contents of the various
chapters. As it turned out, my topics interact in surprisingly many ways.

Three chapters deal quite literally with the image of the actor: in Attic art
(Chapter 1), in West Greek art (Chapter 2) and in Hellenistic and Imperial art
(Chapter 5). Some have tried to warn theater scholars away from the artifacts by
demonstrating that the artists’ selectivity and distortions render them uncertain
and less than perfect documents for reconstructing an ancient performance.
I (among others) would argue that the very unstraightforwardness of the relation-
ship between image and dramatic production greatly enhances the iconog-
raphy’s value as a source of evidence for theater history. Selection and distortion
have a great deal to tell us about the way ancient artists saw or liked to see or,
better still, thought their customers liked to see drama in the ancient world.
Because what is or is not present in a picture is due not to the mechanical repro-
duction but the imaginative reconstruction of a performance, the artifacts can
reveal what caught the fancy of theater viewers and how this changed with time,
place, usage, social class, or political orientation. In Attica, for example (Chapter
1), we find a marked increase in the realism of theater art around the 420s BC
together, with a radical shift in its preferred subject matter. Before this date
theater-realistic art is choral and restricted to large and expensive vessels used in
the symposium. After this date there is a rapid growth of images that show
actors, but they are restricted, almost exclusively, to small, inexpensive media
intended for a much broader market. Within a decade or two of this development
(Chapter 2), we find highly realistic theater images on West Greek pottery of a wide variety of shapes and sizes, but this time almost exclusively focussed on actors. The imagery confirms evidence, studied in Chapter 3, for the early and very broad spread of theater across the Greek world by the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the fourth. But it also gives evidence of a decidedly actor-centered concept of drama in the Greek West. Most surprisingly the imagery reveals a preference for subjects drawn from a restricted corpus of old dramas. This, in turn, seems to indicate that the process of the canonization of the tragic and comic “greats” had already begun by this time. We pick up this topic later in Chapters 5 and 6 which study, among other themes, “classicism” in Hellenistic and Imperial art and culture. But the continuity in the process of canonization also reveals a growing difference in the degree of detail that each art shares with dramatic performance. In the fourth century bc, some painterly selections and distortions, as we will see in Chapter 2, actually bring us closer to the details of performance than we can get by reading our dramatic texts. In Chapter 5, on the contrary, we will see that artisanal selections and distortions can demonstrate that we are moving ever farther from the influence of contemporary performance.

Chapter 1, we noted, shows a heightened realism in theater art after 420 bc and a simultaneous shift in focus from choral music and dance to the actor and acting. Chapter 4 provides evidence for a radical shift in the style of acting from about 420 bc toward mimetic realism. This is no coincidence. In Athens visual artists traded ideas freely among themselves, among whom we must include mask makers, costume designers, set painters, and indeed also actors. In the same period we know that dramatic poetry and dramaturgy became more realistic; and theater music – a medium to which a term like realism is less easy to apply – became markedly more mimetic. While it would be wrong to say that artistic realism somehow began in the theater, it is certainly true that theater was at its experimental hub. Consistently with this trend, Chapters 1 and 2 show that artifacts with theatrical subjects are among the earliest to reveal the traits and tendencies normally covered by the term realism in the visual arts. Chapters 1 and 3 explore some of the external socio-economic motives that might have encouraged the development of realism in both theater art and acting: from the commemorative function of votive choregic reliefs and paintings to the star system that began to shape the acting profession from as early as the last two decades of the fifth century bc.

The rise of the actor had not just artistic and theatrical effects but social and political consequences as well. These are explored in Chapter 6. From the very beginning dramatic production always combined public with private money, and public with private interests. If Greek drama flourished in Athenian democracy, it also flourished under Syracusan autocracy – both tragedy and comedy,
and both genres probably from the very start. Drama is a medium, not a message, and it is (at least primarily) a medium of mass communication that can be adapted to almost any message or purpose. The nature and function of drama were, however, affected by the different political regimes that drama served in antiquity. Macedon seems to have had as profound an influence as Athens in determining drama’s form, function, and venues for later antiquity. Among more immediate effects, Macedon’s adaptation of theater contributed significantly to the growth in the status and power of actors. The greater and longer term effect, however, was the “privatization” of theater, a term that covers many types of dramatic performance, but all of them adapted to suit the personal ambitions of Hellenistic autocrats and Roman Republican élites.

