SATYR PLAY AND CHILDREN IN THE AUDIENCE

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During the fifth century B.C., and at least the first decades of the following century, tragedies were presented at the Dionysia according to a convention whereby each poet competing in the contest produced on a single day three tragedies followed by a satyr play, a comparatively short farce on a mythological subject usually if not always featuring a satyr chorus. Until the present century comparatively little was known about this genre: a single preserved specimen, Euripides’ *Cyclops*, a relative handful of literary fragments and testimonia, and some vase paintings inspired by satyr plays. Then, during the course of the present century, papyrological remains of a number of satyr plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and others, have enormously enriched our knowledge of satyric drama.¹ Not surprisingly, therefore, this heretofore rather neglected department of classical literature has begun to receive new attention from historians of classical drama.²

One outstanding feature of satyric drama as it can be understood on the basis of evidence presently available is the fact that the plots, narrative devices, and characters of many satyr plays are drawn from the world of *Märchen.*³ *Cyclops* is a dramatization of a local Greek version of the ‘Jack the Giant-Killer’ situation;⁴ moreover, it is a straightforward confrontation of a plucky, clever hero and a mock-terrifying ogre and even the physical horrors of the play (Polyphemus’ cannibalism, his ultimate blinding) are recounted with a kind of comically exaggerated gusto that is entirely characteristic of *Märchen.* A number of other satyr plays (e.g. Aeschylus’ *Cercyon* and so-called ‘*Dike Play’*,⁵ Sophocles’ *Amycus*, Euripides’ *Busiris, Sciron,* and *Syleus,* and Sositheus’ *Daphnis or Lityerses*) recounted the defeat of monsters, ogres, and notorious bad men, by heroes.

Then too, the kinds of characters one encounters in satyr plays are frequently recruited from the world of *Märchen*: besides the above mentioned

1. Cf. D.F. Sutton, ‘A Handlist of Satyr Plays,’ *HSCP* 78 (1974) 107-143 (the only important satyric papyrus to have been identified or published since 1974 is *P. Bodmer* 28, a fragment of an anonymous *Ajax*).
3. The fullest discussions are Guggisberg, ib. op.cit. 60-74 and Sutton, ib. op.cit. 145-159.
monsters and ogres one might mention witches such as Circe in Aeschylus’ Circe and Medea in Aeschylus’ [Dionysou] Trophoi (if that play was indeed satyric) and Sophocles’ Daedalus, shape-shifters in Aeschylus’ Proteus and perhaps Achaeus’ Aithon,6 fabulous monsters such as the Sphinx in Aeschylus’ Sphinx and Argus in Sophocles’ Inachus (and also the transformed Io in the same play), and cunning tricksters such as Odysseus, Autolycus, Sisyphus, and the god Hermes, who appear as characters in a number of satyr plays (clever personalities such as Oedipus, Palamedes, and Prometheus may also have been presented as trickster-figures on the satyric stage).7

Also Märchen-like is the number of times the plots of satyr plays feature magic and the miraculous. Some examples of magic in satyr plays are the transformation of men (or perhaps satyrs?) into swine in Aeschylus’ Circe. Proteus’ shape-shifting in Aeschylus’ Proteus, a rejuvenation scene in the same poet’s Trophoi, the magic lyre and Hermes’ preternaturally rapid growth in Sophocles’ Ichneutaes, Io’s transformation and the Cap of Hades in his Inachus, and (according to an attractive understanding of a mutilated text)8 a magically self-replenishing wineskin in Euripides’ Cyclops.

Why were the tragic poets so inclined to employ this order of narrative material in their satyr plays?

Various possibilities may be suggested. First, by comparison with tragedy satyric drama has been described as a popular dramatic form.9 Therefore, one might reason, it is only natural that satyr plays would frequently draw on an order of narrative material that was the special heritage of the common people.

Also, the essential purpose of satyric drama when presented after tragedy was to provide ‘comic relief’ after the emotional and intellectual rigours of tragedy. It might therefore be argued that the folkloristic and Märchen-like nature of satyr plays constitutes a means of purveying this psychological relief. Like the romanticism, colourful exoticism, and obligatory happy endings of satyr plays, this Märchen-nature makes satyr play a form of escapist literature that offers the audience a welcome diversion after undergoing the harrowing experience of watching three tragedies.

