
A Gag at the Bottom of a Bowl?

Perceptions of Playfulness in Archaic and Classical Greece



THOMAS BANCHICH

The author uses the inscriptions and images on several ancient Greek vases to consider how social context, the meanings of play-related words, and particular features of the Greek language contributed to the ability to signal and perceive playfulness. He emphasizes the importance of the lexical range of some Greek words and how expectations linked to specific social settings—especially to the Greek symposium—could promote the perception of play. He maintains that the historical, cultural, and linguistic perspectives of the ancient Greeks warrant the attention of modern students of play. **Key words:** ancient Greece; lexical range; personification of play; playfulness; symposium

PERCEPTIONS OF PLAYFULNESS may mislead. Most of us generally think we can tell when someone we know well is playing around. Likewise, most of us generally think that when we are playing around, those who know us well will recognize our intent. Yet all of us have sometimes misperceived what we take to be playfulness in the people with whom we interact every day. All of us have construed a playfully intended comment as an insult or misunderstood an insult as a playful remark. In either case, we reacted to particular stimuli, somehow contextualized our impressions, and—eventually—made conscious determinations about intentions or behaviors as they pertain to playfulness.

This process is complicated enough when it involves people we know or occurs in social situations with which we have firsthand experience. In such cases, personal acquaintance, familiar social contexts, and consensus about the lexical range of key words and nonverbal signals help foster shared perceptions of playfulness. On the other hand, cultural and linguistic differences, whether features of our own societies or others or of our contemporaries or of another time, reduce exponentially our ability to project playfulness effectually or to perceive intentional playfulness. We sometimes find it difficult to articulate our perceptions of playfulness or to recognize whether they are accurate. Ancient Greece provides a series of examples of the complexity of perceptions of play-

fulness with respect to the ancients themselves—that is, how they seem to have projected and perceived whatever they took to be playfulness. By extension, these very same examples have the capacity to inform us, to make us more conscious of just what we take to be their playfulness and why we do so. Here, as happens so often, what we learn about the Greeks, we learn about ourselves.

The Dipylon *Oinochoē*

Sometime in the eighth century BCE someone—or perhaps more than one person—scratched a string of letters on an interesting but otherwise hardly remarkable *oinochoē*, a type of wine jug or pitcher. The recovery of the vase in 1871, most likely from a grave near the Dipylon gate in the Kerameikos area of Athens, caused an immediate sensation, primarily because the inscription it bore is probably our earliest example of Greek alphabetic writing. At the same time, it is certainly our first written dactylic hexameter, the epic meter of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, comprising a combination of five dactyls (a long syllable followed by two short syllables) or spondees (two long syllables) capped by a sixth unit of two syllables, the first of which is long, the second either long or short. For preliterate Greeks, these beats helped preserve in song the memory of the memorable. When Greeks began to write, dactylic hexameter continued to signal to readers, who probably read aloud, and to those who listened to them the importance of what they were hearing. The very form of the message on the Dipylon *Oinochoē* commanded attention. At the same time, the content of the inscription preserves the first known instance of a Greek interest in playfulness.¹

Translation obscures these three firsts, but especially the last: “Who now of all dancers most friskily frolics, his this. . . .” “His this” begins a second hexameter but after “this” (i.e., the vase) the inscription becomes what looks to be a nonsensical series of practice letters. “Dancers” is an unproblematic rendering of *orchēstōn*, a form of the Greek *orchēstēs*. The word *paizei*, with which the initial hexameter ends, often means “dance,” but here is translated as “frolics” to distinguish it from *orchēstōn*. Though *paizein* may mean “to play” in general terms, *orchēstōn* makes it obvious that the inscription’s *paizei* denotes dance.² Furthermore, the shared root of *pais*, the Greek for “child,” and *paizein* betray what to the Greek mind was the fundamental identity of behavior and emotions associated with dance, play—including playing like a child, engaging in some sports, jesting and joking, and playing a musical instrument—and children themselves.³ Finally, *atalos*, the basis

of the superlative adverb *atalota*, “most friskily,” regularly signifies the distinctive spiritedness, the playfulness, of children or youths.⁴