There are several people that deserve to be singled out for thanks. Thanks are due first to the staff at Wiley-Blackwell, but for whom this book would not exist: Al Bertrand who encouraged me to write this book, Haze Humbert who for many years put up with my excuses for not getting on with it, and Galen Smith who nudged me with patient and gentle persistence until I actually finished the job. Secondly, to the Classics Faculty at Oxford for inviting me to give the Nellie Wallace Lectures that are at this book’s core, and especially to Robert Parker, Robin Lane Fox, Jane Lightfoot, and the Fellows of New College who offered a Fellowship and fellowship in Trinity Term 2004, three months that I consider the high point of my academic career. Thanks to Oliver Taplin, Amanda Wrigley, and Fiona Macintosh for incorporating one of these lectures into the APGRD program, and to Oliver, Beaty, and Charis for the use of their magnificent sixteenth-century house in the tranquil idyll of Great Haseley.

The final push, like the first, began back in Oxford four years later, and that was largely thanks to the support of the Faculty of Art, University of Sydney, and the friendship and generosity of Scott Scullion and Worcester College. The work was continued in Paris, at the École Normale Supérieure, where as Visiting Professor I enjoyed the hospitality of Monique Trédé. For a delightful and profitable stay I thank, in addition to Monique, Brigitte Le Guen, Alexa Piqueux, Sylvain Perrot, and all who attended Monique’s Friday seminars. Thanks also to Glenn Most, Chiara Martinelli, and Rolando Ferri for invitations to try out my ideas in Pisa. The Australian Research Council provided the research time that permitted completion and funds to cover the sometimes prohibitive costs of plates and copyrights.

Writing the acknowledgment paragraphs of this book makes me realize just how much others have contributed to the contribution that the world is (perhaps luckily for them) destined to receive as my own. A great deal of the material in this book was discussed with my colleagues at the University of Sydney, Richard Green, Andrew Hartwig, and Peter Wilson, both in and out of our semi-spontaneous Friday-morning theater-history seminars at CCANESA. One should
at least suspect that good ideas, if any, were generated at this forum. Richard Green, Sebastinana Nervegna, Jeff Tatum, and Peter Wilson also read large swathes of this manuscript and offered many corrections and suggestions. For his unfailing support and indefatigable proof reading I thank Ben Zaporozan. William Slater was, as always, most generous in sharing his encyclopedic knowledge, more often now over the internet than over dinner. My greatest intellectual debt is to my wife Margaret Miller, who has guided and corrected my thoughts on almost everything that appears in this book (and an awful lot that has been left out).

I am grateful to Pat Easterling, Edith Hall, Svetlana Shadrina, and the Syndics of Cambridge University Press for permission to reproduce most of Chapter 4, and to C. Hugoniot, F. Hurlet, S. Milanezi, Samuel Leturcq, and the Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais for permission to reproduce extended passages in Chapter 3. I would like to acknowledge the rare generosity of those individuals and institutions who continue to support the ideals of collegiality and the commonwealth of scholarship by providing, as in days of yore, images and copyrights without asking anything in return: Jeff Rusten; Jacklyn Burns and the J. Paul Getty Museum; Daniel Berger and the Department of Archaeology of the Italian Ministero per Beni e le Attività Culturali; Pietro Giovanni Guzzo and the Soprintendenza Archeologica Napoli e Pompei; Jasper Gaunt and the Carlos Museum of Emory University; Joachim Heiden and the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in Athens; Annemarie Kaufmann-Heinimann and the editors of Antike Kunst; Elena Obuhovich, Vladimir Matveyev and the State Hermitage Museum; Vera Slehofer and the Antikenmuseum Basel; Craig Mauzy and Agora Excavations; Irma Wehgartner and the Martin von Wagner Museum in Würzburg; Jennifer Marsh and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Matilde Romito and Salerno’s Settore Beni Culturali, Musei-Biblioteche; Karen Richter and the Princeton University Art Museum; Sandra Laplace-Claverie and the Bibliothèque nationale de France; and Céline Rebière-Plé and the Musée du Louvre. Special accolades are reserved for William Knight Zewadski for his general support of classical scholarship and in particular, in the present instance, of my own.

