

MIMES, THAUMATURGY, AND THE THEATRE

Leontius of Naples in his *Life of Symeon Salos*, written around the middle of the seventh century A.D., describes an encounter that the subject of the *Life*, the holy fool Symeon, had had with some mimes in the theatre in Emesa:¹

ἑθεάτριζόν ποτε μίμοι εἰς τὸ θέατρον. ἦν δὲ εἰς ἐξ αὐτῶν ψηφᾶς. θέλων οὖν τὸ τοιοῦτον κακὸν ἀνακόψαι ὁ δίκαιος (εἶχεν γάρ τινα κατὰ ἔργα ὁ λεγόμενος ψηφᾶς) οὐκ ἀπηξίωσεν τοῦ μὴ ἀπελθεῖν ἀλλὰ ἀπῆλθεν² καὶ κάτω ἴστατο εἰς τὸ πέλμα, ὅπου ἔπαιζον οἱ μίμοι. καὶ ὡς εἶδεν τὸν ψηφᾶν ἀρξάμενον τοῦ ποιεῖν τὰ ἀθέμιτα πράγματα, ῥίπτει λίθον μικρὸν πάνυ ποιήσας εἰς αὐτὸν σταυρὸν καὶ διδίδει εἰς τὴν δεξιάν χεῖρα τοῦ ψηφᾶ καὶ ἐξήρανε αὐτήν. οὐδεὶς δὲ ἐνόησεν τὸ τίς τὸν λίθον ἔρριψεν. φαίνεται οὖν αὐτῷ τῇ νυκτὶ κατὰ τοὺς ὕπνου ὁ ὅσιος καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ: ὄντως ἐπέτυχον, καὶ εἰ μὴ δόμοσης, ὅτι οὐκέτι ἐπιτηδεύεις τοιοῦτόν τι πράξει, οὐχ ὑγιαίνεις. ὤμοσεν οὖν αὐτῷ κατὰ τῆς θεοτόκου ὅτι οὐ μὴ παρελθῶ τοῦ λοιποῦ διὰ τοιοῦτου παιγνιδίου. (150 Rydén)

Once some mimes were putting on a show in the theatre. One of their number was a conjuror with pebbles. The righteous one, since he wished to exterminate that evil—for the so-called pebble-conjuror had some good deeds to his credit—did not think it right to depart, but he did not depart and took up a stance below on the floor of the theatre,³ where the mimes were performing. When he saw the conjuror beginning to carry out his lawless deeds,⁴ he threw a very small stone, after making the Sign of the Cross on it, and struck the right hand of the man with it, causing it to wither. No one noticed that someone had thrown the stone. The holy one appeared during the night to the conjuror when he was sleeping and said to him: ‘I truly have hit my mark. Unless you swear not to follow such a practice, you will not get well.’ The conjuror, accordingly, swore to him by the Mother of God: ‘I shall not in future have anything to do with such a trick.’⁵

A ψηφᾶς is a type of illusionist whose ancestry stretches back as far as the early fourth century B.C., if not further. In earlier times, he was more often known as a ψηφοπαίκτης. The word is first attested in the comic poet of the third or second century B.C., Eudoxus (fr. 1 K.–A.), although Lysias uses a denominative verb ψηφοπαικτεῖν (fr. 17). He may also be called a ψηφοκλέπτης or a ψηφολόγος or a ψηφιστής.⁶ According to Athenaeus, the people of Hestiaea or Oreos erected a bronze

¹ Derek Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius' Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1996), 21–2, while conceding that the episodes in Emesa are non-specific in their reference, maintains that the atmosphere reflected in them is that of the relative prosperity of Cyprus in the seventh century rather than Emesa in the sixth. But it is far from certain that the *Life* can safely be used as evidence of conditions in the Cyprus of Leontius' day.

² The ἀπῆλθεν that Rydén and Festugière (A. J. Festugière en collaboration avec Lennart Rydén, *Vie de Syméon le Fou et Vie de Jean de Chypre* [Paris, 1974]) print makes no sense, since clearly Symeon did not go away from the theatre. It looks as though either there has been dittography and a verb meaning ‘to approach or enter’ has been replaced or οὐκ has fallen out. Festugière (p. 197) explains οὐκ ἀπηξίωσεν τοῦ μὴ ἀπελθεῖν as a contamination of ἀπαξίω τινός and ἀπαξίω μὴ + infinitive.

³ Both Festugière (n. 2), 138 and Krueger (n. 1), 155 translate ἴστατο by ‘sit’.

⁴ Krueger (n. 1), 155 in his translation takes it to be Symeon who performs the wicked deeds.