Though the Dipylon *Oinochoē*’s hexameter-plus may be drawn from or inspired by some now-lost song, its “now” suggests a particular occasion. That the text is an add on, incised on the vase after its production, strengthens this supposition. It proclaims, perhaps at the moment of its incision, that the vessel will be a prize for one of those who *now* dance. But dance where? Perhaps the “now” was some communal celebration, some festival. However, the vase’s precise function as a bearer of wine points in another direction, toward that social gathering of Greek males that revolved around the drinking of wine: the symposium. If, in fact, the “now” of the *oinochoē* refers to a moment during such a drinking party, whether the attendees heard the inscription read to them by the jug’s owner or by a fellow guest or by themselves as the pitcher made the rounds in the hands of a server makes little difference. Those who chose to dance knew that they, as individuals, would become competitors in a playful competition and that someone would judge each of them. They also knew the criterion the winner must satisfy. Because the criterion was subjective, the dancers and those who opted to sit the dance out must have recognized a judge’s or the judges’ authority. Perhaps, if there was but one judge, that authority derived from ownership of the promised prize. Whatever the case, as the contestants took the floor sequentially or as a group, all knew that perceptions of playfulness prompted by their dance—and decided, in part, by their own notions of what playful dance involved—would determine the winner. Thus, reciprocal expectations on the part of dancers and judge or judges all figure in the mix. All involved would have expected at least an appearance of spontaneity—and of something they would have recognized and felt to be fun, too. The playful actions of the participants would have drawn attention to themselves and perhaps, at least until the moment of decision, to the arbiter of playfulness most of all—just, as in such contests today, judges, no matter what their demeanor or deportment, often share the spotlight with contestants or sometimes even steal it from them. Whatever the specifics of this process, a broader spirit of playfulness would have imbued all present. In this respect, playfulness would have been very much its own reward.

Nestor’s Cup

In 1954 archaeologists excavating the cremation grave of a boy of about ten

years old on the Italian island Ischia at Pithekoussai, the site of an ancient Greek colony, made a startling discovery. Among the items they recovered from that mid-to-late eighth century BCE burial were pieces of a type of drinking cup called a *skyphos* that bore some of our earliest examples of Greek alphabetic script.⁵ It was not just the letters and their date that caused a stir. For, after the excavators had pieced the fragments together, they could read most of a message in three lines, the second and third in dactylic hexameter. Because some of the lettered pieces were missing, scholarly disagreement justifiably ensued about what had stood in the gaps of the surviving text. Consideration of the sizes and shapes of the missing pieces, of the metrical requirements of lines two and three, and of formulaic parallels on later inscriptions, reduced the range of reasonable restorations to three.⁶ The following translations, in which brackets enclose conjectural restorations of missing text, reflect each of these.

I

Nestor's [am I], a goblet good to drink from.
And whoever from this goblet drinks, immediately that one
Will a longing seize of fair-crowned Aphrodite.

II

Of Nestor [there was a certain] goblet, good to drink from.
But whoever from *this* goblet drinks, immediately that one
Will a longing seize of fair-crowned Aphrodite.

III

Nestor's [is] a goblet good to drink from.
But whoever from *this* goblet drinks, immediately that one
Will a longing seize of fair-crowned Aphrodite.

In Translation I, the cup itself speaks. From that point, however, opinions about its message diverge. One camp thinks the cup claims to belong to the *Iliad's* aged King Nestor of Pylos. Homer's Nestor is free with his advice, which others usually respect, and is given to recounting what he remembers as the better, more heroic days of his youth. At one point, Achilles dispatches his friend Patroclus to Nestor to question him about the identity of a wounded fighter whom the old warrior has transported from the battlefield. Upon his arrival, Patroclus receives a drink from

a beautifully wrought cup, which the old man had brought with him
from home. It was set with golden nails, the eared handles upon it were four,

and on either side there were fashioned two doves
of gold, feeding, and there were double bases beneath it.
Another man with great effort could lift it full from the table,
but Nestor, aged as he was, lifted it without strain.⁷

Those in this camp hold that the Pithekoussai cup's apparent proclamation of its identity as the great "Cup of Nestor" must, given the contrast between its baseness and the grandeur of the cup of the *Iliad* be meant to be taken playfully, that is, as a joke. A second camp (Translation II) accepts the Pithekoussai cup's naming of Nestor as a reference to Nestor of Pylos but understands what follows as the inscriber's pointed distinction between his cup—"this goblet"—and the heroic cup of Nestor. A third camp (Translation III) differs from the second opinion in denying any need to identify Homer's Nestor with the Nestor of the inscription. Rather, "Nestor" is simply the name of the Pithekoussai cup's owner, and in no sense is it an allusion to Nestor of Pylos. In fact, Nestor was not an uncommon name. The *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names III.A*, which covers a broad area within which Pithekoussai falls, lists twenty-six instances, though over a range of centuries.⁸ In light of this, those in the third camp maintain, even with the hexameter form of the next two lines, an association of our cup's Nestor with Homer's Nestor would not have been expected, let alone automatic. On the other hand, nothing would necessarily have precluded such an association, whether intended by whomever inscribed the cup or inferred as intentional or humorously coincidental by someone who had used or examined the cup. After all, perceptions of playfulness are no less real when they result from misunderstanding or misperception.