This volume such as it is, is dedicated to the kindness and selfless generosity of my sister Helga who looked after the children while we were trying to function as scholars on research leave, both when the book was started and when it was finished.

Eric Csapo
Abbreviations


RVSIS  A. D. Trendall, *Red Figure Vases of South Italy and Sicily*. London, 1989.

Papyri are cited with P + abbreviated collection name (POxy, PMich, etc.). Plays by Aristophanes (Ar.) and the one work of Plato (Pl.), that is, Laws, capable of being rendered with a monosyllabic English title are cited by the English title. Plato’s Republic is abbreviated Rep. Otherwise ancient authors and works and modern collections of literary fragments are abbreviated according to the lists found in the Oxford Classical Dictionary, 3rd ed. by S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (Oxford 1996) xxix–liv. Journals are abbreviated according to the lists found in the American Journal of Archaeology 104 (2000) 10–24.
This chapter aims to demonstrate the existence of an iconography of theater
and actors in fifth-century bc Athens. The claim would not have surprised
anyone thirty years ago, but many archaeologists and art historians, nourished
on the binarist theories fashionable in the Cold War Era, are directing reductive
methods and exclusionist rhetoric to the construction of boundaries between
art and its “Other” (variously identified as “texts,” “history,” or “reality”). In
2003, for example, Jocelyn Penny Small published a book called The Parallel
Worlds of Classical Art and Text where, in constructing a vision of two solitudes
that live side by side but never mix, she states categorically “that contemporary
Attic vase painters did not base their representations on … plays.” Yet she omits
mention of nearly all of the material I consider important to this discussion.
The book offers a kind of blunderbuss deconstruction of every possible link
between the plastic arts and other forms of cultural expression. Its premise that
art is a fully self-contained and autonomous activity has a certain appeal for
classical archaeologists who teach in departments of Archaeology or Fine Arts
and do not want to oblige their students to learn Greek or read ancient litera-
ture. But this is only the hard end of a vision I wish to render more supple. Even
Oliver Taplin, who has not the least sympathy with this kind of intellectual iso-
lationism, tends in his Comic Angels to underestimate the importance of theatri-
cal subjects in Attic (as opposed to West Greek) vasepainting.

Some other contemporary historians of ancient art dismiss both the possibil-
ity that an object of art could reflect the influence of the theater and the possi-
bility that, if such an influence did exist, it might be useful to any who might
wish to learn something about performance or about the ancient reception of
theater. I refer to the tendency on the part of historians of Greek art to insist
upon the absence or near-total absence of subjects with historical or realistic
content as opposed to mythological or mythologized content. It was not all that
long ago that art historians like E. H. Gombrich contrasted the mythically ori-
ented images and narratives of the Near East with the “antimythical” vision of
the Greeks.2 Greek art served as the foundation of Western realism. This was
progressivist and orientalist, it is true. But the reaction on the part of scholars like Gloria Ferrari is no less categoric. She maintains that all Greek vasepainting is essentially mythical. For many vasepaintings this is largely true. Even scenes of everyday and apparently contemporary life (“genre scenes”) are usually still linked in some way with the mythical imagination. For example, scenes of hoplite battle generally show heroic nudity or military tactics more suited to the world of Homer than to the world of the artist; scenes showing women preening or spinning might have inscriptions that label the principal figure “Helen.” Many apparently realistic scenes can thus gesture compulsively toward the archetypal world of myth. But the reductive claim that attempts to take all vasepainting out of the reach of history can only be maintained by distorting the meanings of “myth” and “history” well beyond recognition. “Myth” must be extended to include the decidedly more ambiguous category of “ritual” to embrace scenes of sport, sacrifice, or choral dance, and even “social rituals” like scenes of the symposium or the hunt. “History” must be contracted to exclude all of the above. But even if “myth” remains a universal norm in the representational arts (and I am far from being convinced that it is), there are exceptions. Indeed the majority of art historians would, I think, balk at the notion that all ancients painted with the same brush. Himmelmann in particular has studied the development of realism in the treatment of several subjects, comic scenes among them (by realism I mean the choice of specific, historic or everyday life scenes that are familiar to the artists and their patrons and treated in such a way as to offer the impression of the familiarity of lived experience). But even Himmelmann excluded much of the evidence relating to theater and largely ignored tragedy. More recently Steinhart has explored with admirable subtlety the interaction between art and mimetic performances, although with a primary focus on non-theatrical mimesis. In this chapter we take a close look at the phenomenon of theater-realism: it is a very minor theme in Attic art, but even if it is exceptional, it is important, and deserves a place both in art history and in theater history. In doing this I claim no originality except in the details of my presentation: many scholars have discussed this theme, both great archaeologists such as Erika Simon and Richard Green, and great theater historians such as T. B. L. Webster and Oliver Taplin (all of them notable and successful transgressors of the boundaries of their discipline).

