

Sara Forsdyke, *Slaves Tell Tales and Other Episodes in the Politics of Popular Culture in Ancient Greece*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011. Pp. xiii + 275. 11 Figures. ISBN 978-0-691-14005-6. Hardback \$39.50.

This is a captivating book, presenting a different approach to a subject which has slowly penetrated the study of ancient Greece, namely the popular or informal culture. Sara Forsdyke sets out to “to understand the ways the ordinary farmers, craftsmen, and slaves in ancient Greece made sense of their world and their place in it (3).” Since popular forms of culture are now largely lost and need to be extracted from texts written by the elite, F. attempts to excavate their traces and signs with the aid of historical and anthropological studies of popular culture in pre-modern Europe, in the antebellum South, and in contemporary Malaysia.

Admittedly, this reviewer approached this book with apprehension; not a few recent books claim to use a comparative approach to study ancient Greek and Roman societies; they dutifully state all the caveats, but then seem to forget them and at best leave the readers to figure out for themselves what is similar or different in the compared societies. It was refreshing to discover that F.’s is a genuine comparative study, using material from other cultures judiciously to show how similar indeed were the ways peasants and slaves in both ancient Greece and other periods and places articulated their discontent and negotiated with the elite for better conditions.

The first chapter, “Introduction” (3–33), presents the book’s subject and lays out its arguments and methodology. Against the prevalent belief that formal institutions were the primary locus of politics F. aims to show that forms of popular culture – such as festival revelry, oral storytelling, and spontaneous collective punishment of social offenders – were central aspects of ancient politics. F. proposes to reveal ancient Greek popular culture by drawing on comparative material, by peeling off from the writing of the elites the layers of ideological bias, and by analyzing literary genres clearly related to popular non-literary forms (such as iambic poetry, comedy, satire, and the novel) and that draw material from popular forms (such as folktales, fables and proverbs). F. rightly emphasizes the hybrid nature of elite and non-elite cultures.

Although relying on comparative material, F. does not lose sight of the differences. In her sketch of the economic, social, and political aspects of ancient Greece she rightly emphasizes the similarities in the worldview of ancient and pre-modern peasants, while pointing out the blurry lines demarcating slaves and citizens in everyday life in Greece. Two historical events in which slaves and ordinary citizens fought together against the wealthy oligarchic landowners serve F. to show that slaves were able to organize themselves and were motivated not only by personal interest, but by politics (26–7). Here, however, the historian who reports these incidents (Thucydides) may have reflected the ideology of his pro-democratic sources. F. rightly notes that although women’s legal status in ancient Greece was inferior to men’s, they filled an important role in cult and participated in the social and political life of the polis. Still, I missed a discussion of the possibility of free women citizens’ cooperation or solidarity with non-citizen and slave women, the way she discusses this theme among men. Although evidence of this for women is even scantier than for men, this is a theme worth exploring.

Following the Introduction, F. divides her discussion into two parts (“Discourses” and “Practices”), each of two chapters. Chapter 2, “Slaves Tell Tales: The Culture of Subordinate Groups in Ancient Greece” (37–89), interprets the third-century BCE story, ascribed in Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistai* to Nymphodorus of Syracuse, of the Drimakos, the leader of runaway slaves in Chios, as an articulated fantasy of “slaves on top” and the hero-cult established for him after his death by the Chian citizens as a physical and symbolic site of mediating tensions between slaves and masters. The story of the fugitive slave who has the upper hand is seen as part of the tradition of folktales and fables about the human trickster or, more precisely, the bandit whose image as an ideal leader served the purposes of both slaves and elites. Drimakos’ hero-cult is construed as an enactment of the reversal of status relations, hence as belonging to communal rituals of role reversal (or the World Upside Down) such as the Greek Kronia and the Roman Saturnalia. From this viewpoint perhaps the festival in Kydonia in Crete fits better here than in chapter 4, where F. uses it as an example of festival revelry involving physical abuse (126); on that occasion *klerotai* (helot-like slaves) took control of the city and were allowed to flog any citizen who dared enter it.

