
The book under review goes back to the author’s Ph.D. thesis (Cambridge, 2002). It is stimulating and contains some strong points. The study’s methodological weaknesses, however, limit the value of several results it claims to achieve.

In the ‘Prologue’ (1–28) Barker states that he will investigate «for the first time» (v and 3) the phenomenon of debate (agon logôn) in the three important literary genres of epic (Iliad and Odyssey), historiography (Herodotus and Thucydides), and drama (Sophocles Ajax and Euripides Hecuba). Analyzing and comparing these texts, B. wants to explore how literary representations of debate change both across and within genres and cultural contexts. B. also weaves into his study a sociological component – informed by Michel Foucault (‘power’), Anthony Giddens (‘structuration’), and Marcel Detienne (‘center’). He understands debate in terms of «dissent from authority» (3) in an «institutional context» (4–5). In addition, taking debates as situations where authority is questioned and scrutinized, B. is especially interested in the «dynamic between authority and dissent» (10). B. furthermore contends that textual representations of debate have a significant socio-political impact. Not only do they invite the reader to think about ways of managing dissent through institutionalized debate and to understand the value of this practice. For B., textual representations of debate also construct a political community as the engaged audience/reader «reproduces … and realizes them [i.e., the debates] as institutional arenas […] as they are represented in the text» (16–7; B.’s cursives).

The study’s three main parts cover epic, historiography, and tragedy. They offer many close readings, which cannot adequately be summarized here. The following paraphrase will instead attempt to convey the larger picture that B. energetically constructs from his comparative analyses, which is also where the author himself sees his study’s main achievements.

In ‘Act I: Epic’ (31–134), B. focuses on scenes of Homeric assembly (agôrê), when leaders and the gathered people (laos) come together. Scenes of council (boulê), however, are surprisingly excluded (34 with n. 13). B. declares the observed differences between the two epics as manifestations of a contest and «agon between the Iliad and Odyssey» (134) as to how dissent should be thought of, managed, and narrated. In B.’s opinion, the Iliad «privileges dissent as necessary and desirable to the institution of the agôrê, even given its potentially troubling repercussions, and while recognizing the need for good management of it» (133–4). In the Odyssey, however, «dissent is marginalized, as the narrative instead privileges Odysseus’ return» (134). B. much prefers the approach of the Iliad, whose audience is «invited to witness and experience the institutional possibilities for dissent» and thus «plays a part in realizing a political community» (ibid.; B.’s cursives). The Odyssey is criticized by B. for putting demands on its audience that are «paradoxical and troubling: little opportunity is given to heed the virtues of dissent; yet it is equally difficult to ignore the violence with which dissenting voices are suppressed» (ibid.).
This supposed rivalry between Iliad and Odyssey is, in B.’s view, also paradigmatic for the fifth-century authors he discusses. The field of competition, as B. sees it, as to how one should think about and textually represent debates thus broadens enormously. In ‘Act II: Historiography’ (157–263) and ‘Act III: Tragedy’ (267–365), B. argues that the later authors – their individual approaches and solutions, which B. brings out effectively, notwithstanding – consciously align themselves with the «narrative paradigms» (23) provided by Iliad and Odyssey. Thucydides and Sophocles are declared to deliberately side with the Iliad as they «all privilege an understanding of dissent in which characters, or the author, take a stand in the arena of debate to challenge the dominant figures, ideals or discourses of their time» (ibid.). Herodotus and Euripides, however, are placed by B. in the opposite corner with the Odyssey because these three texts «expose that ideal of open contest and fruitful dissent as a fiction» (ibid.).

Some specific points that B. makes deserve to be singled out: Herodotus highlights inadequacies of institutions of debate, especially on the Greek side, while the most regulated debates occur among Persians. Thucydides writes the most formal debates, in which he shows the two most opposed opinions, thus enabling his readers to analyze and better understand political discourse. With his own strong authorial voice, Thucydides, according to B., takes an Achilles-like stand by challenging his readers. Turning to tragedy, B. argues that Sophocles’ Ajax follows the model of the Iliad by favorably exploring dissent from the authority of King Agamemnon, this time, however, from the perspective not of the hero himself but of those around him. The play demonstrates how even problematic dissent can be productively managed through the democratic process of debate. Euripides’ Hecuba, however, is critical of the power of debate. B. contends that Euripides closely modeled the vengeful Hecuba after the figure of the returning Odysseus. While the former queen’s dissent (i.e., her revenge) is justified, the trial-like debate scene (Hecuba, Polyestor, Agamemnon) shows that the institutionalized framework of debate cannot resolve such extreme dissent. Euripides leaves it up to the audience to deal with the tragedy’s disturbing outcomes.

