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POTS&PLAYS

a cura di Giulia Bordinon, Monica Centanni, Silvia Galasso

ENGRAMMA. LA TRADIZIONE CLASSICA NELLA MEMORIA OCCIDENTALE
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Pots&Plays. Interactions between Oliver Taplin and the Italian Seminar

Oliver Taplin

The Italian *Pots&Plays* Research Seminar came into being about three years ago, in April 2010. Its current members include classical philologists (Anna Beltrametti, Monica Centanni, Giovanni Cerri, Maria Grazia Ciani, Alessandro Grilli), ancient art historians and archaeologists (Claudio Franzoni, Ludovico Rebaudo) as well as art historians and iconologists (Giulia Bordignon, Alessandra Pedersoli).

Oliver Taplin went to Venice (2007) and Catania (2010) to present and discuss his research on Greek vases and drama both before and after his monograph was published; his groundbreaking work on the interaction between Greek drama and South-Italian vase painting was crucial to the development of our own research, for it made clear that such an interdisciplinary approach could be the most profitable for the widest range of classical scholars – philologists, archaeologists and art historians. The very title of our Seminar was meant as a homage to Taplin's pivotal book.



(left) no. 89 (Apulian *loutrophoros*, ca. 340s, attributed to the Painter of Louvre MNB 1148, Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum 86.AE.680): "Possibly related to a tragedy about Leda, but more probably not" (Taplin 2007, 229); (right) no. 109 (Campanian neck-amphora, ca. 330s, attributed to the Caivano Painter, Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum 92.AE.86): "Just possibly related to some kind of performance about the *Seven against Thebes*, but probably not a tragedy" (Taplin 2007, 266).

During the past three years the Seminar has met several times (in Venice, Pisa, Pavia, Milan, Siracusa), mostly to discuss the theoretical issues raised by the vase-play interaction. Taplin's criteria, which aim to provide a rigorous method for evaluating the possible theatrical background of a vase painting, have been discussed in detail. In essence, our main scope was to define methodological tools that are as objective as possible, but the matter proved to be elusive and slippery: trying to ascertain the connections between mythological vase paintings and classical or early post-classical dramas (not to mention specific performances) can be difficult or impossible, as inferring chronological sequences on the basis of vase-drama interactions often ends up providing more questions than answers.

Early this year Oliver Taplin invited the Italian *Pots&Plays* Seminar to discuss their research in Oxford. On 18 February some of its members (Giulia Bordinon, Monica Centanni, Alessandro Grilli, Alessandra Pedersoli, Ludovico Rebaudo) did a presentation in the Classics Center on behalf of the entire research team. After the presentation in Oxford, some problems of theory were further discussed: we raised some issues concerning method (an aspect most relevant to our research), and Oliver Taplin kindly answered our questions. What follows is the text of this most recent exchange.



Italian Seminar “*Interactions between Tragedy and Greek Vase-Painting*” is the subheading that explains the issue of your book *Pots and Plays*. This much welcomed hermeneutical response to the philodramatist/iconocentric polarity leads you to state that: “Tragedy-related pictures show a mythological story as a mythological story:



(left to right) no. 92 (Apulian volute-krater, ca. 330s, The Darius Painter, Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 81947 [H 3253]): “Possibly, but far from definitely, related to a tragedy called *Persians*” (Taplin 2007, 235); no. 91 (Apulian volute-krater, ca. 340s, close to the Varrese Painter, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 1900.03.804): “Possibly related to a tragedy about Achilles and Thersites, perhaps the *Achilles* of Chairemon” (Taplin 2007, 233).

they are paintings of a myth, not paintings of a play. But the fact that they are not pictures of performances does not mean that they are not related to tragedy" (Taplin 2007, 28). Thus in Part Two of your work vases are listed according to different levels of "interaction" or "relationship" with drama: pots "may be", "might be", "apparently", "just possibly", "evidently", "arguably", "plausibly", "possibly, but far from definitely" are "related to a tragedy". In your opinion, to what extent is this 'balanced' approach to the intertwined – but distinct – worlds of performances and images useful to cast new light on the interpretation of Greek tragedy and Greek vase-painting? Wouldn't a more 'unbalanced', restrictive standpoint be in some way more helpful in understanding the construction of either texts or images? Wouldn't it be useful, at least in some instances, to omit rather than include images that are only "possibly" (or scarcely demonstrably) related to drama (unless they are useful as test-cases)?