**Depicting Myth**

Over the course of the fifth century tragedy became “the most familiar and popular way in which hundreds of thousands of Greeks came to know the great myths.” The validity of this claim (the words are Oliver Taplin’s) is supported
by the way tragedy influenced the choice and treatment of mythical scenes in (fifth-century) Attic and (fourth-century) West Greek vasepainting. For Athens it is (in the fourth century) richly confirmed by the frequency of distinctly tragic elements in literary allusions to myth. Yet despite the huge popularity of tragedy and despite its impact upon the way myths are represented, very few Attic vasepaintings depict (or even evoke) tragic performance, so few in fact that the paradox has become a celebrated mystery.

The paradox is all the greater considering that the fifth century was the great age of both Athenian drama and Athenian red figure. Indeed both tragedy and vasepainting are uniquely well-preserved – far better than any other genres of art in this period – with thirty-three complete plays and nearly a hundred thousand vases. Moreover, even those who insist that Attic red figure pottery renders its subjects in an essentially mythical form cannot deny that it draws them from nearly every facet of social life. There are at best five surviving Attic pots or fragments that can be said to depict tragedy in performance. Tragic performance is even harder to find in West Greek pottery. Of some twenty thousand known vasepaintings, as many as 450 can be reasonably argued to show influence of tragedy – but of these no more than two could be said unambiguously to “show tragedy.”

An early fourth-century Attic vase may serve us as an example of the general practice (see figure 1.1). The subject is an incident in the life of the mythological hero Telephus. Not yet the practiced sailors that they would one day become, the Greeks messed up their first expedition to Troy. They landed in Mysia by mistake and, without bothering to check their position, immediately began to lay waste to the territory. The king of Mysia, Telephus, drove them out again but was wounded by Achilles. Realizing their mistake, the Greeks returned home. Telephus’ wound began to fester and the oracle of Apollo told him that “the wounder would heal.” So Telephus went to Argos, where the Greek chiefs were meeting to plan a second attempt on Troy. They interpreted the oracle to mean that rust from Achilles’ spear would heal Telephus and in return Telephus agreed to guide the expedition to Troy. This was the general outline of the myth before Euripides sensationalized it in a tragedy of 438 BC. Euripides turned Telephus’ encounter with the Greek chiefs into a hostage-taking incident: Telephus infiltrated the war council disguised as a beggar, but when he was exposed as an enemy infiltrator, he grabbed Agamemnon’s infant son, jumped on an altar, and threatened the baby with his sword. The Greek chiefs were in this way forced to negotiate with Telephus, but the outcome was the generally the same as the pre-Euripidean version of the myth. The Greeks arranged for the healing of Telephus’ wound and Telephus in turn agreed to act as navigator for the second expedition to Troy (which did end up in the right place). It is the climactic hostage-taking incident invented by Euripides that we see in figure 1.1: Telephus, center, kneels on
the altar threatening the baby; Agamemnon in the upper right reacts at first with ill-considered aggression.

Euripides’ tragedy not only invented the hostage scene and turned it into the climactic moment in the story of Telephus, but it also created the visual archetype that would emblematize the play for all later antiquity. There can be no doubt that the climax of Euripides’ *Telephus* was staged in precisely this way: it is parodied through precisely these visual clues (with a little, but not much verbal reinforcement) in the *Acharnians* and the *Thesmophoriazusae* of Aristophanes. The precise configuration that we find at the center of this scene – a man kneeling on an altar and threatening a baby with a sword – reappears on no less than fifteen fourth-century West Greek pots (not to mention Etruscan art), to the near exclusion of all other episodes from Telephus’ life, precisely because of the impact of Euripides’ tragedy. A man kneeling on an altar and threatening a baby with a sword could only signal the story of Telephus in both comedy and in art because thousands of Greeks had seen the same combination of visual signals in a theatrical performance of the play.

