

Of centaurs and satyrs: Stesichorus' *Geryoneis* and satyr drama

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Abstract. This paper examines the archaic Greek lyric poet Stesichorus and in particular his *Geryoneis*, a poem that deals with Heracles' journey to the distant west to steal the cattle of the three-headed monster Geryon, and that is probably the best known of his works. Its fame among classicists is owed chiefly to the manuscript P.Oxy. 2617. This precious find, published in 1967, contains substantial sections of a mythological narrative describing Heracles' mission to acquire the cattle belonging to Geryon, a three-headed monster living at the world's end. The work, the only full-scale account of the labour in ancient poetry, describes how Heracles travels in the Sun's golden bowl to the island of Erytheia near the river Tartessus; how Geryon is implored first by a friend, then by his own mother, not to fight the mighty warrior who has come to take his animals; how Heracles strikes Geryon's first head with an arrow, before (we presume — this section is not preserved) closing to finish off the other two at close quarters; and how Heracles returns to Greece with the cattle. A surprising aspect of the poem is its inclusion (probably towards its end, which described Heracles' return from the west) of the myth of Pholus, a centaur in Arcadia who entertains Heracles with wine of exceptional quality, but whose hospitality leads to disaster when the other centaurs, drawn by the scent of the wine, begin a brawl in which Pholus is killed. The parallels between centaurs and satyrs — both animal–human hybrids with tendencies towards passion and violence — point towards an intriguing parallel with Greek drama, which at the Dionysia festival at Athens in the fifth century saw three tragedies followed by a satyr play; here, just as apparently in Stesichorus' poem, elevated poetry has as a codicil something altogether more earthy in character.

Keywords: Stesichorus, papyri, Pholus, centaurs, satyrs, satyr-play.

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О кентаврах и сатирах: «ГерIONEИДА» Стесихора и сатирическая драма

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена древнегреческому поэту архаической эпохи, Стесихору, и в особенности его поэме *ГерIONEИДЕ*, повествовавшей о путешествии Геракла на Крайний Запад для того, чтобы угнать стада трехглавого чудовища Гериона. Неожиданным образом в поэме (предположительно, ближе к ее концу, где описывалось возвращение Геракла в Грецию со стадами) также упоминался миф о Фоле, аркадском кентавре, который угостил Геракла совершенно необыкновенным вином. Однако проявленное им гостеприимство привело к трагедии, когда остальные кентавры, привлеченные запахом вина, затеяли драку, в которой погиб сам хозяин пиршества Фол. В начале статьи дается обзор свидетельств об этой части поэмы: свидетельство Афиней о визите Геракла к кентавру Фолу и об исключительной величине кубка, который тот ему преподнес (Athen. 11, 499a–b = Stesichorus fr. 22a [Finglass 2014b]), сопоставляется с пересказом мифа у Аполлодора и с папирусными фрагментами P.Оху. 2617, fr. 46 и P.Оху. 2617, fr. 17 (Stesichorus fr. 23 и 24 [Finglass 2014b], соответственно). На основании того, что позволяют реконструировать свидетельства, высказывается осторожное предположение, что расположение данного эпизода ближе к концу поэмы, равно как и его содержание и общий этос, а также ассоциация между кентаврами и сатирами (и те и другие представляют собой гибрид между человеком и животным и славятся неумеренностью страстей и склонностью к насилию), находит захватывающую параллель в практике драматических постановок в Афинах классического периода: на Дионисиях в V в. до н. э. стандартно представлялись три трагедии, за которыми следовала значительно более легкая по содержанию и общей тональности сатирическая драма. В случае драматических постановок, равно как и в случае «ГерIONEИДЫ» Стесихора, дополнение к возвышенной трагической поэзии носило значительно более приземленный характер: в обоих случаях за счет контраста достигался эффект эмоциональной разрядки после серьезности основной части повествования.

Ключевые слова: Стесихор, папирусы, Фол, кентавры, сатиры, сатирическая драма.

