

Children in the dramatic tetralogies of the great Dionysia*

Niños en las tetralogías de las Grandes Dionisias

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1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that one of the typical themes in satyr drama was the bringing up and caring for divine or heroic infants.¹ As hybrid creatures who could be paradoxically described as infantile adults, satyrs themselves were also «figures of wisdom and learning», hence their role as caregivers.² As such, Silenus was

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¹ See, e.g., D. F. Sutton, *The Greek Satyr Play*, Meisenheim/Glan, Hain, 1980, p. 153; R. A. S. Seaford, *Cyclops of Euripides*, London, Bristol Classical Press, 1998 (or. ed. Oxford 1984), p. 38; A. Melero, «El drama satírico», in J. A. López Férez (ed.), *Historia de la literatura griega*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1988, p. 414, as well as «La dramaturgia del drama satírico», in E. García Novo & I. Rodríguez Alfageme (eds.), *Dramaturgia y puesta en escena en el teatro griego*, Madrid, Ediciones Clásicas, 1998, p. 216, and P. O'Sullivan & C. Collard, *Euripides Cyclops and Major Fragments of Greek Satyr Drama*, Oxford, Aris&Phillips, 2013, p. 38.

² See O'Sullivan & Collard, *op. cit.*, p. 38. See also S. Nelson, *Aristophanes and His Tragic Muse. Comedy, Tragedy and the Polis in 5th Century Athens*, Leiden & Boston, Brill, 2016, pp. 83-4.

traditionally recognized as *kourotrophos* of Dionysus,³ and apparently the satyrs literally played the role of nurses of baby gods and heroes in several plays.⁴

However, also tragedy –particularly, but not only, Euripidean tragedy– made a *topos* of the caring of heroic children in some of the most poignant episodes in which infantile characters were involved.⁵ We should bear in mind that it was tragedians who composed satyr dramas, in keeping with the highly specialized standards which characterize Athenian classical poetical praxis. As David Sansone accurately recalls, satyr plays «were composed, after all, as part of an entry in a competition for tragic playwrights and the prize the poets hoped to win was a prize for tragic composition.»⁶

Therefore, the contrast between the way child characters are displayed in both theatrical genres is striking and raises the question of how this contrast may be perceived by the audience.

2. Children in satyr drama

Amongst the satyr dramas which featured the nursing of heroic or divine baby boys we could list the following ones: *Diktyoulkoi*, *Lycurgus* and *Trophoi* (or *Dionysou Trophoi*) by Aeschylus;⁷ *Dion-*

³ See Th. H. Price, *Kourotrophos. Cults and Representations of the Greek Nursing Deities*. Leiden, Brill, 1978, p. 71, A. Melero, «El mito del drama satírico», *Fortunatae* 1 (1991), pp. 91-2, as well as G. González Ruiz & S. Porres Caballero, «Los sátiros o silenos», in A. Bernabé & J. Pérez de Tudela (eds.), *Seres híbridos en la mitología griega*, Madrid, Circulo de Bellas Artes, 2012, pp. 237 and 249.

⁴ According to O'Sullivan & Collard, *op. cit.*, p. 16, «the very meagre fragments of Aeschylus' *Nurses* (F 246 a-d) possibly featured a chorus of satyrs dressed as female nurses, and the same may be true of Sophocles' equally sparse *Little Dionysus* (F 171-2) and *Little Heracles* (F 223a-227).» See, also, Sansone, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

⁵ See, e.g., B. Deforge, «Les enfants tragiques», in D. Auger (ed.), *Enfants et enfances dans les mythologies*, Paris, Belles Lettres, 1995, pp. 105-21, and L. Romero Mariscal, «El niño en la tragedia griega», in J. M. García González & A. Pociña Pérez (eds.), *En Grecia y Roma: Las gentes y sus cosas*, Granada, Universidad de Granada, 2003, pp. 411-30.

⁶ D. Sansone, «The place of Satyr-Place in the Tragic Tetralogy», *Prometheus* 41 (2015), p. 6. According to I. Gallo, *Ricerche sul teatro greco*, Naples, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, p. 96, the satyr drama is a subgenre of Attic tragedy, from which it would have been derived.