Disagreement about Nestor aside, some modern scholars see nothing remotely playful about the Pithekoussai inscription. In their view the reality is quite the opposite, for they read the inscription as an obvious instance of *Liebeszauber*, Love Magic.⁹ A few even suggest that the danger the "bewitching cup" posed was the reason for its burial. Christopher Faraone, one of the foremost scholars of Greek magic, went so far as to assert that "given their generally negative view of erotic seizure and their apparently traditional belief in the effectiveness of incantatory language, it is difficult to believe that any Greek of the archaic period would consider the hexametrical couplet inscribed on this cup to be harmless or funny."¹⁰ Some scholars have pushed back with subtle and sophisticated arguments for and against any playfulness inherent in the inscription's form and content. For example, some arguing for playfulness discern a tripartite structure in the inscription: declaration of ownership, formulaic opening of a

curse on whomever drinks from Nestor's cup, and, finally, the consequence for the user. But, *pace* Faraone, that consequence seems hardly unpleasant, indeed quite the opposite, and particularly so if the social context of the cup's use was an archaic Greek symposium. The inscription, on this reckoning, is "a chain of witticisms," a sequence of "unexpected twists of thought," that combine to "form a sophisticated joke based on generally observed [Greek] rules of hospitality."¹¹ A modest pot claims to be the great cup of Nestor; an initially hospitable invitation to drink quickly takes an ominous, threatening turn; and just as quickly the cup caps its threat with the surprising promise of a most pleasurable consequence.

As was true of the Dipylon *Oinochoē*, perceptions of playfulness once more prove problematic, though for different reasons. Here an appreciation of the lexical range of key words is not critical. A reader's initial response to "Nestor" might trigger any one of several reactions. In a particular social setting hosted by someone whose character those present knew well, the inscription's import, whatever it was, could be crystal clear. Nonetheless, Greeks who used the cup may have perceived playful intent as seriousness or serious intent as playfulness no less than do scholars who study the cup today. Playfulness, then, does not adhere to objects or derive primarily from their makers' or designers' calculations. Rather, as the case of Nestor's cup illustrates, human predilection toward and human expectation of playfulness alone are sufficient preconditions for its perception.

The Würzburg Cup

Among the items in the Martin von Wagner Museum's impressive collection of Greek antiquities is a *kylix* (a shallow, two-handled drinking bowl) now regularly referred to as the Würzburg Cup.¹² The cup dates to around 480 BCE and is a creation of the highly regarded Brygos Potter, who often, as in this case, signed his work. The artist whose decoration graces the exterior and interior of the cup is known from a number of the Brygos Potter's productions and, consequently, students of red-figure (as opposed to black-figure) pottery style him the Brygos Painter. In this instance, his theme is behavior associated with symposia, especially with these banquet/drinking parties in what some scholars maintain was—unlike the symposia of archaic Greece sometimes imagined as the interpretive context of the Dipylon *Oinochoē*—a less socially exclusive, more democratized, even vulgar fifth-century Athenian form.

The Würzburg Cup's exterior shows a group of revelers engaged in a *komos*,



Figure 1. Image on the interior of the Würzburg Cup, a shallow drinking cup, depicting a young woman assisting an overindulged, wobbly-kneed symposiast. © Martin von Wagner Museum, Würzburg University. Photo by P. Neckermann

the procession that marked the formal conclusion of such gatherings. The vessel's use throughout the evening would have previewed what was to come. The same holds true of the cup's circular interior or tondo. But it foreshadows another component of a symposium or of one's aftermath. The motif is not unique to the Würzburg Cup, but the Brygos Painter's skillful execution sets it apart. Here a young woman stands cradling the head of a wobbly-kneed symposiast who steadies himself with a walking stick while he retches a prodigious purple stream of wine. The woman's blonde hair, rare among native Athenians, strongly suggests that she is a female "companion." The function of *hetairai*—who were, so far as we know, the only women regularly present at symposia—was to provide

pleasurable stimulation of various sorts, from intellectual (rarely), to emotional (sympathy and praise, stroking of egos), sensory (musical performances, for example), sensual (lewd dancing and provocative dress and demeanor), and sexual. In this respect, then, they were akin to the classical Japanese geisha. Some *hetairai* were slaves, others were free or freed women, and in all these cases non-Greeks. Whatever their status, it seems that, especially when the pleasures they provided involved sex, they were paid. The presence of the *hetaira* on the Würzburg Cup implies that the image represents something going on during a symposium itself and before a *komos* rather than a preview of morning-after effects. Does playfulness figure at all in this picture? Though it is difficult to imagine any way in which a *hetaira* would have thought so, what of the potter, painter, purchaser, and the symposiasts who would have seen and used this cup?