⁵ For expressions of the form παρελθεῖν διὰ τινος meaning ‘to engage in a practice’, see L. Rydén, *Bemerkungen zum Leben des heiligen Narren Symeon von Leontios von Neapolis*, *Studia Graeca Upsaliensia* 6 (Uppsala, 1970), 100–1.

⁶ How a ψηφοπαίκτης differed from a ὄφιοπαίκτης or a παροφθαλμιστής is not clear. The *Hermeneumata Ensiedlensia* in its list of theatrical terms glosses the former term by *praestigiator* as it also does παροφθαλμιστής (*Corp. Glossar. Lat.* III.240). LSJ⁹ s.v. ὄφιοπαίκτης emends to ὄφιοπαίκτης, which it takes to mean ‘snake-charmer’. But a snake-charmer is not a *praestigiator*.

statue of the *ψηφοκλέπτης*, Theodorus, in the theatre, showing him controlling a pebble (1.19b). The term *ψηφιστής* is attested in a Byzantine astrological text that draws on and paraphrases some paragraphs of Vettius Valens on the influence of the star Mercury.⁷ There, *ψηφιστής* is a rendering of the periphrasis in Vettius for a *ψηφοπαίκτης*:

καὶ ἐπιχειροῦντας τὰ παράδοξα καὶ μεθοδικὰ διὰ ψηφῶν ἢ παραλογισμῶν

Those attempting to create wonders and tricks through pebbles or deceptive devices. (1.1.39)

ψηφιστής also occurs in a glossary, the *Hermeneumata Montepessulana*, as the equivalent of the Late Latin term for one who does tricks with pebbles, a *cauculator*.⁸

LSJ⁹ gives as the meaning of *ψηφοπαίκτης* ‘one who juggles with pebbles’. The same authority says that a *ψηφᾶς* is a ‘juggler’. Neither a *ψηφοπαίκτης* nor a *ψηφᾶς* is a juggler, but someone who tricks spectators, by sleight of hand, into believing that they are seeing what they are not seeing; that is to say, a conjuror or prestidigitator.¹⁰ In the case of the word *ψηφοπαίκτης* that emerges unequivocally from the comparison made by Sextus Empiricus of orators who by their roguery blind the minds of judges and steal their votes to *ψηφοπαίκτης* who deceive the eyes of spectators by their sleight of hand:

καθὰ γὰρ οἱ ψηφοπαίκτης τὰς τῶν θεωμένων ὄψεις δι’ ὄξυχειρίαν κλέπτουσι, οὕτως οἱ ῥήτορες διὰ πανουργίαν τὰς τῶν δικαστῶν διανοίας ἀμαυρῶσαντες τῷ νόμῳ συγκλέπτουσι τὰς ψήφους (Math. 2.39)¹¹

ψηφᾶδες also deceived the senses by leading eyes astray. Thus Athanasius can compare the Antichrist, giving a glimpse here and glimpse there of gold or silver and so leading the eyes of men astray, to the actions of *ψηφᾶδες*:

ὥσπερ οἱ λεγόμενοι ψηφᾶδες . . . πλανᾷ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς τῶν ἀνθρώπων χρυσίον αὐτοῖς πολλάκις ἢ ἄργυρον ὑποδεικνύς (Q. Ant. 125 PG 28.677)

Deception and trickery are, accordingly, at the heart of what it was to be a *ψηφοπαίκτης* or a *ψηφᾶς*. To judge from his name, he will have used pebbles in performing his tricks. Seneca clearly refers to such specialized conjurors when he speaks of the pleasure that being fooled by the cups and the pebbles of conjurors gives him (*sic ista sine noxa decipiunt quomodo praestigatorum acetabula et calculi, in quibus me fallacia ipsa delectat*, Ep. 45.8). Exactly what the deception practised by such conjurors lay in is not altogether clear. The testimony of Artemidorus suggests that it

Louis Robert, *Opera Minora Selecta* II (Amsterdam, 1969), 895 with n. 2 suggests that the man ‘abuse pareillement les yeux du public par ses escamotages’. A *παροφθαλμιστής* is one who leads the eyes astray as *παρολογίζεσθαι* is ‘to lead the mind astray’.

⁷ *Cod. Venet. Marc. Gr.* 224ff. 184–94 published by Wilhelm Kroll, *CCAG* 2 159–80, republished as Vett. Val. Appendix I 388.1 Pingree.