⁷ We will focus on Aeschylus' *Diktyoulkoi* later; on Aeschylus' *Lycurgus*, which deals with the infancy of Dionysus, where the satyrs would play the role of his nurses as in *Trophoi*, see Sansone, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19; on Aeschylus' *Trophoi*, see

ysiskos, *Herakleiskos*, **Iambe*, *Ikhneutai*, and, perhaps, *Kedalion* by Sophocles;⁸ *Autolykos I* by Euripides;⁹ *Athamas* by Xenocles,¹⁰ and Timesitheos' *Zenos Gonai*.¹¹ For the sake of brevity, we will only focus on those plays whose fragments have been better and more extensively preserved, i.e. Aeschylus' *Diktyoulkoi* and Sophocles' *Ikhneutai*.

In Aeschylus' *Diktyoulkoi*, once Danae and her baby Perseus had been rescued from the sea by Diktys and the chorus of satyrs, mother and son were left alone on the shore while Diktys went away to fetch further help. The terrified woman was not exactly alone, however, since she was actually accompanied not only by the chorus of satyrs but also by their leader and father, Silenus.

As a character in a tragic play, Danae found herself in a state of predicament: on her own with a small child and devoid of help from a male defender. Moreover, she was accompanied by an old man (a theme recurrent in Euripides' tragedies),¹² although here

Melero, *op. cit.*, p. 97, Sutton, *op. cit.*, pp. 40, 151 and 153, as well as A. H. Sommerstein, *Aeschylus Fragments*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), London, Loeb, 2008, pp. 248-49.

⁸ We will focus on Sophocles' *Dionysiskos* and *Ikhneutai* later; on *Herakleiskos*, see S. Radt, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta. Vol. 4: Sophocles*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977, p. 230; on Sophocles' **Iambe*, see Sutton, *op. cit.*, pp. 43 and 153; on the possibility that *Kedalion* would deal with the infancy of Hephaistos, see Radt, *op. cit.*, pp. 312-13 and P. Voelke, *Un théâtre de la marge. Aspects figuratifs et configurationnels du drama satyrique dans l'Athènes classique*, Bari, Levante Editori, 2001, p. 69, n. 36 and p. 75, n. 51, though A. C. Pearson, *The Fragments of Sophocles*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1917, Vol. 2, p. 9 considered it «improbable.» Seaford, *op. cit.*, p. 38, based on Pearson, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 72, includes Sophocles' *Amphiaraos* as a satyr play which «may have contained satyric παιδοτροφία» but, despite the fact that Pearson tentatively relates this play to «the part taken by Amphiaraus in the events which led to the founding of the Nemean games», he does not exactly associate the play with the caring of heroic infants. Although the games were founded «in the honour of the death of the child Opheltes or Archemorus», we don't believe this particular detail of the myth would actually be apposite to the genre's dramatic concerns, which would more probably have dealt instead with the athletic competitions themselves, another typical theme in satyr dramas. See Sutton, *op. cit.*, p. 148. For a completely different plot, which had nothing to do with the Nemean games, see A. Olivieri, *apud* J. M. Lucas de Dios, *Sófocles: Fragmentos*, Madrid, Gredos, 1983, pp. 64-5.

⁹ See Melero, *op. cit.*, p. 94 and Voelke, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-2.

¹⁰ See Seaford, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹¹ See Seaford, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹² See M. Menu, «L'enfant chez Euripide: affectivité et dramaturgie», *Pallas* 38 (1992), p. 243.

the elder was not a weak supporter of the tragic heroine but, indeed, a lecherous fellow of whom she is really afraid. In addition to this, the chorus did not make for a sympathetic company either, since the satyrs looked as menacing as their father.

The child, however, was never really in danger at all. On the contrary, in order to gain Danae's confidence, Silenus approached the baby and addressed him as if he were his «honoured» nurse and talked to him with «tender sounds» (F 47a Radt, ll. 770-71).¹³ In keeping with his traditional role as caregiver of divine children, Silenus stretched out his nursing arms to the baby hero (ll. 806-07) and with wishful thinking offered himself as a foster father of Perseus, who would lead the pleasant and amusing life of satyrs in Silenus' imagination (ll. 808-20). The innocent child laughed at the sight of the bald head of Silenus and a sexual pun was intended here, probably made explicit in theatrical performance,¹⁴ so that any resemblance to a tragic situation was destroyed by such a stark and incongruous contrast. Apparently, Silenus insisted on the fact that the baby smiled or laughed at him (l. 792),¹⁵ and even employed the metaphorical term that we pervasively find in tragedy applied to children, *neossos*,¹⁶ yet now the 'chick' is not afraid and grasping at his mother's garments, but enjoying himself with the satyr's prop (l. 795).¹⁷ Suddenly the baby began to weep (l. 804) but Silenus comforted him and offered him his protection (ll. 806-07). The consummate *kourotrophos* even employed a childish language to win the baby's (and his mother's) heart.¹⁸

