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In classical dramatic traditions there seems to be a recurrent tendency to present serious drama and broad farce in immediate juxtaposition. Much as, for instance, Roman tragedy was followed by exodia (usually consisting of Atellan farce), Japanese No plays by Kyogen, and Elizabethan tragedy by jigs, so for most at least of the fifth century B.C. the three tragedies of a trilogy were followed by a satyr play, composed by the same author, the only known exception being Euripides’ Alcestis of 438 B.C., presented instead of a satyr play and therefore termed a ‘prosatyric’ play. Most satyr plays were lost in antiquity; only Euripides’ Cyclops survives in the manuscript tradition. Modern papyrus discoveries, however, have greatly increased our knowledge of the genre.

The principal features of the satyr play were:

1. Invariable use of a chorus of satyrs; these are small rustic creatures, half-goat, half-human, elemental and often comically grotesque. They are regularly accompanied by their father Silenus, who is a dramatic character in his own right but also functions as a choral spokesman.

2. Use of mythological plots, with mythological travesty a principal source of humour.

3. Absence of satire of contemporary people and events, overt or covert.

4. Use of the same language, metres, and dramaturgic resources as tragedy, modified by special generic requirements: occasional colloquial and bawdy language, boisterous dances, etc. There is somewhat greater metrical freedom than in tragedy: Porson’s Law is sometimes disregarded and cyclic anapaests outside the first place in the iambic line are admitted.

5. Use of a relatively few stereotypes of situation, theme and characterization.

6. A typically spirited tone, with occasional touches of slapstick and scurrility.

7. Comparative shortness in length, as in Euripides’ Cyclops (slightly more than 700 lines).

8. The evidence seems to indicate that satyr plays occasionally parodied elements in the preceding tragedies.

Demetrius, De elocutione 169, describes the satyr play as ‘tragedy at play’, a fine aphorism for the specific nature of satyric humour, which largely derives...
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from humorous re-employment of the language and dramaturgy of tragedy, from travesty of the same mythological world peopled by the same gods and heroes, and from the absurdity created by the intrusion of Silenus and the satyrs into this world. To a large extent, therefore, the humour of satyr plays consists of poking fun at tragedy, in order of course to provide comic relief.

This comically subversive assault on tragedy takes many forms. The satyr play features, above all, a comedy of incongruity. The satyrs are elemental creatures, at once fey and subhuman, perpetually interested in immediate gratification of their appetites, lazy, arrogant when sure of themselves, craven when they are not. In a satyr's Oeneus, or perhaps Schoeneus, possibly by Sophocles, they present themselves for an athletic competition (the prize is the hand of the king's daughter) with the following self-description:

We are children of the nymphs, devotees of Bacchus, and neighbours of the gods. Every worthwhile art is embodied in us: fighting with spears, wrestling, horsemanship, running, boxing, biting, crotch-grabbing; in us you will find musical song, knowledgeable prophecy with no fakery, discriminating knowledge of medicine, measuring of the heavens, dancing, lore of the Underworld. Hey, is this fund of learning fruitless? All of this is at your disposal — just give us your daughter.

Almost invariably these satyrs are introduced into a mythological situation in which they have no legitimate place, creating an incongruity that is initially absurd and funny, and that can be further exploited. An incident which in the Odyssey is characterized by a certain grimness and horror and by the suffering of sympathetic characters, and which serves as a parable of barbarism and civilization, is dramatized by Euripides in Cyclops. These values are preserved in the play, but the presence of Silenus and the satyrs provides a continuous comic counterpoint. Thus, for instance, when Odysseus is seeking to make Polyphemus drunk, Silenus keeps trying to steal the wine and the satyrs lend their comically feckless assistance to Odysseus when he is attempting to blind the ogre. The presence of the satyr chorus performs another function in this and similar plays. They give an aura of unreality to an otherwise distressing situation, thereby signalling to the audience that Odysseus' predicament need not be taken over-seriously. Thus when he first lands on the Cyclopes' island he sees the satyrs and rightly exclaims that he has stumbled upon a sort of Dionysiac Never-Never Land: 'we seem to have invaded the polis of Dionysus!' (99).