The *Geryoneis* is probably the best known of the works by the archaic Greek poet Stesichorus of Himera. Its fame among classicists is owed chiefly to the manuscript P.Oxy. 2617. This precious find, published in 1967, contains substantial sections of a mythological narrative describing Heracles' mission to acquire the cattle belonging to Geryon, a three-headed monster living at the world's end.¹ The work, the only full-scale account of the labour in ancient poetry, describes how Heracles travels in the Sun's golden bowl to the island of Erytheia near the river Tartessus; how Geryon is implored first by a friend, then by his own mother, not to fight the mighty warrior who has come to take his animals; how Heracles strikes Geryon's first head with an arrow, before (we presume — this section is not preserved) closing to finish off the other two at close quarters; and how Heracles returns to Greece with the cattle.

One curious aspect of Stesichorus' *Geryoneis* is the inclusion within its narrative of Heracles' encounter with the centaur Pholus at Pholoë in Arcadia. In the late second or early third century AD, Athenaeus, the last person who we can say with reasonable confidence was able to read a text of at least some of Stesichorus' poems, records the following about the *Geryoneis*:

- (1) Στισίχορος δὲ τὸ παρὰ Φόλωι τῷ Κενταύρῳ ποτήριον κύφιον
 δέπας καλεῖ ἐν ἴσῳ τῷ κυφοειδέσ· λέγει δ' ἐπὶ τοῦ Ἡρακλέους·
 κύφιον δὲ λαβὼν δέπας ἔμμετρον ὡς
 τριλάγνον
 πί' ἐπιχώμενος, τό ρά οἱ παρέθη-
 κε Φόλος κέρασα

'Stesichorus calls the cup in the house of Pholus the centaur a *skyphion depas*, which means that it has the appearance of a *skyphos*. He says with reference to Heracles: "and taking as his cup a vat of three flagons measure which Pholus had mixed and set before him, he put it to his lips and drank"' (Stesichorus

¹ The papyrus is published in [Lobel 1967]. The latest edition of the fragments can be found in Stesichorus frs. 5–83 Finglass; for a commentary on those fragments see [Davies, Finglass 2014: 230–298], and for further discussion of the poem see [Curtis 2011; Finglass 2012; 2018; 2021; 2022].

fr. 22a [Finglass 2014b] = Ath. 11, 499ab = 3, 100, 21–25 [Kaibel 1887–1890]).

- (2) τὸ δὲ ἐν Γηρυονηΐδι Στησιχόρου
ἔμμετρον ὡς
τριλάγνον

τὴν τῶν τριῶν γενῶν ἀμφιβολίαν ἔχει.

‘But as for the phrase in Stesichorus’ *Geryoneis* “of three flagons measure” it is ambiguous as to which of the three genders the word belongs to’ (Stesichorus fr. 22b [Finglass 2014b] = Ath. 11, 499e = 3, 102, 8–9 [Kaibel 1887–1890]).

Thanks to Athenaeus, then, we know that Heracles encountered a centaur called Pholus during the course of the *Geryoneis*. Later prose sources, Apollodorus and Diodorus, describe what this involved.² Pholus gives hospitality to Heracles when he comes to his home in Pholoë, opening a particular jar of wine for his guest, said by Apollodorus to belong to the centaurs in common, but by Diodorus to have been given to a centaur four generations previously by Dionysus, with orders that it should not be opened until Heracles’ arrival. The smell of the wine attracts other centaurs, who attack with rocks and fire. Although Heracles drives them away with firebrands and arrows, the incident results in two unfortunate casualties: arrows dipped in the hydra’s poison kill both the wise centaur Chiron, and Pholus himself, who takes an arrow out of a dead centaur and accidentally lets it fall on his foot. These narratives come from centuries after Stesichorus’ time, but the evidence of art, which depicts both the conflict with the centaurs and the act of hospitality which brought it about, shows that the story was indeed known in the archaic period, at least from the seventh century onwards [Davies, Finglass 2014: 238–239].