Neither the Brygos Potter nor Painter would have taken the care to produce an object the quality of the Würzburg Cup had they not anticipated demand for it, whether as a stand-alone object or as part of a set. Even if purchased alone, the institution of the symposium would have furnished its imagined context. Potter and painter would have shared this assumption and must have anticipated, too, that the cup would attract a buyer. Here the buyer's appreciation of how food, drink, and camaraderie might alter his guests' sensibilities in the course of an evening at any symposium he hosted would have come into play. The positioning of guests at symposia was an object of careful attention, and, though sometimes a cup would circulate between multiple drinkers, it is not unreasonable to suspect calculated, even playful, pairings of specific guests with specific cups.¹³ Even if the matching of particular cups with the occupants of particular couches involved little or no forethought, what attendees saw within the cups at their places, especially cups as fine as the Würzburg Cup, must have provoked reactions, prompted comment and banter, and helped set a tone through their pictures of what the night could bring. "My guests will smile when they see this, as I smile now, especially one particular guest I have known so well for so long," a host might think. "Be certain to put it at this spot," he might direct. One guest may have remarked to another, "Look at the cup I got. Do you think this was meant especially for me?" From production through purchase and placement, the choice of the theme of the tondo of the Würzburg Cup must have been predicated partly on perceptions of playfulness and on an anticipation of the range of behaviors those perceptions would provoke.

A component of the ritual of the symposium was the determination of an initial wine-to-water ratio and their combination in a *krater*, a large bowl

meant for this purpose. The result would be transferred as needed to pitchers from which boys—generally slaves—filled guests’ cups. Throughout an evening, both the quality of wine and wine-to-water ratios could change. A symposiast who had found the Würzburg Cup at the spot assigned to him or any number of symposiasts to whom the cup was passed would have seen the tondo image each time they emptied the *kylix*, watched it disappear beneath newly poured wine only to reappear as he finished his drink, and witnessed that process repeated through as many rounds as the evening involved. With each return of the vomiting youth and attendant *hetaira*, the drinker would come closer to the outcome the picture presaged, to throwing up. The precise degrees and progressions of the playfulness and play involved in all this are impossible to calculate. However, the possibility that both were not somehow in the mix is highly unlikely. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that either in any way prompted not uncommon representations on the exteriors of other *kylikes* of stuporous symposiasts vomiting almost mechanically from their couches into a range of receptacles.¹⁴ This holds true of relatively rare images within drinking cups of the blinding of the besotted cyclops Polyphemus, who is sometimes shown regurgitating pieces of Odysseus’ crew. If these were viewed as having any message at all, it probably was as a warning about the potentially dehumanizing and destructive consequences of excessive drink or about what might follow violations of the tenets of hospitality.¹⁵ On the other hand, one should not be too quick to dismiss the possibility that some Greeks would have seen such scenes as conveyors of a gross and edgy playfulness made just barely acceptable by the context of the symposium. Indeed, the Athenian tragedian Euripides also wrote a ribald play called *Cyclops*—our most complete example of the genre known as Satyr Drama—that at times comes close to such a take on the plight of Odysseus and his crew at Polyphemus’s hands.¹⁶

Perceptions of Play Herself

To sort out possible connections between the texts, objects, and images so far considered to ancient and modern perceptions of playfulness presents many challenges—one of them reaching a clear, concise definition of *paidia* as the Greeks understood it. To define “playfulness” or “play” within the sharply shifting sensibilities of our own time, culture, and languages is daunting enough. How should we accommodate the playful and now dated racial stereotypes of



Figure 2. Image of Paidia playfully balancing a stick on the index finger of her right hand. Shapiro (1993), 80.

Amos and Andy, the playful violence and sexism of Sean Connery's 007 films, and the playful vulgarity and tastelessness of Judd Apatow and Seth Rogen collaborations with our current understanding of the word? The intervening millennia, cultural norms and contexts in some ways vastly different from our own, and the demands of teasing out the force and significance of ancient Greek words and images make the problem of giving a meaning to *paidia* even more intractable. Perhaps what play meant for them would be easier to define if the Greeks had furnished us with a picture of what they themselves perceived *paidia* to be. In fact, the Greeks did just that—for during the second half of the fifth century BCE, mainly in Athens and mostly on red-figure vases, images of *paidia* suddenly appear. The *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, the great

modern repository of ancient images with connections to classical mythology, prints fourteen such representations of Paidia, and she has featured in several perceptive scholarly studies.¹⁷

Potentialities of the Greek language facilitated and helped determine Paidia's form. Greek exhibits three genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. Many feminine words end in *-a* (α, alpha) or *-ē* (η, eta). Nature or biology regularly determined membership in this category—the so-called Alpha Declension. However, words of any gender could become abstract nouns by appending to their base an *i* (iota) followed by an *a* or, in some cases, simply by adding an *ē* (eta). By this process, *philosophos* (philosopher), a grammatically masculine word, could become *philosophia* (philosophy), a grammatically feminine word.