The satyr play's comic assault on tragedy takes other forms. One technique is to create a momentary mood reminiscent of tragedy, and then deliberately destroy it. In Cyclops Odysseus makes a dignified and altogether serious appeal to Polyphemus for mercy, and then Silenus chimes in with one of his typically idiotic remarks (313–15). Similarly, in Aeschylus' Dictyulci Silenus is seeking to bully Danae into a marriage (perhaps intended to parody a serious situation in the tragedy Polydectes), and she delivers herself of a miniature replica of a
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tragic heroine's lament (773–85). But then she ends with a distinctly off-key 'that's all I have to say'.

The heroes of tragedy are often treated comically. A hero or villain who appears as larger than life in tragedy reappears in satyr plays either as a serious figure surrounded by incongruous absurdity, whereby his own seriousness appears humorously inappropriate, or as himself a comical figure. The former technique is employed in Cyclops. Odysseus himself is treated with complete respect, but humour is generated by the fact that, despite his initial exclamation that he has stumbled upon the kingdom of Bacchus, he reacts in deadly earnest to a situation which we perceive to be less than wholly serious: the Cyclops is essentially no more than a mock-blustering bogeyman from a fairy tale. In other satyr plays the traditional Greek heroes might themselves be presented as ludicrous and grotesque. Thus in Sophocles' Syndeipnon the Achaean warlords engaged in a comically degrading squabble at a banquet, and one of them, perhaps Odysseus, received the contents of a chamber-pot over his head. Heracles was a common character in satyr plays, and often was featured as a gargantuan eater, drinker, and wencher.

If the satyr play takes a humorous look at the heroes prominent in tragedy, and perhaps at tragedy's ideals of heroism in some more general sense, so too it displays a nose-thumbing attitude towards some of the characteristic attitudes of tragedy. In tragedy, for instance, cleverness and deception are presented with toleration, most notably in Euripides' rescue plays, Iphigenia in Tauris and Helen, which have other significant points of contact with the satyr play and may even themselves, like Alcestis, have been prosatyr (cf. p. 352). Otherwise, when a clever man appears in a tragedy, he is usually represented as unprincipled and dangerous. One thinks of the anonymous demagogue in Euripides' Orestes, and above all of Odysseus in such plays as Sophocles' Philoctetes, and Euripides' Hecuba and Iphigenia in Aulide. But in many satyr plays, such as Sophocles' Ichneutae and Inachus, and Euripides' Autolycus, Cyclops, and Sisyphus, the plot hinges on sly misrepresentation, and a clever man or trickster is often the hero. Many satyr plays deal with subtle plots for overcoming ogres, monsters, and other villains, and wily schemes for theft and deception, and there is every reason to think that these were presented as tolerable, or even admirable. The Greeks always liked a tale of a good piece of deception, and the satyr play seems frequently to have catered to this taste. Also, the hero of many satyr plays was some such trickster as Odysseus (who is a hero in satyr plays just as frequently as he is a villain in tragedies), Autolycus, Sisyphus, and the patron deity of trickery and theft, Hermes. Other mythological figures noted for their cleverness may have also been characterized as tricksters in satyr plays, such as

1 Ancient evidence wavers between Syndeipnon and Syndeipnoi. If the play is satyric, Syndeipnon is the more likely title, since Syndeipnoi would imply a chorus not of satyrs but of Achaeans.
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Oedipus in Aeschylus' *Sphinx* and Prometheus in his *Prometheus pyrkaeus*. (We know that Prometheus was presented as a trickster in some comedies: cf. Aristophanes, fr. 645 and Eupolis, fr. 456 K.) Similarly, the many moral shortcomings of Silenus and the satyrs seem to have at least been regarded with toleration rather than condemnation, a sharp contrast with the morality of tragedy.