In Sophocles' *Ikhneutai*, the new-born god Hermes was attended by the nymph Kyllene due to the poor health of his mother after labour. Like Perseus, Hermes is a son of Zeus, who had sired

¹³ See Sommerstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-9, following Page. See, also, J. M. Lucas de Dios, *Esquilo. Fragmentos. Testimonios*, Madrid, Gredos, 2008, p. 285.

¹⁴ See, e.g., G. Zanetto & O. Pozzoli, *Eschilo, Sofocle, Euripide. Drammi Satireschi*, Milano, BUR, 2004, p. 201, n. 33 and C. A. Shaw, *Satyr Play. The Evolution of Greek Comedy and Satyr Drama*, Oxford, Oxford U. P., 2014, pp. 74-5.

¹⁵ We accept the reading proposed by Cantarella. See Sommerstein, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹⁶ See G. M. Sifakis, «Children in Greek Tragedy», *BICS* 26. 1 (1979), pp. 68, 72 and 77-8.

¹⁷ Likewise, Dionysos in Sophocles' *Dionysiskos* F 171 Radt. See Sommerstein, *op. cit.*, p. 51, n. 4, Shaw, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-4 and Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 118, n. 38.

¹⁸ See A. Melero, «La dicción satírica», *Fortunatae* 2 (1991), p. 183 and M. Griffith, *Greek Satyr Play. Five Studies*, Berkeley, California Classical Studies, 2015, p. 105.

him not from a mortal woman but from a nymph, Maia. Hermes is therefore a baby god who might otherwise have found himself in a difficult situation, with a suffering mother and hidden in a cave as the illegitimate child of a god who had fathered him at his jealous wife's back. However, the satyr drama turned a blind eye to the awkward position of the new-born god and highlighted his prodigious growing and miraculous portents instead (F 314 Radt, ll. 277-84), the first of which was inventing the lyre, with Kyllene then informing the satyrs that he took great pleasure in it (ll. 325-28).¹⁹

3. Children in tragedy

Contrary to Kyllene's astonishment and fear for the fast and wondrous growing of Hermes, both nurses and mothers in tragedy normally recall the pain and anguish that looking after children implies.²⁰ Tragedy focuses on human efforts to cope with necessity, and stresses the weakness and deep dependence of children on their mortal parents in order to grow and flourish. No promising future is envisaged for children in tragedy. On the contrary, they have to face the perils of becoming orphans or, worse still, of their own impending and untimely death.

Children in Greek tragedy never laugh and hardly ever smile, and when they do so, the incongruity between this poignant situation and the smiling of the children is actually in no way related with their innocence and ignorance of 'props' but with their fate, as they are doomed to die.²¹ While baby gods and heroes are portrayed in satyr plays with a joyful view regarding the inexorable fulfilment of their prospective lives, children in tragedy are mourned for the future which they will not be able to see accomplished either in matrimony or in war.²² Furthermore, tragic children are inextricably entangled in the rhetoric of pathos which their kin employ: in the thick of the messy world of adults, they are spoken to and even speak in the same terms as heroes and

¹⁹ See O'Sullivan & Collard, *op. cit.*, p. 369, n. 59.

²⁰ Orestes' nurse, Kilissa, is particularly memorable in this regard (A. *Cho.* 743-63). For a general collection and analysis of passages, see Romero Mariscal, *op. cit.*, pp. 421-23.

²¹ See, *e.g.*, Eur. *Med.* 1041.

²² See Menu, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

heroines do,²³ whereas children in satyr plays are talked to in the cute childish way that is supposed to be proper for them.²⁴

4. Dramatic tetralogies and children

If satyr plays were indeed performed at the end of the dramatic tetralogies, then they would certainly provide a relief from the anguish arisen by the previous tragic depictions of children's characters. For an audience to whom high infant mortality was a fact of life and the tending of children so strenuous,²⁵ the fantasy of the dreamlike growth of divine babies would definitely lend itself to a happy ending of the show. The spectacle of small children who laugh and are bound to become strong and courageous heroes would not only alleviate the tension from the preceding tragic displays but also counterbalance their pessimistic view with a more light-hearted and optimistic one.