⁸ *Corp. Glossar. Lat.* III, p. 310 Goetz. The same glossary gives *praestigator* for *ψηφοπέκτης* (*Corp. Glossar. Lat.* III, p. 310 Goetz). The *Hermeneumata Monacensis* glosses *psiphopectis* by *cauculator* and *psephas* by *cauculos* (*Corp. Glossar. Lat.* II, 198 Goetz).

⁹ LSJ⁹ and Lampe s.v. put an acute on the ultimate, but the word follows the same pattern as other terms for occupations in Late Greek ending in *-ᾶς* and takes a perispomenon on the ultimate. So Festugière (n. 2), 196–7. The correct accent is given at *CCAG* 7.118, 8.3.110, 8.4.217.

¹⁰ So H. Blümner, ‘Fahrende Volk im Altertum’, *Sitz. München.* (1918), 19; Franz Cumont, *L’Égypte des astrologues* (Bruxelles, 1938), 85, n. 4; Robert (n. 6), 859. Festugière (n. 2), 138 calls him a ‘un jongleur’ and Lennart Rydén, ‘The holy fool’, in *The Byzantine Saint: The XIVth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, Studies Supplementary to Sobornost 5 (London, 1981), 109 ‘a juggler’.

consisted in being able to put before the spectators more or less pebbles than they imagined they had seen before:

ψηφοπαικτεῖν δοκεῖν οὐκ ἐπιστάμενον πολλὰ ὠφεληθῆναι σημαίνει παραλογιζόμενον καὶ ψευδόμενον διὰ τὸ πολλὰς ψήφους κλέπτειν καὶ ταύτας ἄλλοτε ἄλλως δεικνύειν, οὐ κατὰ τινα ἀπλοῦν τρόπον, ἀλλὰ πανούργως (3.55)

To dream that one is a *ψηφοπαίκτης* for someone who does not know the craft signifies great benefits gained by cheating and deceit, since the *ψηφοπαίκτης* surreptitiously abstracts many pebbles and displays them again at another moment, not in a straightforward manner, but in that of a rogue.¹²

The pebbles were not only put in front of the spectators, perhaps on a table, but might appear in the parted lips of the conjuror.¹³ Similarly, the prestidigitator whose speciality was thimble-rigging, which is to say doing conjuring-tricks with peas or pebbles placed under small cups, would display pebbles under a cup and then cause them to vanish when next he raised the cup, only to make them appear in his mouth; he might then swallow them and pull them out of the ear, nose or throat of spectators (Alciphr. 3.20).¹⁴

We may turn now to the question of what a conjuror or prestidigitator was doing performing as a mime or performing amongst mimes. There are other indications that such illusionists were to be found working alongside or amongst mimes. In the astrological texts, *ψηφάδες* tend to be mentioned in the same breath as *μίμοι* (CCAG 7.118, 8.3.110, 8.4.217). Vettius Valens says that Mercury produces those trying to create wonders or tricks by means of pebbles and illusions and *ἰσχυροπαίχται* or *μιμωδοί* (1.1.39).¹⁵ *ψηφοπαίχται* and *μίμοι* were obviously associated in men's minds, presumably because they performed together.

ψηφοπαίχται fall into the more general category of *θαυματοποιοί*. *θαυματοποιία* encompasses conjuring, acrobatics, juggling, and marionette-shows or, in other words, any kind of performance that produced baffled amazement in spectators. From the fourth century B.C. on *θαυματοποιοί* are to be found performing alongside mimes and in some cases the mime and the *θαυματοποιός* were one and the same person.¹⁶ There were also dancers who danced mime-like dances who doubled as *θαυματοποιοί*. The earliest and best-known instance of such a performer is the *ὄρχηστρίς* in Xenophon's *Symposium*: at the end of the symposium she plays the role of Ariadne as bride of Dionysus in a performance that encompasses music, dance and speech (9.2–5),¹⁷

¹¹ Cf. *Pyrr.* 2.250; *Artem.* 3.55; *Stob. Flor.* 2.2.11. *Dosith. Gramm.* 71 glosses *ψηφοπαικτῶ* by *praestigiator*.

¹² The comparison made by Athanasius of the Antichrist's giving a glimpse (*ὑποδεικνύς*) of gold and silver and leading men's eyes astray to the action of a *ψηφᾶς* points to the same kind of trick (*Q. Ant.* 125 PG 28.677).