This tendency to use the satyr play as a mock-tragedy, as a means of disarming the tension and anxiety tragedy creates, was carried to its logical conclusion in instances in which a satyr play was contrived to parody elements in the tragedies of the preceding trilogy. This is most evident in the satyr plays of Aeschylus, in which the principal character of the trilogy reappears in a comic situation in the accompanying satyr play. Thus Lycurges appeared in both the *Lycurgeia* trilogy and the following *Lycurgus satyricus*, and Oedipus in the *Oedipodeia* and *Sphinx satyricus*. In a variant of this parodizing technique, the satyr play presents a humorous counterpart not of a tragic character but of a dramatic situation which in the tragedy or trilogy is treated seriously, as in *Amymone*, the satyr play produced with the Danaid trilogy which included the extant *Supplices*. Amymone, pursued by the satyrs wanting to reduce her to sexual bondage, appeals for aid and finds a protector in Poseidon (cf. Hyginus, *Fab. 169, 169A Rose*). This presents a parallel to the situation of the Danaids in *Supplices*. Similarly, *Dictyulci* may have been presented with a *Perseus* trilogy containing the tragedy *Polydectes*, and it has been suggested that Silenus' attempt to marry Danae parodies that of Polydectes in the tragedy.

It is possible that the writing of satyr plays parodying accompanying tragedies persisted after the time of Aeschylus. Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Ichneutae* are commonly assigned to the middle or late 440s, and several resemblances between these plays suggest they were written together and that *Ichneutae* parodies elements in *Ajax*. The description in *Ichneutae* of Apollo searching for his missing cattle and their thief distinctly recalls that of Odysseus searching for the killer of the Achaeian herd; the divided chorus of searching satyrs (*Ichn. 85ff.*) seems to parody the divided chorus of searching sailors (*Aj. 866ff.*), and both plays conclude with a scene of reconciliation.

There are stronger grounds for thinking that Euripides wrote his *Cyclops* as a parody of *Hecuba*. The blinding of Polyphemus parodies that of Polyphemus even in detail of diction (cf. *Hec. 1035ff.*, *Cyc. 663ff.*). Both plays are concerned with the problem of civilized behaviour, expressed in terms of *nomos*. Both contain a plea for mercy based on idealism turned aside with a cold lecture about expediency. If the two plays were performed together there is an ironic contrast between Odysseus' rejection of Hecuba's plea in the tragedy and his

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1 The dating of *Cyclops* is disputed, cf. Sutton (1974a). The arguments for a date substantially later than 424 (the probable date of *Hecuba*) are not compelling.
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own plea to Cyclops in the satyr play. Polymestor appears to be an invention of Euripides, and his characterization seems modelled on that of the Cyclops. These correspondences suggest that _Cyclops_ is a comic foil for _Hecuba_, and although no external evidence exists, it is an attractive idea that the correspondences are intentional, that is, that both plays were produced in the same year.

A notable feature of the satyr play is marked dependence on a limited repertoire of stereotyped themes, situations, narrative elements, and characterizations; _Cyclops_ incorporates a number of these generic stereotypes. One of these, the frequent importance of trickery and trickster-figures, has already been noted. A second, perhaps the commonest of all, is the overthrow of ogres, monsters, and giants. As in _Cyclops_, and such other plays as Aeschylus’ _Cercyon_, Sophocles’ _Amycus_, Euripides’ _Busiris_, and Sositheus’ _Daphnis_ or _Lityerses_, the villain is an ogre who molests wayfarers until he makes the mistake of practising his art on a passing hero who destroys him.

In many such plays the villain challenges passers-by to an athletic match or similar contest. Athletics and competition also figure frequently in satyr plays with other types of subject such as Aeschylus’ _Theoroi_ or _Isthmiastae_, in which the satyrs run away from Dionysus and decide to become competitors in the Isthmian Games, and the (possibly Sophoclean) _Oeneus_ or _Schoeneus_, about an athletic contest for the hand of the protagonist’s daughter.