Notwithstanding, if, as David Sansone has tentatively but plausibly contended, «the widespread conviction that satyr-plays were performed after the tragedies at the Dionysia in fifth-century Athens has no direct support in the ancient evidence» and therefore it is perhaps safer «to assume that satyr-plays were rarely, if ever, performed last»,²⁶ then the poignancy of tragedy would have been even starker and would have summoned from the audience all their mature strength to accept its bleak message. Seidensticker was right when he described the interplay between satyr drama and tragedy (and even comedy) as one of mutual intensification.²⁷ The former would have celebrated Dionysos in a farcical and amusing way, but would not have impinged on the latter, which also paid tribute to the god in a more solemn and unflinching way.²⁸

²³ See Sifakis, *op. cit.*, pp. 70 and 73 as well as Menu, *op. cit.* p. 245.

²⁴ See Meleró, *op. cit.*, pp. 182 and 185.

²⁵ R. Garland, *The Greek Way of Life. From Conception to Old Age*. Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1990, pp. 106-08.

²⁶ Sansone, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-8. See also *ibid.*, p. 30. According to Gallo, *op. cit.*, pp. 95 and 97-8, satyr dramas would have originally been performed in isolation, although they would be staged soon afterwards before tragedies, as a sort of prelude; nevertheless, this praxis was changed from the time of Aeschylus onwards and satyr plays were subsequently moved to the fourth assuaging position.

²⁷ B. Seidensticker, «Dithyramb, Comedy and Satyr Play», in J. Gregory (ed.), *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, Malden, MA and Oxford, Blackwell, 2005, pp. 49-53.

²⁸ We also concur with Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 134 when confronting the view of satyr drama as «nothing more than light relief, anti-tragedy, or burlesque tragedy, rather than a dramatic form with its own distinct and positive appeal.»

5. Conclusions

There is currently no evidence about whether real children attended theatrical performances, apart from the young orphans of citizens dead in battle, who were presented with suits of armour and invited to sit in the front-row seats of the theatre.²⁹ Dana Ferrin Sutton conjectured that they actually might have, meaning that tragic poets would have composed their satyr plays «with a special concern for the children in the audience,» who would have taken «special delight and interest in seeing children represented on stage.»³⁰ Nevertheless, Sutton's 'tempting supposition' is biased by the idea that satyr plays were performed last in dramatic tetralogies.

That being said, it is true that children must have been used in the dramatic tetralogies of the Great Dionysia with a special eye on the audience, in order to please them, but also to impress and even shock them. Their pervasive appearance in both types of drama speaks volumes of their theatrical success, in spite of, or indeed because of, their mutual and contrasting differences. In this regard, perhaps we should not overlook the fact that Euripides seems to be the playwright who, as far as we know, made the least use of the typical theme of the caring for children in his satyr plays, whereas on the contrary he was particularly fond of involving children in his tragic plots. As a master of pathos and human domestic affairs, he appears to be reluctant to counterbalance the appalling show of children as victims of adults' loathing and vengeance. Even in *Alcestis*, supposedly a pro-satyr drama, he cannot restrain his melodramatic streak and puts Alcestis' children mourning for their mother on stage. Finally, the devastating effect of the ending of tragedies such as *Medea* or *Trojan Women* could eventually verge on the unbearable, with providing no consolations to take home at the end of the day.

²⁹ They only received this privilege on becoming *epheboi*. See A. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968², p. 268, and E. Csapo & W. J. Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1995, p. 108 as well as T 35A.

³⁰ D. F. Sutton, «Satyr play and children in the audience», *Prudentia* 13. 2 (1981), pp. 73-4.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyse the contrast between the ways children are represented in both satyr drama and tragedy, taking into account the sequence in which plays of both genres appeared within the dramatic tetralogies presented to the Great Dionysia.

KEYWORDS: Children, satyr drama, tragedy.

RESUMEN

En este trabajo analizamos el distinto tratamiento que los personajes infantiles reciben en los diferentes géneros teatrales de tragedia y drama satírico a la luz de su representación en los concursos dramáticos de las Grandes Dionisias.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Niños, drama satírico, tragedia.