When Greeks attempted to imagine—that is, to visualize in their minds—and then to depict “philosophy,” the Greek proclivity for gendered anthropomorphism would yield a female figure, often distinguished from other female figures by distinctive dress, physique, pose, and paraphernalia. By the fifth century BCE, many Greeks seem to have been able to recognize the identities of such figures whenever they saw them, whether in art or performance, religious contexts, dreams or waking visions, thanks to what had become conventional, iconographic practice.¹⁸ Context would, of course, facilitate this process. So today, when we see in a courthouse an image of a blindfolded woman in classical dress holding a scale, we recognize her as Justice. When, in the United States, we see an image of a woman in classical dress wearing a radiant crown and holding high a torch, we recognize her as Liberty. Sometimes Greeks felt the need to label such figures. Because the Greeks of the archaic and classical periods almost never made distinctions between letters on the basis of what we call upper- or lowercase, capitalization of an initial letter could not signal common nouns instead of proper names. Thus both *paidia* and *Paidia* would be *PAIDIA*, and this, in turn, would unite in a single word “play” as an activity, an idea, and a human form. While most of us today, if asked to produce an image of play, would likely respond with a picture of people or a person playing or perhaps of objects associated with kinds of play, few would fashion or could even visualize play anthropomorphized. For many ancient Greeks, it would have been hard to do otherwise. The observation of Germany's greatest Hellenist, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, that the necessary precondition for grasping Greek attitudes toward their gods was the recognition that to them, “The gods are there,” applies, too, to Paidia so perceived. She was not a symbol. *She was there.*¹⁹

With this in mind, pictures of Paidia on the exteriors of Greek vases seem highly predictable. Paidia is a girl or young woman, decidedly not a child, almost always dressed in a *peplos*, a body-length outer garment, through which the outlines of her body are visible. She never appears alone, yet in some instances she seems hardly engaged with those around her. One particularly charming Paidia balances a stick on the index figure of her right hand.²⁰ She extends her left arm and shifts her body and feet to allow her to keep the stick upright. She focuses her gaze precisely where it should be, on the midpoint of the stick. Sometimes she holds what we now generally take to be a necklace, though some scholars opt for a string of dried fruit.²¹ At other times she carries what probably is a large jewelry box. Sometimes Paidia is a maenad—a distinctively dressed devotee of the god Dionysus—or, if not as a maenad, is positioned in a Dionysian context.²² On the Kodros Painter's Cup, Paidia participates in a *thiasos*, a bacchic procession in honor of Dionysus, along with maenads who dance and play with satyrs and a silenus.²³ Here the action and associations recall the linguistic connections between *paidia* and *paizein* ("to dance") noted in the discussion of the Dipylon *Oinochoē*. But there is something more: the erotic. The lexical range of the root *paid-* illustrates some of these. *Paizein* often means something like "to be playful with," "to make sport of," or in a more colloquial idiom "to fun." In a sort of semantic Venn diagram, specific instances of such usage regularly overlap with the sexual connotations carried in English by "frolic," "romp," "disport," "tease," and the locutions "play around" and "to engage in foreplay."²⁴

Images on vases sometimes show Paidia engaged in various types of titillation. The goddess Aphrodite appears on some. One such vase presents the winged Himeros (Desire) enticing Eudaimonia (Happiness) with a necklace.²⁵ Paidia is to Eudaimonia's left, facing away from her and toward Eunomia (Good Behavior), to whom she offers a necklace almost identical to that held by Himeros. At the same time, Paidia coyly withholds in her left arm an additional enticement—a jewelry box.²⁶ Another vase shows Eunomia—together with Peitho, (Persuasion) Eudaimonia, and a woman named Cleopatra—reaching around Paidia in an attempt to touch a necklace that the latter holds just out of reach. To their right, Eros sits on Aphrodite's shoulder. The vase, this one a *pyxis* (a cylindrical container typically used to store cosmetics and baubles) on which Paidia balances a stick, again pictures her with Aphrodite, this time along with Peitho, Eudaimonia, Eunomia, Eukleia (Good Repute), and Hygieia (Health).²⁷ On a *lekythos*—a type of oil jar—now in Munich, Paidia, absent Aphrodite, pushes winged Himeros, who sits in a swing. Here the message seems to be that play-

fulness can stimulate other, more concentrated sensual emotions: she can make one swing higher. The presence of Paidia precipitates the kind of movement we might think of as psychological or physical excitement or agitation, sometimes in her direction, at other times toward others, though nonetheless prompted, assisted, or enhanced by her.²⁸

