

BOOK REVIEW

Satyr Play: The Evolution of Greek Comedy and Satyr Drama. By CARL A. SHAW. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xviii + 191. Hardcover, \$74.00. ISBN 978-0-19-995094-2.

Although comedy and satyr-drama were both produced at the City Dionysia and both were essentially comic genres, any interaction between them has largely been ignored. Dobrov, in fact, erected what he termed a “fire-wall” between these genres, concluding that “comedy appears to ignore the very existence of satyrs and satyr-plays” (253). In 2005 I showed that “comedy has satyrs too”, while Bakola has examined the relationship between Kratinos’ *Dionysalexandros* with its chorus of satyrs and the established genre of satyr-drama.¹ Shaw aims to “tear down that (fire)wall” by arguing that comedy and satyr-drama did interact with each other, and interact significantly, and while I fear that he may at times be overstating his case and seeking the influence of satyr-drama at every turn, he has established that we need to consider more seriously the inter-relation between these two humorous genres.

Chapter 1 contains a discussion of the ancient critical views about satyr-drama, observing that Plato and especially Aristotle view art as binary (serious v. mock epic, tragedy v. comedy, superior v. inferior). But satyric references in *Symposium* show that Plato sees more to drama than just that stark antithesis at 223c-d. For Shaw the final scene shows all the three genres represented: tragedy (Agathon), comedy (Aristophanes), satyr-drama (Sokrates).

In the second chapter Shaw turns to the origins of both genres, investigating especially what was there before each became an official part of the City Dionysia. His key term here is *komos*, which for Shaw lies behind dithyramb, satyr-play, and comedy. But although Comedy (*komoidia*) is *komos*-song, in Aristophanes the term *komos* occurs only four times and always of a non-comic revel; and, since on inscriptions *komoi* are the dithyrambs, of these three genres comedy has the least

¹ Dobrov, G. (2007). “Comedy and the Satyr Chorus”, *CW* 100: 251-65; Storey, I.C. (2005). “But Comedy has Satyrs too”, in G.W.M. Harrison (ed), *Satyr Drama: Tragedy at Play*. Swansea: 201-18; Bakola E. (2010). *Kratinos and the Art of Comedy*. Oxford: 81-112.

to do with *komoi*. So on the vase by the Hector-Painter with Marsyas leading Komoidia (102–104), I wonder if we should read the latter figure as “Revel-Song” and not “Comedy”. At times it was hard to follow what Shaw meant by “pre-comic” and “dithyramb *komos*-song”; the Venn diagram (33) did not help elucidate matters. To explain why *two* humorous genres arose, he argues that “satyr play was laughable *kômos*-song, but comedy was laughable *kômos*-song with a much broader range of possibilities” (78).

Shaw often proceeds on the assumption that similarity implies influence. In chapter 3 that some titles of Epicharmos’ comedies are the same as (or close to) those of Attic satyr-dramas suggests to him that not only was Epicharmos known at Athens, principally through contact with Aeschylus, but that his works influenced those at Athens. But this is rather like the “diffusion theory”, on which since the Egyptians and the Mayans both built pyramids, they must have a common source, i.e. Atlantis. I prefer the possibility of “parallel evolution”, and Pickard-Cambridge’s observation, “a common mythology and a similar social life” (57), still carries much weight.

Chapter 4, the core of the work, discusses the relationship between satyr-drama and comedy in the fifth century. This is where we possess the most evidence and where the vases present a wealth of material. One of the strong features of the book is the inclusion of useful visual evidence from all periods. Shaw does not discuss the ‘why’ of satyr-drama, but accepts the explanation of the *Suda* and Zenobios (79–81) that satyr-drama was aimed to rectify the fact that tragedy was coming to have “nothing to do with Dionysos”. I have always found this a suspiciously convenient explanation *post eventum*. Much of his discussion turns on *Alkestis*, where he defines the problem as not its content but the absence of satyrs (96). But was *Alkestis* the only such experiment with the fourth position, was it even the first? Shaw follows Marshall 2000 that *Alkestis* was responding to a phrase in the “Morychides decree” (ca. 439) which forbade *komoidein*.² The intent was to ban personal humour in comedy (*onomasti komoidein*), but it could mean “not to fool around”, and by eliminating the satyrs Euripides was exploiting that misunderstanding. This has always seemed a stretch to me and I prefer Sutton’s explanation (66) that by 438 satyr-drama had become dispensable—Shaw all but admits this on page 78—and that Euripides is experimenting with the fourth drama.

In chapter 6 Shaw demonstrates persuasively how later satyr-drama adopted features from conventional Old Comedy, such as parabasis-like addresses to the

² Marshall, C.W. (2000). “*Alkestis* and the Problem of Prosatyrical Drama”, *CJ*95: 229-38.

spectators, personal humour, and the use of complex metres, and plausibly gives the explanation (141–143) as the severing of satyr-drama from tragedy in the festival re-organization *ca.* 340.

A few minor points in passing. Sommerstein has offered an intriguing explanation of why Platonios has claimed (wrongly) Kratinos' *Odysseis* for Middle Comedy, which should be added to note 12 (108–109).³ The title cited for Astydamos' satyr-drama (133) should be *Herakles*, not *Hermes*. The reverse side of the Cleveland Dionysos (120) of the vase shows three followers of Dionysos: a young man with a thyrsus, a satyr, and a maenad with a tambourine. This makes the vase less directly related to dramatic performance. When satyrs appeared in comedy, did they wear the grotesque costume of Old Comedy or the more restrained outfits shown on the Pronomos Vase? In *Clouds* did Aristophanes possibly borrow the Silenos-mask from satyr-drama for Sokrates?

But these aside, I learned a great deal from what Shaw has amassed about satyr-drama and would readily recommend it to senior undergraduates and graduate students.

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³ *Talking about Laughter*. Oxford: 272–88.