
This is a book with not only a polemical but also an avowedly reactionary agenda. Its aim is to reclaim the Bacchae from the critical theories of (post)modernity, and to reinstate an Aristotelian account of the play’s specificities of action and character. Radke sets herself against virtually all distinctively modern approaches to the work (see 318–19 for a notably uncompromising, as well as somewhat patronising, formulation), including those informed by psychoanalysis, anthroplogy, and structuralism. But her chief target is a group of readings whose principles are metatheatrical or metafictional. These are readings which, according to R., are committed to a concept of meaning as both performative and open, and which go beyond the particular tragic configuration of Bacchae to generate a meta-theory of tragedy, a theory embedded in a sceptical metaphysics of all human experience as quasi-theatrical ‘illusion’. R.’s own Aristotelian model of tragedy, by contrast, discovers in the Bacchae both concreteness and singleness of dramatic meaning – a meaning grounded in the pity-and-fear arousing properties of the actions and sufferings of Pentheus, not in the supposed polarities and contradictions of the Dionysiac spirit. Against the grain of nineteenth- and twentieth-century approaches to the Bacchae, R. maintains that the work is not essentially about the nature of Dionysus himself, but the vehicle of a darkly irrational worldview, but a closely focussed study in the disastrously yet intelligibly flawed judgements of a young Theban king who displays an overwhelming ‘Kontrollzwang’ when faced with a god he is incapable of recognising.

The book’s arguments involve a constant dialectic between the positive and negative sides of R.’s position. This leads, however, to a rather awkward, disjointed structure: there are only two main chapters (one over two hundred pages long), but the text is divided into a circuitous chain of sections and subsections (many more than the table of contents indicates), with excurses and long notes inserted into the body of the text, as well as footnotes that sometimes run to 750 words. Despite the length of the volume, no sequential or continuous reading of the play is attempted. Instead, R. zigzags from one part of the work to another, returning to the same passages as many as three or four times in different sections of the book. There is an inordinate amount of repetition (something that the series’ three editors might have seen fit to curb). The style and tone are relentlessly didactic throughout.

The book’s main merit lies in the rigorously questioning scrutiny which it brings to bear on the (often unstated) presuppositions of ‘modern’ readings of the Bacchae. This is particularly true of chapter III (256–315), where some influential ideas about Dionysus as theatrical director/actor, Pentheus as actor/spectator, and the ‘palace wonders’ scene as a piece of theatrical fiction, are effectively probed and unpicked. R. is justified in claiming that, in their more extreme forms at least, such readings impoverish the work, reducing it to a ‘surface’ on which notions of illusion and reality produce flickering impressions, while failing to come to terms with the full details of the dramatic fabric. Individual points in
R.’s critique remain contestable: I am unconvinced, for instance, that lines 912 and 924 purport to warn Pentheus of the dangers awaiting him (and what does R. imply by calling this, twice, the ‘primary’ meaning of the lines?), rather than conveying something more oblique and religiously charged. But on the whole R. succeeds in this chapter, and elsewhere too, in making a substantial dent in a major movement in recent criticism of the Bacchae.

In this connection it is worth mentioning that there is an interesting excursus earlier in the book (174–80) on the theory that the actor playing Dionysus was expected to wear a ‘smiling’ mask. The textual basis of this view (in images of Dionysiac laughter at lines 439 and 1021) is shown to be insufficient to uphold the theory; the lines in question have contextually powerful force in their own right. But R.’s restriction of that force to ‘indirect interpretations’ of the god, and her desire to eliminate any element of ambiguity from them, are unsatisfactory: they do not do justice to the play’s larger themes of laughter, and they are symptomatic of a reductiveness to which I shall shortly return. More far-reaching is an appendix on the theatrum mundi trope (324–40); indeed, I found this the most compelling part of the entire book. Despite a weak linguistic argument that the idea of ‘illusion’ can refer only to the status of individually perceptible objects (327), R. achieves here a searching analysis of the intellectual ancestry and implications of theatrum mundi motifs: she elucidates their reliance on a radically sceptical dichotomy between reality and illusion; she distinguishes between theatre as (supposedly) illusionistic appearance and as non-illusionistic fiction; and she builds up a robust case that an antithesis between reality and illusion provides no general key to the interpretation of Greek tragedy.