So at least I have argued elsewhere.10 Admittedly, in so writing, I was working under the assumption that satyr plays were written for an adult audience (this assumption appears to have been tacitly made by every literary critic and historian, ancient and modern, who has discussed satyr

6. ib. 69f.
7. ib. 149-151.
8. Cyc. 147 (cf. the apparatus ad loc. in Murray’s Oxford ed.).
drama). There is no reason to apologise for having discussed satyr play in this way inasmuch as the majority of members of the audience at the Dionysia were of course adults.

Nevertheless it is worth remembering that children (at least boys) were allowed to attend dramatic performances. This is suggested by Plato, *Gorgias* 502D:

**SOCRATES:** So isn’t [poetry] a form of rhetorical address?

**CALLICLES:** I think so.

**SOCRATES:** So haven’t we found a kind of rhetoric that addresses the whole people: men, women, and children alike, both slaves and free men, which we do not very much admire . . .?

Taken by itself this passage may not be probative; it is at least debatable whether women were allowed to attend the theater (for it is clear from the surrounding context that dramatic poetry is presently under discussion)\(^{11}\) and to the best of my knowledge there is no corroborative evidence for slave-theatergoers. Nevertheless corroboration does exist that boys were allowed to attend dramatic performances (cf. Aristophanes, *Clouds* 539, *Peace* 50, *Peace* 766, and Eupolis fr. 244 Kock).\(^{12}\)

Inasmuch as Märchen and fairy-tales are preeminently children’s literature, it is therefore tempting to suppose that the tragic poets wrote their satyr plays with a special concern for the children in the audience; perhaps satyr plays were, among other things, a kind of reward for the children for having been so patient as to endure the preceding serious plays.\(^{13}\) Then, too, children have to be initiated into accepting the artificial conventions of drama in general and the special artificialities of any culture’s particular dramatic tradition. Satyr plays such as *Cyclops*, with plenty of fun, plenty of physical action, and plenty of deliciously mock-terrifying horror, would have an obvious appeal to children. But they would also teach children to accept the idea of drama and the special conventions

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13. In this case we would have a special case of Horace’s general statement of the *raison d’être* of satyr play (*A.P.* 220ff.):

>carmine qui tragicò vilem certavit ob hircum  
>mox etiam agrestes Satyros nudavit, et asper  
>incolumi gravitate iocum temptavit, eo quod  
>illecebris erat et grata novitate morandus  
>spectator, functusque sacris et potus et exlex.
of Greek drama (masks, the chorus, the use of the physical resources of the theater, and the like). Then too, since *Cyclops* dramatizes the defeat of an ogre who suffers from such overweening pride that he is under the illusion that he is a god, and whose defeat is presented as punishment for sin and represents the upholding of a morally orderly universe, the play may be said to present the moral framework of a Greek tragedy in terms sufficiently simplified that a child could readily comprehend them. So in this way, too, watching a satyr play such as *Cyclops* might be considered educational: satyr play paves the way for the child's eventual understanding of tragedy.

Two further features of satyr drama might suggest that they were written with a special eye towards the children in the audience. First, a number of satyr plays, such as Sophocles' *Dionysiscus*, *Heracleiscus*, and *Ichneutae*, were about the birth and childhood adventures of gods and heroes. Possibly children would take a special delight and interest in seeing children represented on stage. Then too, the style of at least some satyr plays seems easier than that of tragedy (hence *Cyclops* is always a favorite in the beginning Greek classroom), perhaps a concession to the children in the audience.

From the adult theatergoer’s point of view, satyr play must have been amusing and diversionary. Part of his amusement must have consisted of being able, temporarily, to relive his childhood by escaping from the harsh and perilous saga-world of tragedy to the beguiling fantasy-world of *Märchen*. Another source of his pleasure must have been the ability to witness and share the delight of the children in the audience as they reacted to the simple, broad humor of a kind of drama that seems to some degree written especially for them.

15. The theological implications of the play are underlined by Odysseus' nouthetic prayer to Athena at 350-355.
16. This is not to say, however, that satyr plays were always merely uncomplicated farce or contained nothing weighty enough to engage the interest of an adult theatergoer. Sophocles' *Inachus*, for example, seems to have presented genuine human suffering and to have raised substantial questions about the nature of Zeus’ morality in his dealings with Io and those around her. But, as in the rough-and-tumble chase scene represented by *P. Tebt. 692* cols. i-iii, there was plenty of clowning and fast physical action that would appeal to children.