Oliver Taplin I may have overdone the gradations and variations of relationship between each vase and a particular tragedy, especially as I arrived at the phrasing of most of them in a fairly impressionistic way. I did, however, think it's important to emphasise that we are not dealing with *phenomena* that are homogeneous or invariable or steadily developing. The few vases that I have included, despite believing that they are probably not related to tragedy at all, are there because they raise interesting questions (yes, "test-cases" also): I have in mind nos. 89, 92 and 109 (and I would now add 91). I included no. 24 because it might conceivably be claimed for Sophocles' *Antigone* (unlike the usual BM nestoris). I have, indeed, been criticized for not including some interesting but highly marginal claims, e.g. the Darius Painter's monumental sacrifice of



(left to right) no. 24 (Apulian hydria, ca. 420s, close to the Painter of Berlin, Taranto, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, 134905): "Possibly related to Sophocles' *Antigone*, but more probably not related to any tragedy" (Taplin 2007, 94); no. 17 (Apulian loutrophoros, ca. 330s, attributed to the Darius Painter, Princeton University Art Museum 1989.29): "May well be related to a tragedy about Niobe, but probably not that by Aeschylus" (Taplin 2007, 78).

Polyxena at the Funeral Games. I have occasionally included a vase under a known play although I think it most likely that it is related to another (later) play on the same story, no doubt indebted to the famous version. Examples are nos. 17 under Aesch. *Niobe*; 26 under Soph. *Philoctetes*; 36 under Eur. *Medea*; 45 under Eur. *Herakles*; 78 under Eur. *Telephos*. Two other Medea vases, which are clearly in counterpoint and even contrast with Euripides' great model, are nos. 94 and 102.

IS Despite its impartial approach, Pots and Plays shows a consistent sympathy for the philodramatist approach (e.g. the corpus of vases in Part Two is arranged by playwrights and plays), as its aim is to point out the listing of a "lexicon of signals that prompt the viewer to think of tragedy" (Taplin 2007, 32). Some of these signals, though, may or may not – in equal measure – be related to performances rather than to other narrative/iconographical features (costumes and boots; porticoes and naiskoi; supplication scenes): hence one could not properly speak of a "lexicon" in assessing a relationship to tragedy, but should consider these signals just as iconographical conventions, adapted only case by case by painters to put forward an interaction with theatre; again, the assessment of a connection between painting and drama should then be restrictive rather than inclusive.

Oliver Taplin Since the "misodramatist" approach maintains that there is no significant connection whatsoever between the vases and the theatre, I necessarily have "consistent sympathy for the philodramatist approach". It is true that by ordering the vases, wherever plausible, under the known playwrights (thus following Webster and Trendall IGD), I have shown a "biased" consideration for the interests of philologists and literary/theatrical readers. But arrangement by date or fabric or even myth would not, I think, have made a more informative sequence. I can see that "lexicon" was not a good term to use.



(left to right) no. 26 (Sicilian bell-krater, ca. 380s, attributed to the Dirce Painter, Siracusa, Museo Archeologico Regionale "Paolo Orsi" 36319): "May be related to a *Philoctetes* tragedy, but apparently not that of Sophocles" (Taplin 2007, 98); no. 36 (Apulian amphora, ca. 330s, attributed to the Darius Painter, Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 81954 [H3221]): "May be related to the escape scene in a *Medea* tragedy, possibly that of Euripides, but more likely that of another tragedian" (Taplin 2007, 124).

A “checklist of possible indicators” might have been better – although even then it is not a simple matter of “present” and “absent”. I think that “just as” in “just as iconographical conventions” is going too far in the other direction: “possibly as no more than...”, yes. And I certainly agree that they have to be taken “case by case”.

IS *As for the representation of the other “signals”, the ‘rocky arch’, the ‘trophos/paidagogos’, the ‘furies’: does one really have to resort to theatrical conventions in each instance, or wouldn’t it be best considering each case under its historical conditions of creation? That is to say: these figures might have surely had a theatrical ‘birth’, but over time they might have been incorporated in a mere iconographical vocabulary, and they should be considered proper “signals” only when they are a novelty, a ground-breaking innovation in the figurative tradition. What is your opinion in this regard?*

Oliver Taplin A case-by-case approach will take into account the prominence (or weakness) of indicators, and their combination (or sparsity). And it should not restrict itself “only” to instances of iconographic innovation. If a painter, in symbiosis with viewers, wishes to activate associations with a tragedy, surely he and they would exploit established “iconographic vocabulary” with theatrical associations. How the vocabulary was first coined is, indeed, especially interesting and revealing, but there is no reason to suppose that it loses all significance outside the “mere” iconographic frame as soon as it has been established for the first time.