¹³ *Front. Aur.* 3: *alter autem oleas suas in altum iaciat, ore aperto excipiat, exceptas ut calculos praestrigiator primoribus labris ostentet.*

¹⁴ On cup-players (*eos qui in poculis ludunt Lib. Herm. Trismeg.* 71.10; *τοὺς ἐν ποτηρίοις παίζοντας* Teucrus *apud* F. Boll, *Sphaera* [Leipzig, 1903], 51.2), see Blümner (n. 10), 19 with n. 138, Cumont (n. 10), 85, n. 4. On the *ἱμαντελικτής*, who challenged spectators to place a stick in a twisted leather thong that will not shake loose when the thong is unbound, see D'Arcy Thompson, 'IMANTEΛΙΓΜΟΣ', *CR* 33 (1919), 24–5 and E. K. Borthwick, 'New interpretations of Aristophanes' *Frogs* 1249–1328', *Phoenix* 48 (1994), 23–6.

¹⁵ On *ἰσχυροπαίχται*, see Robert (n. 6), 893–7.

¹⁶ On *θαυματοποιοί* and mimes performing alongside each other, see E. Wüst, 'Mimos', *RE* 15 (1932), 1736–7.

¹⁷ Bernhard Huss, *Xenophons Symposium: Ein Kommentar* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1999), 440

but she is described as an *ὄρχηστρίς* able to perform wonders (τῶν τὰ θαύματα δυναμένων ποιεῖν 2.1). She lives up to that billing and puts on a performance of both juggling and acrobatics (2.8,11). The exponent of the Italian mime, Nymphodorus, was also known as a *θαυματοποιός* (Duris, *FGrH* 76 F 57 = Ath. 1.19–20; Clearchus fr. 93 Wehrli = Ath. 10.452–3).¹⁸ Another exponent of the Italian mime, Ischomachus, also a figure from the fourth century B.C., is said, once he had become well-known, to have acted his mimes amongst wonder-working routines (ὡς δὲ εὐδοκιμεῖ, μεταβάς ἐν τοῖς θαύμασιν ὑπεκρίετο μίμους Clearchus fr. 93 Wehrli = Ath. 10.452–3). It is hard to tell who the *ὄρχηστής* and *θαυματοποιός* is to whom and to whose sons in Roman times the Delphians granted citizenship and membership of the council (*FD* III.6.469).¹⁹ Aelius Aristides does nonetheless lump together *ὄρχησταί*, *μίμοι*, and *θαυματοποιοί* in a context that shows he has pantomimes, not just dancers, in mind (*Or.* 50.414, Dindorf II, 567).

The evidence, such as it is, does not allow us to say whether Nymphodorus combined his *θαυματοποιία* with his miming or whether his miming and his *θαυματοποιία* were separate and distinct performances as they are in the case of the *ὄρχηστρίς* in Xenophon's *Symposium*. Some *θαυματοποιοί* who acted as mimes seem to have performed conjuring tricks that were an integral part of their act. The Attidographer Phanodemus tells of a Locrian called Diopieithes who appeared in Thebes with bladders of milk and wine that he had attached to his person; he then squeezed them, saying that he was drawing the liquids from his mouth (*FGrH* 325 F 9 = Ath. 10.20a). Athenaeus, who cites Phanodemus here, goes on to say that the character-mime or *ἡθολόγος* Noemon gained fame for doing the same kind of things. It is by no means clear whether Athenaeus is still drawing on Phanodemus, but it does rather sound as though Diopieithes was like Noemon a mime and that he pretended in performing as a mime to produce water and wine from his mouth.

ψηφοπαίκται undoubtedly performed in the theatre. The citizens of Oreos who set up in the theatre of their city a bronze statue of Theodorus in his role as *ψηφοκλέπτης* presumably put the statue in that location, because Theodorus had performed in their theatre (Ath. 1.19b). From the fourth century A.D. there is the statement of Eustathius of Antioch that *ψηφοπαίκται* are capable of performing many more and much greater feats in theatres than those on which sorcerers pride themselves (*Engast.* 9.10 Klostermann). But not all of them will have had the privilege of performing in a theatre. Those who did so were the stars. Others were *ὄχλαγωγοί* or *circulatores*, which is to say persons who performed in the circle that gathered around them in a marketplace or at a crossroads, where they collected money from the spectators, before moving on to another location or town. Vettius Valens, after mentioning *ψηφοπαίκται* and *ισχυροπαίκται* and *μιμωδοί*, goes on to speak of those making their living from public exhibitions and from wandering, vagabondage and from no settled existence (<ἀπό> ἐπιδείξεως τὸν βίον ποριζομένους, ἐτι δὲ πλάνης καὶ ἀλητείας καὶ

on 9.2–7 classifies the performance as a species of mime, dismissing the attempts of others to treat it either as straight mime or pantomime as pointless.

¹⁸ For the identification, see H. Reich, *Der Mimus* (Berlin, 1903), 223.

