

ARACHNE'S WEAVING: DISENTANGLING THE AMBIGUITIES OF IRRELIGIOUS REPRESENTATIONS OF THE DIVINE

Carole M. Cusack

Arachne, a princess of Lydian Colophon - famed for its purple dye - was so skilled in the art of weaving that Athene herself could not compete with her. Shown a cloth into which Arachne had woven illustrations of Olympian love affairs, the goddess... tore it up in a cold vengeful rage... Athene turned her into a spider - the insect she hates most - and the rope into a cobweb, up which Arachne climbed to safety.¹

REPRESENTING THE DIVINE

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the appropriate attitude to the divine is one of awe and respect. But is it? Contemporary world religions (with the notable exception of Hinduism) tend to fit this model. However, there are significant exceptions throughout history which envisage quite different ways of approaching the divine, including irreverence and paradox, apparently allowing the overthrow of the divinely ordered hierarchy. This paper examines the satyr-plays of ancient Greece, and their context, the festival of the Great Dionysia, as an example of a 'carnival' religious occasion. The concept of carnival, as developed by Bakhtin, refers to

a special state which breaks life's trivial routine and turns it upsidedown... [where] all participants in... carnival know perfectly well that they turn the serious insideout only for a moment, in order to resume the norm.²

THE GREAT DIONYSIA

The Great Dionysia, in honour of the god Dionysos, took place in Elaphebolion, the ninth month of the Greek year, and was a public event in which the whole city of Athens participated. The Chief Archon was responsible for running the festival, which was a *Leitourgia* - a 'legally enforceable, necessary public service'.³ Its religious significance was considerable, as Dionysos was patron of wine and ecstasy, inspiration and conviviality, and was identified in a mystery cult with the grain deity Sabazius and the resurrected deity Zagreus.⁴ The performance of plays was integral to the festival (playwrights competing submitted tragedies, comedies and a satyr play). The plays were brief (Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

is long at 1,673 lines), and formed part of an entertainment which included processions, the wearing of gorgeous robes, sacrifices of cows and bulls, ceremonial carrying of models of erect phalluses, a communal beef supper, wine, and the release of prisoners on bail.⁵

Excess characterises the above description. Beef was generally eaten only rarely, law and order were usually scrupulously upheld, and Athenian society was customarily prudish in matters of sex. However, the religious nature of the festival is unmistakable, and the excesses were with the permission of the gods. Xenophanes described the *symposium* (a drinking party) as beginning with libations and prayers to the gods, with the altar prominent in the dining room. The gods share in, or at least bless, the entertainment.⁶ With the Great Dionysia, the phalluses were closely associated with the cult of Dionysos, and before the festival proper began rituals involving a very old wooden cult statue of the god were held.⁷ The character of Dionysos must be analysed before proceeding further.

THE CHARACTER OF DIONYSOS

Despite myths which portray Dionysos as a latecomer to the society of Olympus, there is evidence for his cult being ancient. He is usually depicted wearing a long saffron dress, which, while it was not a woman's garment, creates an atmosphere of sexual ambivalence. Jameson observes that:

with jewellery in hair worn long [the dress] is part of the old-fashioned style of aristocratic Athenians of the archaic period. Other sixth-century depictions of male gods show a similar if simpler costume. Dionysus, however, continues to wear it long after it has been abandoned by the others. The saffron-dyed robe (*krokotos*) he is described as wearing in comedy has unmistakable feminine connotations.⁸

However, this effeminate image is deceptive, as the companions of the god, the satyrs and the maenads, personify untrammelled male sexuality and liberated female sexuality.

Maenads and satyrs recall the 'carnival' *topos*, as they are experiments with alterity.⁹ The Greek woman led a secluded life in the 'women's quarters' of the house. Her sexual experience was limited to her husband. Yet Euripides' *Bacchae* tells of women initiates of Dionysos who break out of their restrictions to revel freely on the hillsides. Lissarrague wryly comments that:

ancients and moderns have been at pains to assure us that the expeditions of the women were entirely chaste. It would certainly be surprising if Greek men, in view of their

tight control of their women, had allowed them to go to the mountains with the expectation of sexual adventures. And yet it is not without significance that women indulging in wine at night and freed, however briefly, of social constraints were imagined as engaged in sex, as Pentheus repeatedly implies in the *Bacchae*.¹⁰

The maenads are divine beings, initiates of the god, whose activities are perpetually those which the women engaged in only rarely.

To some extent the counterpart of the maenad, the satyr is a hybrid, part man and part hooved animal (horse, donkey, or goat). They are depicted on vases as in perpetual motion, unable to control themselves. There is great emphasis on their phalluses (usually shown erect) and their sexual appetites. Rape, voyeurism and masturbation are, along with drinking and flute-playing, almost the only activities the satyrs indulge in.¹¹ Visual evidence for satyrs and maenads is largely gleaned from Attic vase painting.