F. points out that the Drimakos story is told in Athenaeus as an example of the corrupting effect of chattel slavery on the Roman society. She interprets it as “a product of cultural negotiation through which masters and subordinate groups worked out a *modus vivendi* (77).” This is an attractive solution to the apparent discrepancies in the story (a hero slave who comes to an agreement with the citizens and is worshipped by both parties). Yet it might also be asked what purposes this story served for the Chians who told it to Nymphodorus, and whether Athenaeus adapted it to his purposes.

Chapter 3, “Pigs, Asses, and Swine: Obscenity and the Popular Imagination in Ancient Sicyon” (90–113), focuses on the figure of Cleisthenes, the tyrant of Sicyon. F. argues that Herodotus’ account of the tyrant’s reforms (5.67–9), namely his attempt to expel the cult of the Argive hero Adrastus and his change of the Sicyonian tribes’ names to those of barnyard animals, is a satirical inversion of the historical facts. Here she follows Bakhtin’s conception of folk humor: images of the grotesque body, obscenity, and the humiliation of the elite and the institutions. F. suggests that Herodotus derived his version from later anti-tyrannical traditions, and that popular fifth-century traditions assigned obscene meanings to the tribes’ names and attributed them to the archaic tyrant.

But since Herodotus’ version of the Sicyonian Cleisthenes’ reforms is a brief digression from his account of the reforms of the grandson, the Athenian Cleisthenes, what does this say about his attitude to the latter, whom he presents as imitating the former? Moreover, F. interprets the story of Cleisthenes’ trickery in replacing Adrastus’ cult by that of the Theban Melanippus as a moral tale illustrating the wickedness of kings or tyrants. But it may well have started as a story approving the clever trickster Cleisthenes who got the upper hand in his struggle for power, and later reversed by the anti-tyrannical tradition. Aristotle’s report (*Pol.* 1315b15) that Cleisthenes’ family ruled for one hundred years, which F. correctly interprets as a sign that the family was broadly accepted (99), may also indicate that the story started as a positive version (or even inversion) of Cleisthenes’ reforms, something perhaps on the lines of the stories about the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus’ tricking the Athenians into accepting his rule (Herodotus 1.59–60). These stories too may have begun as folktales reflecting the pro-Peisistratid

tradition, evident in the *Ath. Pol.* 14–16, where it is also said that Peisistratus' reign was likened to that of Kronos (mentioned by F. on p. 193n52 but in a different context).

Chapter 4, “Revelry and Riot in Ancient Megara: Democratic Disorder or Ritual Reversal?” (117–43), which opens the second part of the book, associates Plutarch's stories of outrageous behavior of the poor in sixth-century B.C. Megara with rituals of social inversion that sometimes turns into riot. According to F., Plutarch, as well as Aristotle (1302b28–32), linked these upheavals to Megara's early regime which they misrepresented as democratic. With the aid of social anthropologists and cultural historians, and analyzing examples from ancient Greece, F. shows how rituals of hospitality can explain the background to Plutarch's stories: these ritual forms were a mechanism whereby the poor indicated their discontent and regulated their relations with the rich. She concludes that “the drive of the rich to increase their profits and of the poor to secure their well-being was an ongoing process that was more or less a continuous feature of social life in pre-modern agrarian societies” (143). As much as I agree with F.'s reading of the sources, it must be noted that we know next to nothing about early Megara, and there is no proof that its regime in the archaic period was not democratic.

In Chapter 5, “Street Theater and Popular Justice in Ancient Greece” (144–70), F. argues that popular, or “informal” justice in classical Greece was frequently used alongside “official”, or “formal” forms of punishment and that the Greeks made much more flexible use of the various modes of social control than is recognized. Moreover, as F. rightly stresses, the boundary between these two categories was vague. Through these rituals of popular justice, which took the form of street theater in that they were performed before and needed an audience (comprising male citizens, women, and slaves), the masses asserted their role in the community and reduced elite members to their own level.

In the “Conclusion” (173–8) F. summarizes her arguments and emphasizes her conclusion that the “living” forms of popular culture – fantasies of magical abundance, rituals of reversal, fables and tales – were vital to the ways through which ordinary Greeks and their slaves made sense of the world and resisted domination.

The book is beautifully produced, offering plates which illustrate the text. I noticed but few typos. In sum, F.'s book is an original and insightful reading of the Greek historical texts, even if some of her arguments are open to objections. But any disagreement should not detract from this worthy contribution to the history of Greek culture and politics.

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