As noted above, this episode is attested for the *Geryoneis* by means of Athenaeus’ testimony. No fragment of the papyrus can with certainty be attributed to the story, but two are at least consistent with it, as follows:

² Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.5.4, D. S. 4.12.3–8. For the myth see further [Davies, Finglass 2014: 238–239].

(3) υυ υυ] [
 υυ υυ υυ υ] αδικω[
 υυ υυ υυ υ] μενο[

←————→

5 υυ υυ υυ υυ] [
 υυ υυ υυ]· [
 υυ υυ υυ υυ] [] [

twenty-three verses missing

31 οδα. [υυ υυ υυ
 τιν οκ[υυ υυ
 δώκε[(υ) υυ | υυ υυ
 ένθεν [(υ) υυ υυ υυ
 35 οἶνον [υ | υυ υυ υυ πευ–
 καλίμο[ιτιν
 ... [] [

‘... unjust... / ... / he gave... / from there... / wine... / fir...’
 (Stesichorus fr. 23 [Finglass 2014b] = P.Oxy. 2617 fr. 46).

(4) υυ υυ] κωὺ φατὰ θ. [
 υυ υυ] κάματος καὶ ἀ|μ[
 υ υ]
 υυ υυ] φύλοπις ἀργαλέα [
 5 υυ υυ υυ].
 υυ υυ υ] μάχαι τ’ ἀνδρο[κ–
 τασίαι τ(ε) υ υ δι]απρυσίαι· [

←————→

υυ υυ υ] ος ἵππων [ant.
 ‘... and unspeakable... / ... toil and... / ... woeful strife... / ... battles,
 and man-slayings, and piercing... / ... of horses’ (Stesichorus fr. 24
 [Finglass 2014b] = P.Oxy. 2617 fr. 17).

The content of these fragments (wine and fir in the former, battles and horses in the latter) would fit the Pholus episode, and so may come from it. But even if they do not, there is no reason to disbelieve Athenaeus’ claim

that the tale formed part of Stesichorus' poem; the fragments of the papyrus cover only a portion of that poem, which was at least 1,300 lines long.³ Usually the episode is associated with Heracles' hunt for the Erymanthian Boar, which takes place in Arcadia and so provides a more explicable context for the encounter; but Stesichorus was free to incorporate it within his account of a different labour.

Athenaeus unfortunately does not tell us whether the encounter with Pholus took place on Heracles' way out to Erytheia or on the way back. Either option is possible, but the latter seems more likely, since Heracles' journey out to Geryon's homeland already has a lot of mythological events to include, such as Heracles' obtaining from the Sun his magic bowl, in which to travel to Erytheia. If the episode took place on his outward journey, it would have had to occur almost at the start of the work, with Heracles setting out from Argos and travelling through Arcadia; it would be odd to open a poem dedicated to the story of Geryon by describing a meeting that had no bearing on that encounter and could scarcely be thought preparatory to it. West argues that the encounter took place on Heracles' way out; "surely not on his way back, when he had a herd of cattle to manage" [West 1979 :142, with n. 73; 2011–2013, 2: 273 n. 73; Lloyd 2007: 383, fn. 73]. But narratives of Heracles' return encompassed many different events despite the presence of the cattle [Finglass 2021]; those animals could be conveniently forgotten by the poet when it suited his narrative to do so. It seems unlikely that the episode was narrated in a speech as an event in the past, which would be the only other possibility; the Athenaeus fragment refers to Heracles in the third person, so he could not be the speaker, and it is hard to see who else could have told the tale, to whom (not Heracles, who did not need to be informed of his own exploits), and for what reason.

Trying to understand the overall shape and purpose of a text that has survived in fragments is never easy; the analysis above, and the suggestion to follow, should be treated with the caution that they deserve. Let us assume, then, that my hypothesis that the Pholus episode took place during

³ We know this thanks to a stichometric marginal symbol in one fragment; see [Davies, Finglass 2014: on fr. 25 Finglass].