SATYR-PLAYS AND RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

So what are 'satyr plays' doing in a religious festival? How can their lascivious and socially unacceptable behaviour be incorporated into an occasion which is both religious and concerned with the creation of social solidarity? It is important here to separate ourselves from cultural prejudices. As Easterling notes:

there are two main areas of difficulty; first, differing notions of the division between the sacred and secular, and second, the tendency on our part, as twentieth century readers, to monotheistic or rationalistic prejudice, which may lead us to distort the Greek material and even to wonder how seriously the Greeks themselves took their religion.¹²

These tendencies must be avoided. It is customary to assume that monotheism is somehow more 'logical' than polytheism, and that cultures where the divine is manifest in forms which are vastly different from the partly anthropomorphised but essentially ungendered, spiritual, non-embodied, undivided, ethical deity of the monotheistic traditions are somehow less spiritually developed, less religiously serious. That satyrs and maenads are divine beings and themselves part of the spiritual hierarchy would be incomprehensible to many world views. Ingvild Gilhus reminds us that 'reality' is constituted in a multiplicity of ways, and with differing meanings for the same signals: 'the god in animal form, for the [Greeks is] a part of their religious universe... From the Christian point of view the

confrontation between the religious and the zoological sphere makes the religious sphere ridiculous.¹³

THE RELIGIOUS ORIGINS OF DRAMA

Theories abound as to the origin of drama. Francis Cornford located the origin of comedy in the agricultural festivals of the early Greeks. The religious nature of drama is often overlooked, but 'even as late as the Middle Ages, formal plays, as distinct from mere rustic pantomimes or charades) were customarily presented in church, on significant calendar dates, rather than on any secular stage'.¹⁴ Tragedy has been more difficult to classify than comedy, as it is less obviously connected with agriculture or the everyday lives of people. One theory sees the origin of tragedy in Dionysiac fertility ritual. The people are mourning for a dead god, and joyfully celebrate at his resurrection. Tragedy contains the *agon* (literally 'contest', but giving us the English word 'agony') of the dying god, and the satyr-drama which follows supplies the joy of his resurrection.¹⁵

Current scholarship sees satyr-drama as developing from the same core concept as tragedy, both in form and content.¹⁶ This is speculative, as contemporary references to satyr-plays are as rare as the plays themselves: 'one ancient writer... speaks of satyr-drama as being 'tragedy-at-play' or 'joking tragedy'. But this is hardly helpful, since it may mean either that satyr-drama was mock tragedy, or tragedy *buffa*, or pure farce, or simply a sportive treatment of the subject matter of tragedy.'¹⁷ Sleaford sees the satyr drama as preserving the ancient Dionysiac qualities of drama, with its core cast of satyrs.

THE CYCLOPS

Only one satyr-play survives complete, the *Cyclops* of Euripides. Apart from this, there is a substantial fragment of Sophocles' *Ichneutae* (*The Trackers*). Therefore, it is difficult to generalise about the genre. Euripides, the son of Mnesarchus (or Mnesarchides) was born between 485 and 480 BCE. He presented his first tragedies at the Dionysia of 455 and won first prize in 441. He won four times, then left Athens in 408 for the court of King Archelaus of Macedon, and died there late in 407 or early 406. He wrote about eighty-eight plays of which nineteen under his name survive (although *Rhesus* may not be his).¹⁸

Cyclops cannot be dated as matching one of the extant tragedies, but it does not seem to be conclusively proven that there was a relationship between the subject matter of the satyr-play with the tragic trilogy which preceded it. The plot of *Cyclops* is a conflation of the Polyphemus episode from the ninth book of the *Odyssey* with the story of the capture of Dionysus by Lydian pirates.¹⁹ The play opens with Silenus lamenting that the satyrs sought to escape their servitude to Dionysos, since they have ended up in a far worse position, as the slaves of the Cyclops Polyphemus. Odysseus appears and a ribald conversation ensues, in which Odysseus gives Silenus some wine, and the curious satyrs ask him about Helen of Troy. Coryphaeus says,

when you took that woman, did you all take turns and bang her? She liked variety in men, the fickle bitch! Why, the sight of a man with embroidered pants and a golden chain so fluttered her, she left Menelaus, a fine little man.²⁰

It is important to note that Euripides is quite faithful to Homer in his plot, and that ancient Greece was a civilisation where the distinction between the sacred and the secular was not so clear-cut as we are accustomed to. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* functioned as sacred books, in that they spoke of the intervention of the gods in the history of the Greeks; therefore the *Cyclops* is irreverent in the extreme. The plot does not become more elevated after this beginning: the Cyclops appears and Silenus (red-faced and with a headache from the wine) denounces Odysseus to him, as a villain. The participation of Polyphemus in the divine hierarchy is demonstrated by his exclamation upon hearing that Odysseus and his companions had been eating his food: 'Didn't they know that I am a god? Didn't they know that my ancestors were gods?'²¹

Odysseus attempts to persuade Polyphemus that Silenus and his satyr companions gave them the food, and that he should not eat them. This attempt fails and Odysseus, with the aid of the satyr Coryphaeus, resolves to put out the Cyclops' one eye. The ribaldry of the play reaches a climax when the drunken and well-fed Cyclops (he has eaten some of Odysseus' crew) resolves to rape Silenus. The play concludes with the blinded Polyphemus learning the identity of his assailant, and the satyrs leaving their old master to enlist as Odysseus' crew.