But if this monograph successfully drives home some of its negative theses, one does not have to be a devotee of either metatheatre or any other sect in what R. regards as (post)modernity’s ‘liquefaction’ of thought-structures to feel that the overall logic of her enterprise is nonetheless intellectually constricting. Too often, her method of argument depends on boiling things down to reductive, either-or alternatives, and thereby excluding complexity and nuance (often deliberately so: see below).

This is true, in part, of her more sweeping characterisations of modern critical theories themselves. R. is strongly inclined (e.g. 8–13) to assimilate these approaches to a single model of ‘performative’ (visually rather than textually orientated) meaning, and also to trace this model back to essentially ‘structuralist’ roots. This involves some specific distortions: the work of Goldhill, for example, contrary to the impression given by R. (12 with n. 31), is itself conceived in opposition to certain kinds of performance criticism; equally, there are sharp differences between some types of performance criticism and committedly metatheatrical models of drama. Again, when contending that the Bacchae invites an actively discerning, Aristotelian pity for Pentheus, not a ‘modern’ conception of empathetic identification with the character, R. aligns the ideas of sympathy and identification in a way which disregards attempts (including mine) precisely to separate sympathy from identification, and which also, I should add, stays conspicuously silent about the problems which the evidence of both Gorgias and Plato pose for her ancient/modern dichotomy in the psychology of pity. All in all, I sometimes missed a fully discriminating account of divergences between modern schools of thought, as well as a sufficiently alert sense of the intricate relationships between modern and ancient conceptual categories.

What’s more, it is ironic, given her critique of other people’s intellectual polarities, that R. depends so much on her own disjunction between ‘literary’
(reading-based) and ‘theatrical’ (performance-orientated) approaches to the Bacchae (or any other Greek tragedy). Why should this be a fundamental dichotomy at all? For one thing, there is nothing in Aristotle which requires this stance (a point obscured by the curtness of R.’s brief comment, 29). Whatever else one makes of the Poetics’ remarks on reading and seeing plays, Aristotle need not be taken to espouse a hermeneutic disjunction between reading and performance. For so self-conscious and fastidious a critic, R. never explains exactly where her concept of the ‘literary’, with its entailment of the concrete and specific (e.g. 116, 133), comes from, or why it is so authoritative for a Greek poetic tradition which did not itself conceptualise ‘the literary’. Furthermore, R. employs her dichotomy in a way which tends to flatten out the resources of poetic meaning. She takes the literary to involve a textual specificity which a (good) ‘reader’ – even where that person is in fact a spectator in the theatre – must construe not only concretely but also rather positivistically (as the penultimate paragraph on 118 clearly illustrates). Such a posture is bluntly prescriptive; it cannot in itself dissolve major disagreements of interpretation. R. also asserts that if/because a Greek tragedy was designed to receive a single performance (though she ignores historical factors which complicate this standard hypothesis), no author would want his work to contain much polyvalence or complexity (20). This is a muddled argument: first, because it question-beggingly equates complexity with the risk of confusion or disorientation, rather than with, say, a source of dramatic richness and resonance; secondly, because without explanation it assumes that the difference between a single and repeated experience of a ‘literary’ work has cognitively inescapable implications. R.’s attempt to limit the meanings of a Greek tragedy by reference to the material conditions in which it was (first) received is not only a priori (as well as, arguably, a variant on the ‘intentional fallacy’); it would, if its logic were followed through, imperil her own enterprise of uncovering an inherently textual specificity of meaning in the Bacchae.