**Figure 1.1** Attic red-figured calyx krater, c.400–375 BC, Berlin Antikensammlung 3974. ©bpk Berlin 2009.
There are perhaps other minor theatrical features in the composition. For example, it could be argued that the women who register an emotional reaction by running to the left and right on the margins of the scene are at least functionally reminiscent of a chorus, or that the contrastingly placid presence of Apollo, hovering above the action (upper left), recalls a fragment of the play in which Telephus calls upon Apollo, or indeed recalls the generally placid and benign indifference of the gods, as expressed in tragedy’s more anthropocentric universe. Yet despite all this and despite the scene’s total dependence upon the plot of Euripides’ tragedy, this is no illustration of tragedy, but of myth.

**Depicting Choruses**

By contrast with the mythologizing norm of theater-influenced vasepaintings, for which the Telephus vase might serve as an example, four Attic vases reveal varying degrees of the opposite of the mythologizing vision, namely realistic details of tragic performance that intrude upon and undermine any merely mythological conception of a scene. All are choral and thereby perhaps susceptible to being categorized as ritual and hence quasi-mythical in the broad and dilute sense urged by those who insist that all vasepainting is cut from mythical cloth. But this would not do justice to the details of our vases, of which two at least are decidedly more focussed upon a theatrical performance than upon any possible myth or myth-like subject.

Before we examine the tragic paintings, however, something must be said to excuse my reluctance to look at vasepaintings depicting satyrs in pursuit of the question of theater-realism. Many vases are (I think rightly) suspected of being in some way connected with satyrplay. The problem is in proving a connection with theater. Satyrs have too strong a connection with music and dance in the Greek mythic imagination, on the one hand, and with choruses of men performing as satyrs in Dionysian processions, on the other, to allow us to insist upon the usual indices of dramatic performance, namely pipers, choral groupings or suggestions of mask and costume. Even if all these markers were present they would not suffice to prove any specific connection with satyrplay as opposed to mythic and cultic forms of satyr performance. And yet, it is necessary to say, if only in passing, that satyr vases can nevertheless reveal a realism that is inconsistent with purely mythical imagery. For example, a vase by the Leningrad Painter is for good reasons, frequently related to satyrplay. Signs of performance include the presence of a human piper, the use of loincloths with erect phallos, called \textit{perizomata}, lines at the wrist and ankles indicating the body-tights worn by all ancient actors, as well as mask-like features (bug-eyes, double-lines marking the hair-line at the back of the three-quarter mask), and
even a certain amount of co-ordination in the satyrs’ movements. Nevertheless nothing permits us to insist that it shows a dramatic performance. At best we can insist that, if these are in some sense mythical satyrs, they are satyrs drawn after the manner and appearance of men who perform as satyrs.

The case for iconographic theater-realism must be made on the strength of tragic and comic performance, which have no existence apart from theater. From the first half of the fifth century we have two vases that may depict tragic choruses. Although they offer no hints at masks, they declare their theatricality through such details as the presence of pipers and identically dressed chorus-men in a narrative context. One of these is a pelike in Berlin that shows, on each side, a dancing maenad accompanied by a piper. Even if the piper signals a performance, there is nonetheless nothing to distinguish this maenad from any other. One could say that the painter bypasses the performer and refers us directly to the mythic maenad he represents.

The second is an Attic hydria surviving in only six fragments. The vase originally showed a piper and at least seven to nine members of a chorus, dressed as Persians, dancing around a pyre upon which sits a man who is usually thought to be Croesus. The pot was made a few years after the battle of Plataea, a brief period in which tragedians, notably Aeschylus (Persians) and Phrynichus (The Capture of Miletus, Phoenician Women), flirted with historical rather than mythological subjects. For a few decades, when Athens believed it had experienced events of mythic proportions, there was a vogue, paradoxically, for something approaching history in the theater. Cyrus sacked Sardis in 546 bc and so the story of Croesus being nearly burned on the pyre is in some sense “historical,” though the history is to our eyes heavily mythologized. Its treatment in art might also have been mythologized. Interestingly it was not—or at least not fully. The piper is a clear allusion to performance and the fact that the costumes of the dancing Persians are nearly identical signals a chorus. The two preserved faces, however, have no attributes that suggest a mask and their mouths are closed. Here again the artist seems to focus on the characters that the masks represent and not on the performers. But for all that, the theater-realism of the vase is no more compromised than the integrity of any possible mythical conceptualization of the image. We are betwixt and between.