Many of these themes converge in a depiction on the tondo of a fifth-century drinking cup by artist known as the Jena Painter. The tondo displays a satyr copulating with a nude female figure thought by some scholars to be a maenad or nymph. The vase names both: the satyr Chorillos, the female Paidia, “Playgirl.”²⁹



Figure 3. Image on the interior of a shallow drinking cup by artist known as the Jena Painter depicting a satyr copulating with a nude female figure of a maenad or nymph. © Martin von Wagner Museum, Würzburg University. Photo by P. Neckermann

The image presents some of the same interpretive challenges as the Würzburg Cup. Whether or not the producer and purchaser of the cup envisioned its use at some event specifically associated with Dionysus or at a broader array of gatherings where guests imbibed wine, the tondo would have been visible to the drinker before the cup was filled for the first time and then, successively, after each emptying. Was the copulation of Chorillos (the root of the name is also that for “dance,” recognizable in our “chorus”) with Paidia a reference to a specific event known through myth? The uniqueness of the image and the rarity of the name Chorillos argues against this.³⁰ Was the image a playful portent of a wine-induced transformation of the drinker into a satyr who would engage literally with *paidia*— would “have fun”—and figuratively with Paidia, or Playgirl? Did designer and host anticipate that an imagined guest would perceive the scene as a playful overture and so receive it? Or did the “utility” of the image depend on a host’s calculated match of this cup with a specific guest? Is this, then, an instance of provocation to play activated by a perception of playfulness? Each of these possibilities depends for its efficacy on a nuanced appreciation of and an inclination or at least susceptibility to playfulness determined, in part, by the lexical range of the *paid-* root and on expectations and actions associated with specific social contexts.

Athenian comedy may have imparted to audiences a capacity to see *paidia* and Paidia more clearly. The comic poet Aristophanes is justly famous. However, he had no shortage of rivals. A critical difference between the former and latter is that many of Aristophanes’s plays survive complete while we know the works of almost all the other comic poets only through fragments, summaries, or commentary preserved in other texts. One of these authors is Crates of Athens, who lived in the second half of the fifth century.³¹ We know the titles of six of his plays. Of special interest here is his *Paidiai*, the plural of *paidia*. Because the titles of some ancient comedies reflect the personae of their choruses (Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, *Frogs*, and *Wasps*, for example), there is a chance that the individual members of the chorus of Crates’s *Paidiai* appeared as various amusements, enjoyments, and games. If so, the connotations *paidia* bore for ancient Greeks warn against the assumption that these personae would have been exclusively or even predominantly children’s games. Indeed, one of the two extant quotations from the play and the comments of Iulius Pollux, the second-century CE lexicographer who recorded it, hint at a combination of youthful play and the sexual playfulness a Greek would readily attribute to *paidia*. As the epitome of Pollux’s topically arranged *Onomasticon* explains in its treatment of *paidiai*:

“The kissing game is named from the act of kissing, i.e. to ‘to kiss tenderly,’ just what Crates seems to give glimpses of in *Paidiai*. And this poet spoke, too, pretty much about the majority of these [*paidiai*] in this drama. In any case, he says, ‘She plays the kissing game among the male choruses, just as is to be expected, smooching the handsome ones.’”³² Is the “she” an actor who is meant to be the kissing game or simply a character who plays this game and perhaps others too? Of course, Pollux, our sole witness, would not have seen the production and could only judge from the text, whatever he had of it. Nonetheless, what he tells us is suggestive in its fit with other Greek perceptions of playfulness. Play need not be playful. In this case, it was.

Ruminations

Greeks could think about *paidia*, experience *paidia*, visualize and depict *Paidia*, and, unlike us, sometimes actually play with *Paidia* herself. In each case, the lexical range of *paidia* or a *paid*-related word would combine with narrower usages with which an individual or a group was familiar. Social context and temperamental and psychological predisposition, too, would be part of this conceptual process, one no less effective in purposeful precipitators of playfulness—when playfulness played any role at all—than in intended receptors of playfulness, whether the latter perceived accurately, misconstrued, or failed to perceive playfulness on the part of the former. Obviously, the Dipylon *Oinochoē*, Nestor’s Cup, the Würzburg Cup, and the vases on which *Paidia* appears were, as they are now, in and of themselves incapable of intent. Rather, the capacity of intent and its apprehension resided in the minds of potters, painters, those who commissioned, employed, or owned them, those who sold and bought the objects, those who inscribed them, and those who encountered them then and encounter them now. Interdependence or some causal relationship does not necessarily follow. Significant removes of time and place may intervene. Even reasonable certainty about original intentions and ancient reactions may be impossible. Yet none of this renders our own perceptions of playfulness, no matter how unfounded they may be as historical inferences, any less real than were perceptions of playfulness inspired in ancient Greeks by the messages and images considered here.