There is something refreshing about the ambition and energy that fuels this book. B. lays out his positions and arguments with clarity and force. The cross-generic and sociologically informed approach is sensible and promising, and B.’s close readings produce a good number of interesting observations: for instance, differences in how Greeks, Trojans, and the gods conduct assemblies in the Iliad; differences in how Herodotus represents debates among Greeks and among Persians (even if B.’s ensuing explanation is not the most plausible); Agamemnon’s pervasive concern for and ineffectiveness at maintaining control over dissent(ers) in the Iliad, Ajax, and Hecuba; Thucydides’ method of imitating and at the same time exposing persuasive techniques used by debaters in his work; finally, the many ways in which institutionalized debates are represented as imperfect or failing processes of negotiating dissent and authority, leaving the audience/reader with questions not only about the debated issues but also about the process of debate. The book’s editing is fine.¹

¹ Typos are rare: 3n.7; 58n.60; 124n.116; 171–2 (syntax); 322; 339n.54; 352.
These strengths notwithstanding, B.’s study also suffers from weaknesses that reduce its overall merits. The fact that a cross-generic perspective on debate is not as unprecedented as B. declares it to be is, in comparison, only a minor quibble. More problematic is the argumentative substance. It is of course helpful and productive to compare how different authors textually represent institutionalized debate and dissent. B.’s claim, however, goes much further, and the conclusions he draws from his observations are not the most convincing. He believes that his authors form deliberate rivalries and alliances around the single question of how debates and dissent should be managed and textually represented. The textual evidence, however, does not bear this out. B.’s supporting arguments and interpretations, containing many inaccuracies, are often counter-intuitive and go – as B. repeatedly acknowledges with great confidence – against the scholarly communis opinio.

Two examples that stand for many may illustrate this point, the first carrying little, the second much argumentative weight: B. apodictically states that according to Demodocus’ song about the fall of Troy «Odysseus’ ruse works only because the Trojans debate» (117). The Odyssey’s text, however, does not establish such a causal link. Demodocus sings, as B. points out, that «the Trojans debate a lot» (117; B.’s cursive; Od. 8,505 poll’ agoreuon) about what to do with the mysterious gift that is already sitting inside Troy’s walls. We even hear which three options they are discussing (8,506–9). But the narrative’s focus is not on the Trojans’ decision-making process. Demodocus does not only skip how the Trojans arrived at their decision, he even emphasizes that Troy’s destruction was inevitable once the horse had been pulled into the city (8,510–2). Discussing Hecuba’s revenge, B. writes that «the closest parallel that suggests itself is Odysseus’ brutal actions in the Odyssey, his blinding of Polyphemus and his vengeance on the suitors» (346). This is hardly true. Euripides’ Medea and other revenge tragedies (cf. A.P. Burnett, Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy, Berkeley 1998, not cited by B.) are certainly ‘closer’ in theme, plot structure, and reception context than the two disparate episodes from the Odyssey. But B. claims that Euripides presents the former Trojan queen as a sufferer «in order that the audience may see Hecuba … as an Odysseus» (364), and that the Odyssey’s «narrative strategy» is nothing less than «the dominant paradigm for understanding the plays» (365). By not even considering other possible (and arguably more obvious) textual parallels, B. himself appears to ‘silence dissent’ here.

Some of B.’s textual choices are also questionable. It is never sufficiently explained why Homeric scenes of council (boule) are excluded from this study (34–

¹ B. does not cite W.J. Froleyks, Der Agôn Logôn in der antiken Literatur, Diss. Bonn 1973 (This title is cited by M. Lloyd, The Agon in Euripides, Oxford 1992, which B. has used.). J. Duchemin, L’Agôn dans la tragédie grecque (Paris ‘1968), listed in B.’s bibliography, does in fact contain a survey chapter on the agon among the sophists, in Herodotus and Thucydides, and in Aristophanes. In addition, histories of Greek rhetoric routinely point to the agonistic-rhetorical strand that runs through much of Greek literature. These contributions still leave more than ample room for further study. Their due acknowledgment, however, might have led B. to a more nuanced assessment of wherein his study’s originality lies.
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1. Also, Sophocles’ Antigone, perhaps the most elaborate and profound treatment of precisely the topic B. investigates is surprisingly absent from the book’s discussions. The reasons given why Ajax and Hecuba were selected for treatment are not very compelling (278–9). Hecuba may be a particularly unfortunate choice. This play’s chorus does not represent a citizen-body, nor do the politically charged terms «dissent» and even «terrorism» (353) capture well the essence of what this tragedy around personal injustice, personal revenge, personal interests is about.

In light of all this, even some of the book’s chapter and section titles become contestable. For instance, by calling the study’s main parts ‘Prologue’, ‘Act I’, ‘Act II’, ‘Act III’, and ‘Epilogue’ B. artificially suggests a much stronger sense of coherency and development than the adduced material and his arguments warrant.

Despite these problems, B.’s book ‘Entering the Agon’ pursues very worthwhile questions and contains enough good observations to make it a contribution of considerable importance for anyone studying agônes/debates in Greek literature.

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1 On the contrary, 340.13 and 350.20 strongly suggest that they should be included.
2 The play is briefly mentioned twice (317n.116; 340n.58).