Another theme frequently associated with this typical situation – the ogre who molests passers-by – is that of abused hospitality. This is explicit in _Cyclops_ (cf. especially 299ff.), and probably in similar plays. But this theme of hospitality and its abuse also figured in satyr plays with other types of subject. In Sophocles’ _Inachus_, for instance, Hermes apparently first comes to Inachus’ kingdom disguised as a foreign stranger (he is described as a _karbanos aithos_, ‘swarthy barbarian’, _P.Oxy_. 2369 ii 26) and is received hospitably by Inachus. Then he transforms Inachus’ daughter Io into a cow, and Inachus and the satyrs, unaware of his benevolent motive, are naturally enraged: their indignation was probably all the greater because they thought he had abused hospitality. There may have been a similar disruption in Sophocles’ _Iambe_, a dramatization of the _Homeric Hymn to Demeter_, if the play contained the incident where the king and queen of Eleusis find Demeter baptizing their son on the fire and misconstrue her motive.

Again, many plays, such as _Cyclops_, about the defeat of wayfarer-molesters featured the theme of escape or rescue. Like Odysseus, the hero would fall into the clutches of the villain and destroy him in order to regain his freedom. In such plays the satyrs could always be introduced plausibly as slaves of the

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1 Some think the stranger is Zeus himself, but this is unlikely if the stranger appeared on-stage in the early scenes: the tragic poets were reluctant to represent Zeus as an on-stage character. On the other hand, if Inachus and the stranger did not meet on stage it is hard to imagine what could have filled the first 280 lines of the play.
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villain, to be released as part of the play's happy ending. This was presumably
the case, for instance, in Euripides' Sciron. The evidence of vase paintings
suggests that in Aeschylus' Circe they shared with Odysseus' crew a transforma-
tion into bestial shape and eventual release from it. Escape and rescue appeared
in many forms: in the plays of Aeschylus, for example, one may mention escape
from bestiality in Circe, from foreign lands in Proteus, from sexual bondage to
Silenus and the satyrs in Amymone and Dictyulci and the Suitors in Ostologoi,1
and from the Underworld in Sisyphus drapetes.

Usually, as in Cyclops, the satyrs have been forcibly separated from their
natural master Dionysus 'whose service is perfect freedom', and are allowed to
return to him at the end of the play. Aeschylus, however, sometimes reverses
the normal process: in Isthmiastae the satyrs (temporarily — we do not know
how the play ends) seek escape from Dionysus, and in Amymone and Dictyulci
they are themselves the villains who threaten the heroine.

Another frequent narrative element is magic and the miraculous. Taking, for
example, the satyr plays of Sophocles, one may note the appearance of the
Cretan 'robot' Talus in Daedalus; the possible baptism by fire in Iambe; a
magical transformation into a cow in Inachus; Hermes' magical growth in Ichneutae;
the cure of Orion's blindness in Cedalion; a magic philtre conferring immortality
in Kophoi, etc. Similarly, witches such as Circe and Medea, wizards such
as Proteus, and numerous monsters and similar fabulous beings appeared as
characters in satyr plays.

All these satyric stereotypes may also be seen as aspects of a more general
tendency to employ elements reminiscent of Märchen and fairy tales. For many
of the narrative elements found in satyr plays can be related to familiar folklore
motifs. Thus, to name a few, Aeschylus' Sphinx features a riddle contest, and
his Proteus a 'shape-shifter'; Sophocles' Iambe and Kophoi present variants of the
theme of loss of immortality through folly. Euripides' Cyclops, like other satyr
plays about the destruction of wayfarer-molesting villains, dramatizes a variant
of the 'Jack the Giant-Killer' situation: the defeat of an ogre by a plucky and
clever hero.

Also, in Cyclops, which seems representative of plays of its type, the original
viewpoint of a fairy tale is preserved intact. Odysseus is a simple hero, and
Polyphemus a simple villain. The quality of Odysseus' revenge is scarcely
called into question, either in respect of its brutality or its fraudulent nature.
Even the gruesomeness of Polyphemus' cannibalism and of his blinding is
presented with the comic exaggeration of a fairy tale, intended to evoke the
same pleasurable frisson of horror as children derive from such stories. This,
like the unreality conferred by the presence of the satyrs, keeps the play from

1 There is no real reason for doubting that Ostologoi was satyric, cf. Sutton (1974a) 118.

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having a distressing effect out of keeping with its function of providing comic relief.