CONCLUSION

On the surface, *Cyclops* is an irreverent and witty lampoon on some of the minor divine beings of ancient Greece. It depicts those beings as drunk, lecherous and deceitful. A play is the perfect congruence between religion, literature and the arts, consisting as it does of a text, a performance which has visual and auditory components, and subject matter which is religious. It is here that the connection with Arachne's weaving becomes apparent. She wove a picture of the gods at their worst, drunken and fornicating. She was punished by Athena for her impiety and irreverence. But in reality, trying to draw a hard and fast line between pious and impious representations of the divine is not always useful. Bourdieu has demonstrated that

the very act of drawing a map, insofar as it implies an established and unarguable regularity and system, falsifies important uncertainties, smooths out the wrinkles, and regularises all matters that are still to be negotiated between actors in the social conglomerate.²²

One 'important uncertainty' in the society of ancient Greece was the liberty afforded by religious festivals such as the Great Dionysia. Yet it must not be supposed that the ability to make fun of the gods meant any lack of belief in them or in the social structures which existed with their approval. In the Old Attic Comedy, as Easterling comments,

paradoxically even the presiding deity Dionysus could be made fun of in a play, as he is in *Frogs*, where he is an outrageously stupid and cowardly buffoon, but this fact can easily be misinterpreted if it is considered in isolation. Dionysus is after all the 'hero', and it is he who wields the ultimate power in the play, he who chooses to bring Aeschylus, not Euripides, back to the world of men.²³

The ability to see the gods in this light does not nullify their majesty, or their awe-inspiring qualities. The Dionysos of Euripides' *Bacchae* is very far from that of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, yet they *are* the same god, seen through different lenses, for different purposes. The positive qualities of the 'carnival' allow people to turn their world upsidedown for a few exhilarating days, but the result of this transformation is the reinforcement of the day-to-day forms of that world when the return to 'normality' is achieved.

REFERENCES

- 1 Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1960), p. 98. The primary sources references for the Arachne story are Ovid, *Metamorphoses* vi 1-145 and Virgil, *Georgics* iv 246.
- 2 Aron Gurevitch, 'On the Nature of the Comic in the *Elder Edda*', *Medlaeval Scandinavia*, 9, p. 133.
- 3 Paul Cartledge, 'The Greek Religious Festivals', in P. E. Easterling and J. V. Muir, eds, *Greek Religion and Society*, (Cambridge University Press), p. 124.
- 4 Graves, pp. 103-04.
- 5 Cartledge, pp. 120-21.
- 6 P. E. Easterling, 'Greek Poetry and Greek Religion', in *ibid.*, p. 40.
- 7 Martin Robertson, 'Greek Art and Religion' in Easterling and Muir, eds, observes that 'the cult-statue in the temple was the most centrally religious use of sculpture', p. 164.
- 8 Michael Jameson, 'The Asexuality of Dionysus', in Thomas H. Carpenter and Christopher A. Faraone, eds, *Masks of Dionysus*, (London and Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 50.
- 9 Francois Lissarrague, 'On the Wildness of Satyrs', in Carpenter and Faraone, eds, p. 220.
- 10 Francois Lissarrague, 'The Sexual Life of Satyrs' in David Halperin, John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin, eds, *Before Sexuality* (Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 60.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 12 Easterling, *op cit.*, in Easterling and Muir, eds., p. 34.
- 13 Ingvild S. Gilhus, 'Religion, Laughter and the Ludicrous', *Religion* 21 (1991), p. 260.
- 14 Francis MacDonald Cornford, in Theodor H. Gaster, ed, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (Gloucester, 1968), p. xiv.
- 15 Richard Lattimore and David Grene, eds, *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, Vol. III, (University of Chicago Press, 1955).
- 16 Richard Sleaford, *Euripides' Cyclops* (Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 16.
- 17 William Arrowsmith, 'Introduction to *Cyclops*', in Lattimore and Grene, p. 225.
- 18 Lattimore and Grene, p. v.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 226.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 244.
- 22 John J. Winkler, 'Laying Down the Law: the Oversight of Men's Sexual Behaviour In Classical Athens', in Halperin, Winkler and Zeitlin, eds, p. 174. Winkler is discussing P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (R. Nice, trans. Cambridge, 1977), pps 2, 37 and 105.
- 23 Easterling, p. 36.