For all her readiness to dissect others’ presuppositions, then, R.’s own critical premises are often schematically or rigidly formulated. This leads, moreover, to a marked one-sidedness in her interpretation of particular components of the text. One can see this with her treatment of two crucial moments in the play: 850–3, where Dionysus anticipates inflicting a ‘light-headed madness’ on Pentheus, and 810ff, where Pentheus eagerly accepts Dionysus’s invitation to watch the maenads in the mountains. R. justifiably wants to avoid a reading that subjects Pentheus to an external determinism. But to hold that position she suppresses the dramatic expression of psychological complexity. In the first case, R. argues that what is involved is ‘only’ an intensification of something in Pentheus’s own character, though she also blurs matters, and seems to equivocate (not for the only time), by denying that it is ‘absolutely’ external (144–6). But she ignores the emphatic language of line 816, thereby silencing the intimation of a force that will work through Pentheus’s mind without being entirely the product of that mind. Similarly, in discussing 810ff R. legitimately tries to avoid a sharp polarisation between rationality and irrationality (79–91), but she pushes herself into a corner where Pentheus’s passionate desire to observe the maenads is exclusively equated with his wish to control the situation yet avoid its dangers (247–55). The uncanniness and aura of hidden depths dramatised at this turning-point, whose power

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1 I have recently offered a historically comparative perspective on this issue, in: Aristotelianism and Anti-aristotelianism in Attitudes to Theatre. In E. Theodorakopoulos (ed.), Attitudes to Theatre from Plato to Milton, Bari 2004, 57–75.
is hardly an invention of psychoanalytic readings, are sacrificed by the unnecessarily narrow terms in which R. seeks to preserve the consistency of Pentheus’s character.

Both the strengths and weaknesses of R.’s book appear in her treatment of Dionysus. She boldly challenges what has become an unquestioned modern consensus about Dionysus as a god of inherently fluid plurality and ‘contradiction’: some of the intellectual contours of this consensus, from Nietzsche onwards, are well analysed (95–114). She also has some persuasive things to say about differences between Dionysus and the chorus in the Bacchae (136–73), objecting to the use of the chorus as ‘objective’ testimony to the god’s nature and reading their songs as subjective responses to the situation in which they find themselves. But these features of R.’s case are undermined by an ultimately dogmatic account of what Dionysus ‘really’ stands for. Appealing to the sharply contrasting phases of maenadic behaviour described in the two messenger speeches, as well as the prima facie self-controlled manner of Dionysus himself during much of the play, R. argues that only the creative, harmoniously joyful half of the picture of the god’s followers represents the authentically Dionysiac, while lapses into destructive mania are an aberrant excess (169–70) for which humans themselves are «die eigentliche causa efficiens» (194). This amounts to a refusal to accept the play’s depiction of the Dionysiac in its problematic and incompletely decipherable totality. R.’s position here is arbitrary; she gives no reason why one half of the picture should be privileged over the other (and therefore why one could not, with equal validity, reverse her argument). She allows herself to talk repeatedly of ‘what is actually intrinsic to Dionysus’ («was tatsächlich für Dionysos wesentlich ist», 181); at the same time she proposes a neat separation between the god himself and the perceptions of his followers (189–90), displacing the idea of ambivalence from the former onto the latter. But she thereby perpetrates a petitio principii and denies the play one of its most profound resources. Neither within the Bacchae itself, nor more generally in Greek religious mythology, can the nature of gods be demarcated with ‘factual’ precision or wholly disentangled from what the worshippers of those gods project onto them.

However the concept of ‘literature’, whether ancient or modern, is constructed, its interpretation should leave room for possibilities of meaning that resist and exceed decisive finalities. Yet R.’s argument abounds with statements of how Greek tragedy ‘must’ be interpreted, of what the ‘authorial intention’ or even the ‘fixed meaning’ of the Bacchae can or cannot have been, and of other allegedly non-negotiable verities. Despite the useful challenges which it issues to modes of interpretation that can themselves become doctrinaire, this book’s heavily hortatory voice left me in the end with a feeling that it is not only tragic heroes who sometimes suffer from a ‘Kontrollzwang’.

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