The case for realism is decidedly better on a column krater in Basel (see Figure 1.2). It dates to the first decade of the fifth century and is probably our earliest evidence of tragedy. On it three ranks and two files of young men dance in rectangular formation. This is surely a synecdoche for three files and four ranks, the distinctive and possibly normal formation of the tragic chorus. The depiction of a full tragic chorus of twelve would have been visually confusing and awkward on the limited space provided by the pot’s surface. The choreuts are costumed as soldiers but are not really soldiers: they wear diadems rather
than helmets, dance rather than march, and carry no weapons. A series of Os emerge from their mouths in added red paint (not visible in Figure 1.2) to show that they are singing. They approach the orchestra’s central altar, behind which rises a smaller figure who is presumably an actor. This may be one of the many “ghost-raising” scenes which were especially popular in early tragedy.20

Masks are richly suggested. The faces of the choreuts (and to some extent the actor) are all alike: they have wide eyes, gaping mouths, jutting chins, and chin-lines that extend, unusually, right up to the hair-line. And since ancient masks covered the entire head as well as the face, we should also notice the unnatural hair-line position of the diadems, and the highly unusual strand by strand rendering of the hair.21 The painter seems to have taken pains to suggest that there is something unnatural, something artificial, about these heads. Even the breastplates, on closer examination, appear not to be breastplates, but frilled, sleeveless tops (not part of the normal Greek vestimentary repertoire) with patterns that are similar enough to suggest the near-uniformity of dramatic choral costume. No detail could justify the relegation of this image to mythic fantasy, unless

Figure 1.2 Attic red-figured column krater, Mannerist style, 500–490 BC, Basel BS 415. Courtesy, Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig. Photo: Claire Niggli.
(and this is perhaps the fatal admission) it is the absence of lines at the wrists and ankles of the choreuts to mark the body-tights that appear normally to have been worn by both actors and choreuts, at least in drama later in the century.

In 2002 the publication of a fragment of a vasepainting from Olbia gave us the first image that renders tragic performers with unambiguous realism (see Figure 1.3). The fragment belongs to an Attic bell krater produced in about 425 BC. On either side of a piper and his boy assistant dances a tragic choreut whose mask and costume are depicted with scrupulous realism. The faces of the masks are overpainted with added white in an effort to contrast the (conventionally white) female flesh of the characters with the darker skin of the nape and neck of the male performer under the female mask. The reproduction is unfortunately of poor quality, but it appears to me also that the lines of the sleeves of the choreuts’ body-tights are also visible. The piper too appears in all his theater paraphernalia. The piper’s harness (phorbeia) is rendered in detail and, rarer still, his assistant, who stands by holding his pipe case (sybene) to which is attached at the top the reedcase (glottokomeion) containing the extra mouthpieces and reeds required for modulating the music. One can see the top of one of the mouthpieces held in the assistant’s hand above the break. Froning in her publication mistakes this for the boy’s thumb(s) and concludes that he is clapping to keep time (whence Revermann takes the notion that this may be a rehearsal). But this is not a
natural way to clap (it is both ineffectual as it deadens the sound and quite painful – try it!). But it is no thumb. Compare the detail with the detail of the small piper’s assistant in Dioskourides’ mosaic of the Theophoroumene who also holds the same equipment (below, Figure 5.7). This is unprecedented theatrical realism in Attic art, and it is not just the manner of rendering details of costume that has changed. The fragment also reveals a significantly different conception of its subject matter. The earlier mythological vases gave us at least small hints about what story was being told. Here we know only that the tragedy had a chorus of young women, but this was true of the majority of tragedies at this date. I suspect that we would know nothing more specific even if the whole scene were preserved. It is precisely the lack of anything that could be linked to narrative, either mythical or dramatic, that is astonishing. For the first time the art shows us a performance, pure and simple, without even a hint at the story behind the performance, let alone the myth behind the story.

The earliest vases to show scenes of comedy are probably also choral. Two extraordinary vases depict what appears to be a comic chorus dressed as fighting cocks (Figures 1.4 and 1.5). There can be no serious doubt