(left to right) no. 45 (Paestan calyx-krater, ca. 350s, signed by Asteas, Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional 11094 [L369]): “Evidently related to a tragedy about the madness of Herakles, not that of Euripides, but quite likely under its influence” (Taplin 2007, 143); no. 78 (Apulian volute-krater, ca. 310s, attributed to the White Sakkos Painter, Genève, Sciclounoff Collection, unnumbered): “May well be related to a *Telephos* tragedy, probably not that of Euripides” (Taplin 2007, 210).

IS *As we have such little external (literary, archaeological) evidence – apart vase-painting itself – of a familiarity with theatre in 4th-century Western colonies, to what extent are we allowed to extend our knowledge of 5th-century Attic theatre and its conventions to the Apulian world, particularly considering that Apulian tragedy-related vases – unlike comedy-related vases – usually lack ‘theatricality’ (e.g. tripods as signals of theatrical victory)?*

Oliver Taplin There is indeed a lack of evidence (setting aside the vases) for the history of the Greek theatre between the fifth century and the widespread activity of the *Technitai* in the third century, both for Magna Graecia and elsewhere. I believe, however, that the ever-increasing activity of, and demand for, troupes of professional traveling actors supply the only plausible reconstruction of this period. I have made the case for this in my chapter in *Theater Outside Athens* (Cambridge 2012) edited by Kathryn Bosher (who has sadly died young); and I am aware of others working further along these lines. I am confident that it will before long become generally accepted that theatrical performances were widespread and frequent throughout the Greek world (not only in the West) in the fourth century, and that they were the chief way in which most people came to know the treasure-store of mythical stories.

IS *In this sense, might the question that closes Part One of Pots and Plays “What was the point of tragic vase-paintings for funerals?” (Taplin 2007, 43) equally be answered by the use and representation of plain ‘Homeric’ mythical plots and characters with no need to resort to performances? Or would it be best answered precisely by the speculation that only the actual experience of dramatic performances, beyond*



(left to right) no. 94 (Apulian volute-krater, ca. 330s, attributed to the Darius Painter, Princeton University Art Museum 1983.13): “May well be related to a play about Medea at Eleusis” (Taplin 2007, 238); no. 102 (Apulian volute-krater, ca. 320s, attributed to the Underworld Painter, Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen 3296): “Plausibly related to a Medea tragedy, but not that of Euripides” (Taplin 2007, 255).

the knowledge of mythical narration, had that visual strength and effectiveness to cause a katharsis – and not a merely aesthetic consolation in modern terms, or, in your own words, “in a form that has beauty” (Taplin 2007, 46)? Isn’t precisely the concrete enacting of myth on stage – not the mere familiarity with the dramatic plot – the reason why we are still called today to “weep for Hecuba” (see Hamlet, 2, 2)?

Oliver Taplin The Apulian vase-painters did sometimes draw on the epic or non-dramatic traditions of mythical story-telling for vases made for funeral destinations. But these are not nearly so numerous as those which may be plausibly claimed to be related to tragedy (why this reluctance to “resort to” performances?). The explanation of this is both the growing dominance of theatre as the most familiar mode of mythical story-telling, and (as suggested) the power of theatrical performance as providing a combined experience of strong emotion and of explorations of the problems of human life and mortality. And, yes, theatrical performance was a visual experience as well, and thus more closely related to the painted representations that were found to be so appropriate for funeral occasions. It is paradoxical that Aristotle’s *Poetics* (1462a, 1–18) suggests that the tragic experience might be achieved by reading without the physical enactment of performance, while also perceiving in its central discussion that the audience’s experience is the essence of what makes tragedy different from other poetic forms. I am not sure that *katharsis* is necessarily the best metaphor for this, but I do agree that it is this capacity of tragic enactment that makes the recollection of it such apt material for the funeral vases.



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