A final point is worth making. Engagement with ancient perceptions of playfulness should caution students of ancient and modern play against invest-

ing in culturally overdetermined, normative generalizations about it. Unless thoughtfully qualified, such generalizations can mislead and obscure. This article itself serves as a warning. Whatever insights it offers about Greek playfulness and in spite of its emphasis on the lexical range of *paid*-related words, it has not examined Greek words for “playful” or “playfulness.” The Greek adjectives that come closest to the former almost always carry a strong implication of childishness or a focus on being childish (*paidikos*, *paidikē*, *paidikon*), on being a jokester (*paignios*, *paignion*), or on exhibiting a fondness for jokes (*paigniēmōn*, *paigniēmon*). Two other adjectives—*paidiōdēs*, *paidiōdes* and *paigniōdēs*, *paigniōdes*, though almost exclusively postclassical—come closer to our notion of playful. Used with the Greek for “the,” it denoted “the playful.” However, these adjectives occur in substantivized form only three times in classical literature: *to paidiōdes* in a fragment of the orator Lysias to describe the quality of a composition; *to paigniōdes* in Xenophon to describe a state induced by moderate intoxication; and *to paigniōdes* again in Xenophon in a description of how the failed Athenian oligarch Theramenes, when sentenced to death by hemlock, exhibited what Xenophon (who could not have known Theramenes’s true intent) presents as playfulness when the condemned man flicked to earth the last drops of the poison in his cup, an apparent toast to his already executed collaborator Critias.³³ As for investigations of modern play and playfulness conceptualized exclusively in English by a particular subset of English speakers trained in modern disciplines and employing (no matter how skillfully) the methods and assumptions of such disciplines, these, too, may mislead and obscure. An exclusive reliance on a methodological imperative to get close, to observe, to record, to measure, to replicate, and then to measure again—the basis of much of the best work in the social sciences—involves costs. The loss of perspective or critical distance is but one of these.

Language alone can take us only so far in understanding the sensibilities of the past. Crosscultural and multilingual studies grounded in philology, history, and the scholarly investigation of the material culture of times and places other than our own—in this article, images preserved on ancient Greek pottery—can help us create that critical distance and recognize (but not necessarily reject) the distortions of a shortened temporal and narrower spatial perspective. To ignore the potential insights such approaches promise would be a disservice to the serious study of play and perceptions of playfulness.

NOTES

1. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv. 192. Lilian H. Jeffery, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece: A Study of the Origins of the Greek Alphabet and Its Development from the Eighth to the Fifth Centuries B.C.* (1961), 68 and Plate 1; Barry B. Powell, *Homer and the Origins of the Greek Alphabet* (1990), 158–63. Unless otherwise noted, all dates are BCE. Likewise, unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.
2. Alfred Schäfer, *Unterhaltung beim griechischen Symposion: Darbietungen, Spiele und Wettkämpfe von homerischer bis in spätclassische Zeit* (1997), 14–18.
3. The two verbs associated with *pais* are *paizein*, the verb of the Dipylon inscription, and *paideuein*, to raise a child. For erotic implications of *paizein*, see Jeffrey Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy* (1991), 157. All Greek is transliterated. ē = eta, ō = omega.
4. Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, Vol. 1 (1968), 131, column 2, for *atalos*, “youthful spirit” or “tender spirit,” regularly of children; Vol. 3 (1974), 848–50 for *pais*, 848–50 for *paizein*.
5. Giorgio Buchner and Carlo Ferdinando Russo, “La Coppa di Nestore e un'iscrizione metrica da Pitecusa dell'VIII secolo av. Cr.,” *Rendiconti della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei* 10 (1955): 215–34; Jeffery, *Local Scripts of Archaic Greece*, 68 and Plate 47; Powell, *Homer and the Origins of the Greek Alphabet*, 163–67.
6. Peter A. Hanson, “Pithecusan Humour: The Interpretation of ‘Nestor’s Cup’ Reconsidered.” *Glotta* 54 (1976): 25–44; Calvert Watkins, “Observations on the ‘Nestor’s Cup’ Inscription.” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 80 (1976): 25–40; Marek Wecowski, *The Rise of the Greek Aristocratic Banquet* (2014), 127–89, esp. 127–38.
7. *Iliad* 11.632–37, trans. Richmond Lattimore (1951), 251.
8. Peter M. Frazer and Elaine Matthews, *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names. Vol. IIIA: Peloponnese, Western Greece, Sicily, and Magna Graecia* (1997), 313.
9. Albrecht Dihle, “Die Inschrift vom Nestor-Becher aus Ischia.” *Hermes* 97 (1969): 257–61; Stephanie West, “Nestor’s Bewitching Cup” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 101 (1994): 9–15.
10. Christopher Faraone. “Taking the ‘Nestor’s Cup’ Inscription Seriously,” *Classical Antiquity* 15 (1997): 97.
11. Wecowski, *Rise of the Greek Aristocratic Banquet*, 130.
12. Martin von Wagner Museum, Inventory Number HA 428 = L 479.
13. Wecowski, *Rise of the Greek Aristocratic Banquet*, 88–89.
14. Schäfer, *Unterhaltung beim griechischen Symposion*, Plates 14.1, 15.1, 16.1, and (a tondo showing a bearded man retching into a bowl while a nude boy holds his head) 28.2; Alexandre Mitchell, *Greek Vase-Painting and the Origins of Visual Humour* (2009), 86–91.
15. For example, a Laconian black figure vase (ca. 565–550) = Paris, Cabinet des Médailles 190, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale de France; Amy C. Smith, “‘Homeric’ Art in Ancient Greece: The Case of Polyphemos,” In *Proceedings of the BRLSI* 9, Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution. <http://www.brslsi.org/events-proceedings/proceedings/25019>. Smith counts twelve