Heracles' return journey, not on his way out to Erytheia, is correct. My contention is that if this hypothesis is true, the role played by the Pholus episode in Stesichorus' poem is to some extent comparable to that of satyr-play in the dramatic tetralogies of fifth-century Athens, which were made up of three tragedies followed by a satyr drama. In the remainder of this chapter I briefly attempt to justify that view.

Centaurus are not satyrs, of course. Satyrs are typically cowardly, for example, whereas centaurs are bellicose [Padgett 2003: 3]. In contrast to satyrs, "centaurs... are virtually never shown in a state of sexual arousal, so strong was the aesthetic and ethical prejudice in favor of the horse's nobility and quasi-heroic status" [Griffith 2006a: 193, fn. 27].⁴ Nobility, not a concept ever associated with satyrs, could be predicated of centaurs such as the wise Chiron or the hospitable Pholus, even if the majority of centaurs were not so depicted.⁵ Yet despite these differences, the two species are in many ways comparable; as Padgett puts it, "closely related but occupying different conceptual realms, centaurs and satyrs are seldom considered together, and yet it may be that the one cannot be understood without the other." [Padgett 2003: viii]. Satyrs were originally equine creatures, a mixture or melding of human and horse; centaurs too are obviously a combination of horse and man, though unlike satyrs their animal and human natures were cleanly divided into separate sections [Padgett 2003: 4].⁶ Just as the centaurs in the archaic hexameter poem *Kaminos* "appear as potential wreckers of human constructions",⁷ so too

⁴ Cf. [Griffith 2006b: 326]: "donkeys in art are more often than not represented it-hyphalically (as are satyrs — but, remarkably, not centaurs, despite their notoriously hybridic behavior in myth), as a signifier of their 'low' and uncontrolled nature."

⁵ Cf. [Padgett 2003: viii]: "Half horse and half man, centaurs stand — like humanity itself — with legs in two worlds. Wild and libidinous, like Nessos, who assaulted the wife of Herakles, centaurs also could be noble and wise, like Cheiron, the teacher of Achilles, Jason, and Asklepios. Their bifurcated form perfectly symbolizes the fundamentally ambivalent nature of the human being: part beast, part angel."

⁶ For fantastical equids in general, see [Griffith 2006a: 193, fn. 27].

⁷ Hes. fr. 302, 17–20 [Merkelbach, West 1967]; thus [West 2007: 293], who makes the comparison with the satyrs of drama.

satyrs in drama engage in trickery and frustrate human enterprises. Both kinds of creature “travelled in groups and were known for unbridled desire and an intolerance for wine... satyrs too had horses’ tails, and were often depicted in art carrying women off in postures very like those of... raping centaurs.”⁸ Given these similarities, it seems fitting that according to Apollodorus, Silenos, father of the satyrs, was also the father of the centaur Pholus:⁹ a telling detail in the context of this argument.

So towards its end Stesichorus’ *Geryoneis* contains an episode involving centaurs, creatures (we may safely presume) not previously involved in the poem’s narrative, just as tragic tetralogies culminated with an episode involving satyrs, a closely-related type of creature, who would have been similarly out of place in the tragedies that preceded them. As we have seen, it is unusual to find the Pholus episode in the *Geryoneis* at all, associated as it normally is with Heracles’ hunt for the Erymanthian Boar. But such a mixing-up of Heracleian mythology can be paralleled, as it happens, in satyr-play, since in Euripides’ *Syleus* Heracles is made the slave not of Omphale as per usual, but of the ogre who gives the play its name. Moreover, the very ethos of Heracles’ encounter with Pholus is readily comparable to what we find in satyr-play, a genre which provided a framework “in which the supremacy of the Olympians... is reasserted, the transgressor punished, and Greek values such as hospitality and friendship are upheld” [O’Sullivan, Collard 2013: 28–29]; the same is likely to have been true of the Pholus episode in Stesichorus’ *Geryoneis*.

