

## BOOK REVIEW

*Greek Satyr Play: Five Studies*. By MARK GRIFFITH. Berkeley: California Classical Studies, 2015. Pp. xvi + 190. Paper, \$29.95. ISBN 978-1-939926-04-03.

Until recently, Mark Griffith's essays on the enigmatic and historically marginalized genre of satyr drama have been scattered in a range of journals and collections, but the articles and chapters gathered here amount to much more than the titular "Five Studies." Although they were produced for different venues and occasions, they develop naturally and cohesively, making the volume read as a monograph, even if it was not originally conceptualized as such. Various threads of arguments, ideas, theories, and methodologies weave in and out of each chapter, providing a surprisingly holistic and wholly interesting picture of satyr drama on both the micro and macro scales. The result is a volume of unparalleled value for anyone interested in the genre.

When Griffith began his work on satyr play in the 1990s, he was one of few scholars to recognize the genre's importance at the City Dionysia. Rather than simply viewing satyr drama as comic relief after tragedy or as a vestige of archaic ritual, he sees it as the culmination of the tragic experience. As Griffith notes, the volume's overarching argument is that "the formal and aesthetic characteristics of [satyr] plays, and hence their psycho-social dynamics and function, can be to some extent recovered and assessed, and that these operated in a distinctively complementary mode to those of the tragedies that accompanied them" (1). Griffith provides a fresh narrative for these ideas in his introduction, part of which treats the development of scholarship on satyr drama, but another that offers a personal account of his own scholarly development. Griffith reflects usefully on the various models and scholars that influenced him, and his frequent use of the first person makes the account especially compelling.

As the first chapter ("Slaves of Dionysus") makes clear, Griffith's earliest interest in satyr play focused on questions of the genre's social function. Although I have never been particularly comfortable with the word "function" when discussing art (preferring instead "effect"), Griffith's arguments are almost always persuasive. Even when he provides bold anthropological and psychological interpretations that reconstruct audience interpretation, his thoughtful analyses

and detailed readings make his complex theories convincing. Satyr plays do appear to offer (48–49) “a dialogically polarized world,” in which spectators have a split response. As he puts it, “We cannot be gods or heroes; and we should be ashamed to be satyrs: yet at some level we yearn to be both. So do we settle for what lies in between, the life of ordinary human citizens.”

As so often happens in this collection, the tail of chapter one leads directly into chapter two (“Satyrs, Citizens, and Self-Presentation”), a compelling study of the importance of “playing the satyric other” in the construction of Athenian identity. In addition to a valuable technical study of vocabulary, stylometrics, and colometry, Griffith offers a remarkably apt analogue for satyr drama’s split (high/low) dynamic: nineteenth-century American blackface minstrelsy. He moves well outside the comfort zone of most classicists, highlighting the varying levels of male citizen fantasy associated with both modes of performance, and illustrates his theory with clarity and aplomb.

In the remaining chapters, Griffith returns to an idea that he began to develop in chapter one, that satyr drama was a “romantic,” “middle-brow” genre. Griffith uses various philological methods, including counting compound words and examining tragic and satyric meters, to show that satyr play is on the higher end of the high/low spectrum. He also points out the difficulty for modern scholars to discern whether a fragment comes from tragedy or satyr play. He does not mention, though, that in the original performances, the satyr chorus would have ensured that spectators never mistook a tragedy for a satyr play or vice versa. This tragic-satyric firewall makes Griffith’s observations all the more fascinating, since it suggests that satyr drama was truly conceptualized as a third type of theatrical performance, despite being part of the tragic competition.

In “Sophocles’ Satyr Plays and the Language of Romance,” Griffith amasses compelling evidence (including an appendix of compound adjectives in tragedy, comedy, and satyr play) and offers sophisticated close readings to support his argument that satyr drama was a romantic genre, and he expands these ideas in the subsequent studies. In chapter five, he uses both sides of the famous Pronomos Vase to show that satyr play and tragedy need to be read “Face to Face.” But more significantly, he reveals that romance is the crucial theme on the vase. The lovers Dionysus and Ariadne are at the center, and the unnamed female presence beside them, Griffith demonstrates, is very likely the goddess of love, Aphrodite.

The final chapter, “Greek Middlebrow Drama,” presents Griffith’s most developed definition of romance, but he begins with an excellent overview of non-Athenian theater, an inspiring reminder that “Greek drama” was much more

than just tragedy and comedy. To support his point, he turns to satyr drama and shows that satyric performance was both “separate and in between.” This section delivers the best available reading of Demetrius’ often-invoked (and often-misrepresented) description of satyr drama as “playful tragedy.” In a style that is typical of Griffith, he closes by pushing his argument even further, with the persuasive proposal that satyr drama was an important model for the similarly romantic genre of Greek novel.

Griffith’s *Five Studies* balances formal, technical discussion with theoretical, social, and literary readings. He employs a range of evidence, presenting fascinating “hard” data at one point and fascinating cultural comparisons and theories at another. As the volume proceeds, Griffith refines and redefines his conceptions of the genre, as disparate ideas meld and develop to make this a crucial collection for all students of satyr play and all scholars of Greek drama.

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