Two other common characteristics of satyr plays may be noticed. The first is that many satyr plays are set either in the countryside or in exotically alien locales: Asia Minor, Egypt, Libya, etc. Second, almost by definition a satyr play must have a happy ending. In the few instances where the poet seems to have selected a plot that did not end happily, he must have adapted his material so as to minimize the unhappy aspects.

If tragedy affirms the existence of some kind of general world-order, so does the satyr play. Many satyr plays end with the defeat of villains of one kind or another, so that even if the satyr play is tolerant of the chorus’ shortcomings and of cleverness, it is scarcely an amoral genre. It holds a comic mirror up to tragedy, but at the deepest level it affirms its values. For all its humour, for instance, one should not forget that Cyclops is no less cautionary in intention than is its Homeric prototype.

Euripides’ Alcestis was presented in 438 B.C. instead of the usual satyr play, and a number of satyric stereotypes recur in this play: hospitality, rescue from bondage, use of folklore themes, drunken carousal and gluttony (for comical banqueting scenes were not uncommon in satyr plays, e.g. Sophocles’ Syndeipnon and Euripides’ Syleus), and the appearance of Heracles, a frequent satyric character. Also, familiar satyric elements are found in Euripides’ Iphigenia in Tauris and Helen: defeat of a villain, violation of hospitality, trickery (which is condoned rather than criticized), and exotic settings, and these are combined much as in Cyclops. The Euripidean romance was created by the introduction of satyr themes into the tragic performance. Indeed, since these plays resemble Alcestis in this respect, it is tempting to consider them prosatyr. This is especially true of Helen, since it seems to have parodied a tragedy in the same set, Andromeda, and since its treatment of Menelaus’ heroism has a distinctly comic flavour. The length of these plays, particularly of Helen, might be deemed an objection to this theory. But Alcestis is already substantially longer than any known satyr play, and in view of the length of Euripides’ later plays generally, this is probably not a fatal objection.

It is a striking fact that the typical subject matter and scenes of satyr plays are also those of the Odyssey: incidents involving the defeat of villains and ogres presented with the same simple, readily-identifiable polarization into good and evil; the theme of hospitality and its abuse, functioning, as in plays like Cyclops, as a litmus test for the identification of sympathetic and unsympathetic characters; use of cleverness and of a clever man as hero; situations of escape or rescue from actual or impending bondage; use of folktale narrative elements, magic and the miraculous, wonderful and terrible beings, and exotic settings to

1 Schmid-Stählin 1 3, 537 n. 5.

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create a highly romantic universe. The *Iliad* is essentially grimly realistic, and by contrast the *Odyssey* is romantic. Though it is not itself escapist in intent, it may be regarded, since it contains these elements, as the ultimate ancestor of all western literature of escape, romance, and fantasy. It is precisely these elements which are carried over into the satyr play.

The satyr play provides comic relief by allowing us to escape from the universe of tragedy, which is realistic in the same sense as that of the *Iliad*, into a colourful and fabulous world of boundless possibility. At the same time, since this is a palpable fantasy world, and since a happy ending is obligatory by the rules of the game, we may be excited by the predicaments of satyric characters without being moved or distressed. So besides being a romantic universe, this is an optimistic one. The satyr play thus presents a roseate vision of life counterbalancing that of tragedy.

