**Satyr play**

**Satyr plays** were an ancient Greek form of tragicomedy, similar in spirit to burlesque. They featured choruses of satyrs, were based on Greek mythology, and were rife with mock drunkenness, brazen sexuality (including phallic props), pranks, sight gags, and general merriment.

Satyric drama was one of the three varieties of Athenian drama, the other two being tragedy and comedy. It can be traced back to Pratinas of Phlius, circa 500 BC. After settling in Athens, he probably adapted the dithyramb, customary in his native home, with its chorus of satyrs, to complement the form of tragedy which had been recently invented in Athens. It met with approval and was further developed by his son Aristeas, by Choerilus, by Aeschylus, and others.

In the Athenian Dionysia, each playwright customarily entered four plays into the competition: three tragedies and one satyr play to be performed either at the end of the festival or between the second and third tragedies of a trilogy, as a spirited entertainment, a comic relief to break the oppression of hours of gloomy, fatalistic, formulaic tragedy. They were short, half the duration of a tragedy. The general theme of heaven, fate, and the gods affecting human affairs in the tragedies was carried through into the festivities of the chorus of satyrs and Sileni, companions of Dionysus.

**Origins**

The origins of performance culture and the emergence of the satyr play can be traced to ancient rural celebrations in honour of the god Dionysus. Rush Rehm argues that these inaugurated the "agricultural cycle of planting and harvesting" closely associated with Dionysus, who represented the embodiment of "a fundamental paradox inherent to the world, life-giving but potentially destructive." The dramatic festivities at the City Dionysia in Athens, similarly dedicated to Dionysus, required each playwright to submit three tragedies and a satyr play, which functioned as the last piece performed at the festival. The accurate emergence of the satyr play is debatable; however, Brockett argues that most evidence "credits Pratinas with having invented this form sometime before 501 BC", which is supported by P. E. Easterling's argument that by the 5th century the satyr play was considered an integral component of the tragike didaskalia. Brockett also suggests the possibility that the satyr play was the first form of drama from which both tragedy and comedy gradually emerged.

A.E. Haigh however maintains the fact that the satyr play is a survival from "the primitive period of Bacchic worship." Haigh lists several examples of recorded entries to the City Dionysia: thus, in 472 BC Aeschylus won the first prize with *Phineaus, Persae, Glauces* and the satyr play *Prometheus*. Among Euripides' entries, Haigh underlines *Theristae* (431 BC), *Sisyphus* (415 BC) and *Alcestis* which Euripides was allowed to present as a replacement of the traditional satyr play.

The mythological origins of the satyrs are closely linked to the advent of Dionysus into Hellenic culture. The satyrs and their female counterpart, the maenads, were followers of Dionysus, a "late-comer to Olympus and probably of Asiatic origin." According to Roger Lancelyn Green, the satyrs probably began as minor nature deities, while their designated leader Silenus originated as a water spirit, a maker of springs and fountains.
attendant to Dionysus when the satyrs joined the god’s following, and was subsequently proclaimed their father. The satyrs characterised themselves by amorality, excessive drinking and the breaking down of traditional values and barriers. Eric Csapo and Margaret C. Miller further argue that satyrs have a strong connection with music and dance and consider them to be “archetypal musicians and dancers,” thus linking them to Dionysiac processions and the origins of performance culture.

Structure and content

The material for a satyric drama, like that for a tragedy, was taken from an epic or mythology, and the action, which took place under an open sky, in a lonely wood, the haunt of the satyrs, had generally an element of tragedy; but the characteristic solemnity and stateliness of tragedy was somewhat diminished, without in any way impairing the splendour of the tragic costume and the dignity of the heroes introduced. The amusing effect of the play did not depend so much on the action itself, as was the case in comedy, but rather on the relation of the chorus to that action. That relation was in keeping with the wanton, saucy, and insolent, and at the same time cowardly, nature of the satyrs. The number of persons in the chorus is not known, although there were probably either twelve or fifteen, as in tragedy. In accordance with the popular notions about the satyrs, their costume consisted of the skin of a goat, deer, or panther, thrown over the naked body, and besides this a hideous mask and bristling hair. The dance of the chorus in the satyric drama was called sicinnis, and consisted of a fantastic kind of skipping and jumping.

The only satyr play to survive in its entirety is Euripides' Cyclops, based on Odysseus' encounter with the cyclops, Polyphemus, in Book 9 of the Odyssey. Aeschylus was noted for his satyr plays, the largest fragment of which to have survived being his Dictyulci (‘The Net Fishers’) in which the baby Perseus is washed up on the shore with his mother Danae and is found by Silenus and the satyrs. We also have large fragments of a satyr play of Sophocles called Ichneutae (‘The Trackers’), in which the satyrs are employed by Apollo to track down his stolen cattle, and discover the baby Hermes. Smaller fragments of other satyr plays exist, and the genre continued to be written and performed as late as the second century AD, though most have wholly vanished. Even a fragment of music survives from a satyr play. The Romans did not imitate this kind of drama in their literature, although, like the Greeks, they used to have merry after-pieces following their serious plays.
Costumes

A.E. Haigh writes extensively on costumes for the satyric drama. The chorus members all wore masks in accordance with Bacchic tradition.[17] The earliest reliable testimony is supplied by the Pandora Vase dating from the middle of the 5th century. On that vase, the satyrs are portrayed as half men and half goats, wearing goat’s horns on their heads, thus referring to the goat deities of the Doric type.[18]

A later representation can be seen on the Pronomos Vase, found in Naples. The goatish element has disappeared and the satyrs resemble the old Ionic Sileni who were horse deities. The performers are wearing horse tails and short pants with attached phallus, a symbol of Dionysiac worship.[19] Haigh claims that the Doric satyrs were the original performers in Attic tragedy and satiric drama, whereas the Ionic element was introduced at a later stage.[20]

Notes

[6] Haigh (1907, 16)
[7] Haigh (1907, 17)
[8] Lancelyn Green (1957, 9)
[9] Lancelyn Green (1957, 10)
[10] Lancelyn Green (1957, 10)
[11] Lancelyn Green (1957, 10)
[12] Csapo and Miller (2007, 21)
[14] Pausanias, Description of Greece 2.13.6
[17] Haigh (1907, 290)
[18] Haigh (1907, 293–294)
[19] Haigh (1907, 294)
[20] Haigh (1907, 294)

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**External links**
- The Ancient Library - Satyric Drama (http://www.ancientlibrary.com/seyffert/0562.html)
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