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Aristophanes and the Satyr Chorus

The three genres of Athenian drama could share the same festival occasion. As different modalities of performance, however, tragedy, comedy and satyr-play remained aesthetically and thematically distinct. The poetics of tragedy and comedy have received much recent attention. Can we speak of a distinct satyric poetics? In this paper I explore the boundaries which set satyr-play apart from tragedy and comedy in terms of its intertextual and reflexive potential.

Recently Michael Kaimio and his colleagues at Helsinki University published an exhaustive survey of the intertextual and reflexive aspects of the satyr-play. We now have a solid basis for including the “third” genre in discussions of Greek drama and its metafictional poetics. There remains a curious asymmetry, however: Satyric drama (e.g., Cyclops 706-7) may make explicit reference to tragedy. Tragedy and comedy enjoy a well-known reciprocity on a number of levels. Comedy, however, appears as a rule to ignore the very existence of satyrs and satyr-play. As every rule begs to be tested, I challenge this reflexive asymmetry by looking at a passage that stands out as an exception, specifically, the Hauling or Anodos scene in Peace (289-360). In this sequence the chorus of Panhellenes extracts Eirene from her subterranean enclosure thereby reproducing a visual and thematic moment well attested in the evidence for satyr-play, namely, the discovery (“birth”) of Pandora and her extraction by a chorus of satyrs.

Before considering the satyric aspects of Aristophanes’ Anodos scene it is important to inspect the apparent “firewall,” in the realm of poetics and intertextuality that separates comedy and satyr-play. How does a contemporary dramatic genre appear to be beyond the ken of comedy? A specific way to approach this question is to ask when and why (if ever) the comic poets ever violated the apparent rule to concede that satyrs are, in fact, good to represent?

First I review all references to satyrs and satyric drama in the comic fragments and the extant plays. I then discuss the value of Aristophanes’ unique borrowing from satyr-play in terms of the particular sociopolitical program of Peace.