Tragedy is also realistic in that it reproduces the moral ambiguities of life. The unending debate over the rights and wrongs of Antigone and Creon is witness to the fact that the universe of tragedy is not peopled by simple heroes and villains. In imitating the *Odyssey* by adopting a simple and readily comprehensible polarization of heroes and villains, often in starkly agonic terms, the satyr play offers relief from the necessity of confronting a complex universe. This contrast is posed dramatically in the instance of *Hecuba* and *Cyclops*. Polymestor and Polyphemus are similar ogres destroyed by their victims, who wreak their vengeance with particular savagery. In *Hecuba*, by such devices as the final prophecy and the creation of a measure of sympathy for Polymestor when he genuinely grieves over the murder of his children, Euripides adds a moral complication by casting doubt on the quality of Hecuba’s revenge, which in retrospect is made to seem barbaric and otiose. But in *Cyclops* a similar incident is recounted in the simple, unquestioning terms of a fairy tale. It is almost as if we view the same incident twice, through the eyes of an adult and a child. This release from the need to respond to complex moral issues must also have been experienced as a form of relief.

We have seen that clever men and tricksters are frequently cast as sympathetic central characters in satyr plays. Indeed, these are so common that the clever man, if anybody, may be characterized as the satyric hero. Again, this recalls the contrast between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, for the tragic hero is notoriously a linear descendant of Achilles, and this satyric hero is equally descended from Odysseus. Like Achilles, the tragic hero who attains greatness because of his heroic self-assertion is guided by exalted and rather forbidding standards. Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, however, is great for entirely different reasons: persistence, shrewdness, self-reliance, industry, adaptability, and similar ‘middle-class virtues’. After tragedy’s presentation of exceedingly uncommon, often great, individuals, the satyr play’s presentation of more ordinary virtues...
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may have been experienced by the audience as another form of relief. Moreover, the great problems posed by tragedy are genuine and genuinely terrifying, while the satyric hero is regularly confronted by nurseryroom monsters like Polyphemus who are mock-terrifying straw men to be sent down to routine and predictable defeat.

By 340 B.C. (cf. IG I1 22.2320) the dramatic festival of the Dionysia was re-organized, and satyr plays were thenceforth performed independently of tragedy. Thus they no longer served to provide comic relief after tragedy, and it is probably no coincidence that shortly after this date evidence appears for a new kind of satyr play, which retained the satyr chorus but gravitated into the orbit of contemporary comedy, abandoning mythological plots in favour of contemporary satire, and adopting the dramatic techniques and metres of comedy.

The two best known such plays are Python’s Agen and Lycophron’s Menedemus. Agen was written and produced at the behest of Alexander, to satirize and discredit his fallen minister Harpalus. It was probably produced in 324, when Harpalus was still alive and a potent threat to the internal security of Alexander’s empire; if so, this is an interesting example of the use of literature as political propaganda. Menedemus seems to have been a good-natured lampoon on the notorious frugality of this philosopher.

There is evidence for other such plays. Although Sositheus is best known as a reviver of the classical mythological satyr play, perhaps in response to the rise of bucolic poetry (cf. Dioscorides’ epigram Anth. Pal. 7.707), a satyr play ridiculing the philosopher Cleantzes is probably attested by Diogenes Laertius 7.173, and the Eupolidean metre of a fragment of Astydamas Minor’s Heracles satyricus quoted by Athenaeus suggests that it may have been a similar play.

Wilamowitz’s suggestion that Timocles’ Ikarioi satyroi was a satyr play rather than a Middle Comedy is nowadays unpopular, but Athenaeus 9.407d seems to say that Timocles the comic poet and Timocles the contemporary tragedian were one and the same, and there is nothing in this play’s fragments uncharacteristic of other late satyr plays. More conclusively, titles consisting of plural nouns and Satyroi are otherwise reserved for satyr plays; comedies with satyr choruses, such as Cratinus’ Dionysalexandros, received different types of title. Thus, if this was a satyr play, the common suggestion that Python invented this new kind of satyric drama must be wrong, for while Agen ridicules Harpalus for establishing a cult for his newly deceased mistress Pythionike, Ikarioi speaks of her as still living. Timocles, who was, in fact, virtually unique in writing both tragedies and comedies, and was quite possibly working at the time of the re-organization of the festival (his name appears on the inscription cited above), would be admirably situated to make this innovation.

1 Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1962) 4v 688f.; the most recent argument to the contrary is that of Constantinides (1969) 49–61.