¹⁹ L. Robert, 'Epigraphica', *REG* 42 (1929), 435–6 = *Opera Minora Selecta* I (Amsterdam, 1969), 23–4 and 'Pantomimen im griechischen Orient', *Hermes* 65 (1930), 111 = *Opera Minora Selecta* I.659 is convinced, because two other pantomimes in inscriptions from Delphi are referred to as *τραγικῆς ἐνρῦθμον κινήσεως ὑποκριταί* (*FD* III.1.551.1–2, III.2.105.2–3), that the man is not a pantomime, but a dancer of low status of the same order as the dancers known as *κίναδοι* and that his *θαυματοποιία* consisted in the same kind of tricks that the *ὄρχηστρίς* in Xenophon's *Symposium* performed. This is a little too dogmatic. If he was a dancer of so low a status, the honours bestowed not only on him but on his sons are somewhat surprising.

ἀκαταστασίας 1.1.39). It is likely that it is the persons he has just mentioned who prompt him to speak of those living off the shows they put on and travelling as vagabonds from place to place. The collection of astrological poems that purport to be the work of Manetho, but in fact belong to the High Empire, describes *ψηφοπαίκται* doing just that in language that echoes that of Vettius:

*ψηφάων παίκτας τε καὶ ἐξ ὄχλοιο πορισμῶν
βομβηδὸν ζώνοντας, ἀλήμονας ἤς χθόνος αἰεὶ* (4.448–9)

Players of pebbles, living like buzzing bees (i.e. moving from spot to spot) off what the crowd provides, wanderers always over the earth.²⁰

Mimes and *θαυματοποιοί* put on shows at symposia in private houses, at crossroads and in market-places, wherever a crowd might gather about them, and in the theatre. All of these venues provided a more or less suitable setting for the plays that the mimes performed, for displays of juggling and acrobatics and for such conjuring trick as a fire blazing up apparently spontaneously.²¹ But for *ψηφοπαίκται* the stage of a theatre is hardly an appropriate place of performance; the spectators need to be able to see and count the pebbles with which the *ψηφοπαίκτης* performs his tricks. That may very well be the reason why Symeon stands below on the floor (*πέλμα*) of the theatre, where the mimes put on their show.²² Furthermore, unless Leontius is writing very loosely, Symeon does not take a seat, but stands during the performance.

A letter of Alciphron offers another instance of a conjuror performing in what looks to be the orchestra of a theatre. He does so in front of a group of spectators, at least some of whom are standing. The standing spectators in this case are active participants in the show. The writer purports to be a simple countryman who has gone to town to sell his produce and who while there had been taken to the theatre, where he had seen a thimble-rigger perform. From the fine seat he enjoyed the man had seen the conjuror come forward into the midst of the spectators (*εἰς γὰρ τις εἰς μέσους παρελθὼν*), where he had set up a tripod on which he had placed three small cups with which he had covered small white round pebbles; he had then shown all of them below one of the cups, only to make all of them disappear from that location and appear out of his mouth; his next move was to swallow them and then bring forward those standing nearby into the centre of things (*τοὺς πλησιὸν ἐστῶτας ἄγων εἰς μέσον*) to pull a pebble out of the nose of one, another out of someone's ear and yet another out of the gullet of a third, only to make them all disappear again (3.20). It is hard to see where the conjuror can be but in the orchestra of the theatre. Alciphron, it is to be imagined, describes a reality that he himself knows and is not drawing on an account of what went on in the theatre in Athens in the fourth century B.C.²³

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²⁰ A. Koechly in *Poetae Bucolici et Didactici* (Paris, 1862) translates: *calculorum lusores atque ex vulgi quaestibus susurratim viventes, erroneos suae terrae semper*. Bees do not whisper, but buzz (*βομβεῖν*).

²¹ Ath. 1.19e credits the *θαυματοποιός* Cratisthenes of Phlius with this trick.

²² It is true that *θέατρον* may be used generally to designate a stadion, an amphitheatre, or a hippodrome, but in the absence of other markers the presumption must be that by *θέατρον* Leontius means a theatre. Reich thought that by *πέλμα* Leontius had in mind the breast-high platform on which what he calls jugglers customarily performed. John Malalas, quoting the historian Charax who had said the hippodrome represented the cosmos, provides the appropriate parallel: he says that the *πέλμα* of the hippodrome signified the whole earth (*Chron.* 7.175). The *πέλμα* is then the floor or orchestra of the theatre.

²³ I am indebted to David Bain and W. J. Slater for their criticisms and corrections of an earlier draft of the article.