Polyphemus images over a period of a little over two hundred years.

16. Ian C. Storey and Arlene Allan, *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama* (2005), 156–68.
17. Anneliese Kossatz-Deissmann, “Paidia,” *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, Vol. 7 (1994) Vol. 7.1, 141–43, and Vol. 7.2, 94–96; Barbara Borg, “Eunomia oder: Vom Eros der Hellenen.” In *Konstruktionen von Wirklichkeit: Bilder im Griechenland des 5. und 4. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.*, ed. Ralf von den Hoff and Stefan Schmidt (2005), 193–209; Smith, “Homeric’ Art in Ancient Greece,” 51–69, 153–68.
18. Harvey A. Shapiro, *Personifications in Greek Art: The Representation of Abstract Concepts, 600-400 B.C.* (1993); Borg, “Eunomia oder: Vom Eros der Hellenen;” Emma Stafford and Judith Herrin, eds., *Personification in the Greek World: From Antiquity to Byzantium* (2005); and Smith, “Homeric’ Art in Ancient Greece,” offer overviews.
19. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Der Glaube der Hellenen*, Vol. 1 (1931), 17.
20. Kossatz-Deissmann, *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, Vol. 7.2: 94, *Paidia* 4.
21. Shapiro, *Personifications in Greek Art*, 80.
22. Kossatz-Deissmann, “Paidia,” *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, Vol. 7.2: 95, nos. 8–12a.
23. *Ibid.*, Vol. 7.2, 95, *Paidia* 8.
24. Smith, “Homeric’ Art in Ancient Greece,” 64–65.
25. Shapiro, *Personifications in Greek Art*, 66; Borg, “Eunomia oder: Vom Eros der Hellenen,” 299–305; Barbara E. Borg, “Eunomia or ‘Make Love Not War’? Meidian Personifications Reconsidered,” in Stafford and Herrin, *Personification in the Greek World: From Antiquity to Byzantium*, 208 and figure 14.7.
26. Borg, “Eunomia or ‘Make Love Not War’?” 198; Stafford and Herrin, 159–63.
27. Borg, “Eunomia or ‘Make Love Not War’?” 208, figure 14.5.
28. Borg, “Eunomia oder: Vom Eros der Hellenen,” 307–8, with figure 7; Borg, “Eunomia or ‘Make Love Not War’?” 196–97 and 210, figure 14.7.
29. Würzburg, Martin von Wagner Museum L 492; Borg, “Eunomia oder: Vom Eros der Hellenen,” 305–6.
30. Anneliese Kossatz-Deissmann, “Chorillis,” *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, Vol. 3 (1986), 274.
31. Rudolf Kassel and Colin Austin, *Poetae comici Graeci*, Vol. 4 (1983), 83–110; Jeffery Rusten, ed., *The Birth of Comedy: Texts, Documents, and Art from Athenian Comic Competitions, 486-280*, trans. Jeffrey Rusten, Jeffrey Henderson, David Konstan, Ralph Rosen, and Niall W. Slater (2011), 137–41.
32. *Onomasticon* IX.94–129, ed. Erich Bethe (1931), Vol. 2, 173.30–183.4, on *paidiai* in general, and, on Crates’s *Paidiai*, *Onomasticon* IX.114–115, Bethe, Vol. 2, 179.4–10 = Crates, Fragment 27, *Poetae comici Graeci*, Vol. 4, 99 = Rusten, *Birth of Comedy*, 140, fragment 27.
33. Lysias, *Oration* 111, fragment 244a–c, line 13; Xenophon *Symposium* 2.26.7 and *Hellenica* 2.3.56.