There is more to make us think of satyr-play when we consider Stesichorus’ centaurs, even in the little that survives of his treatment of the story. The fragment attested in Athenaeus’ quotation emphasizes wine-drinking, and in particular the astonishing size of the cup employed by Heracles, which is called “a vat of three flagons measure”: this latter detail suggests the theme of gluttony and drunkenness, typical of satyr-play, as well as the comic potential of Heracles, a frequent figure in that genre,

⁸ [duBois 1982: 31]; cf. [O’Sullivan, Collard 2013: 33–34], who offer many examples of satyrs’ bibulousness. For the comparison see further [Kirk 1970: 154, 156; Osborne 2009: 9–11].

⁹ Apollod. 2, 5, 4.

featuring in Euripides' *Syleus* and Ion's *Omphale*, for instance, and also in the prosatyr *Alcestis*, where his appetite features prominently (747–772). The Pholus episode is not wholly comical, of course; unless Stesichorus' account differed radically from the summaries offered by later authors, significant and probably sympathetic individuals died during its course, and in the note in my commentary on the Athenaeus fragment, I wrote “a [comical] tone would be unlikely here, when conflict and tragedy are imminent.” [Davies, Finglass 2014: 291]. Today that note seems to me too serious. The picture of Heracles imbibing fine wine from a massive vessel seems at least light-hearted. Moreover, in drama the Pholus episode was treated in comic rather than tragic terms. So in the fifth century Epicharmus wrote a play on the subject,¹⁰ as Aristophanes may have done;¹¹ the fourth-century tragedian Chaeremon wrote a *Centaur*, ‘an extraordinary and inventive polymetric satyr play’ [Shaw 2014: 130; see further, 130–133], and whereas several comedies have that title,¹² some of which are likely to have dealt with the Pholus myth, no tragedies do. The deaths in the story evidently did not inhibit comical or satirical treatment of the myth; and although that does not prove that Stesichorus handled it in that way too, it at least shows that such a treatment was possible, which is consistent with what we have already tentatively inferred from the fragment preserved by Athenaeus.

If these hints of similarities are not mere shadows, then just as Greek audiences of the fifth century encountered the high drama of tragedy followed, as a codicil, by the lower events of satyr-play, so too the Greeks of the sixth century encountered the high tragedy of Heracles' clash with a profoundly sympathetic Geryon only to see the same hero in a different kind of context, a different mood, in the Pholus episode at the end of the poem.¹³ If the hypothesis that the Pholus episode took place during

¹⁰ Epicharm. fr. 66 [PCG] Ἡρακλῆς ὁ πὰρ Φόλοι.

¹¹ Ar. fr. 278–88 [PCG] Δράματα ἢ Κένταυρος.

¹² Cf. T. Günther *apud* [Krumeich *et al.* 1999: 581, with fn. 1].

¹³ Cf. [Finglass 2014a: 38]: “The central part played by monsters — Geryon, Cerberus, Scylla, Pholus, and so on — in his work is something quite different from what we find in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, where such figures play a circumscribed role.”

Heracles' return journey, not his outward one, is correct, the structure of Stesichorus' *Geryoneis* thus provides an intriguing archaic parallel for what would become a cardinal feature of classical drama. That is not to say that Stesichorus influenced the development of this feature of the tragic tetralogy, as he certainly did influence other aspects of fifth-century tragedy.¹⁴ Rather, we may think in terms of parallel developments in closely associated media, both aimed at providing, by means of a contrast, an emotional release after the high seriousness of the main part of a work of literature. Unless a complete text of this fragmentary poem comes to light, we will never be sure about the function of the Pholus episode; but perhaps just enough remains for us to appreciate what can be gained from seeing Stesichorus' *Geryoneis* through satyric eyes.

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¹⁴ For the debt owed by Greek tragedy to Stesichorus see [Swift 2015; Finglass 2018].

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