

## BOOK REVIEW

*Athenian Myths and Festivals*. By CHRISTIANE SOURVINOU-INWOOD. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xi + 377. Hardback, £83.00/\$150.00. ISBN 978-0-19-959207-4.

Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood's attention was turned to aristocratic religious associations (*genê*) in Athenian festivals through Stephen Lambert's claim that the *genos* Bakchiadai played an extensive role in the City Dionysia.<sup>1</sup> Her response found its way into the penultimate chapter of *Athenian Myths and Festivals* but not before inspiring a lengthy study. Sourvinou-Inwood traced the part played by these associations and the *peplos* of Athena Polias in the Plynteria and the Kallynteria. She pursued the *peplos* into the Panathenaia and the frieze of the Parthenon. Her methodology led to exhaustive studies of the myths of early Athenian history and the cults of Athena at the Palladion and Dionysus Eleuthereus. The result was a lengthy manuscript which her editor, Robert Parker, has reduced to one sixth in producing *Athenian Myths and Festivals*. Sourvinou-Inwood was writing her second mystery novel, *Murder at the City Dionysia*, while she was working on *genê*.<sup>2</sup> It may be my fancy, but *Athenian Myths and Festivals* conveys the impression of a detective story: the scholar traces the actions and whereabouts of dead aristocrats like her hero, Chloe, the story of the corpse in Dionysus' sanctuary. Sourvinou-Inwood's book is not for the faint-hearted, but it has many rewards, for example, her observations on the Chalkeia (268–70).

It was at the Chalkeia that the loom was set up for weaving Athena's *peplos*. Girls (*Arrhēphoroi*), nubile young women (*Ergastinai*), and the married priestess of Athena were involved in weaving. Scholars dutifully note that the Chalkeia was celebrated nine months before the Panathenaia, but Sourvinou-Inwood points

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<sup>1</sup> S. D. Lambert, "The Attic *Genos* Bakchiadai and the City Dionysia," *Historia* 42 (1998) 394–403. The article came to Sourvinou-Inwood's attention "only rather later" (Robert Parker, *Editor's Preface*, vi).

<sup>2</sup> Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, *Murder at the City Dionysia*, New York: Vanguard Press, 2008. Her novel is out-of-print and unavailable to me by interlibrary loan.

out that the females involved represent “the three stages of women’s lives as perceived by the Greeks” (268), that this symbolically relates their participation to that of all Athenian females, and that the process of weaving this important gift to the goddess, symbol and emblem of the *polis*’ relationship with its tutelary goddess and all the gods, took nine months to create so that “the biologically based, and therefore universal, association of nine months with human pregnancy could not but have imbued the enterprise of weaving the new *peplos* with the metaphorical colouring of the production of a child ...” (270).

Chapter One sets out the course and explains her methods. They are basically structuralist, emphasizing in-depth probing of the data for patterns. “Meaning is created ... with the help of relationships of similarities to, and differences from, the other elements in the system of which each element is part” (289). I found her explanation in terms of “Greek ritual logic” (13) illuminating and her use of “parameter,” a favorite word, a bother, perhaps because of its one-time status as *the* buzz word.

Sourvinou-Inwood’s first “investigation” (72) delves into the myths of early Athenian history. She bedrocks her “arguments” upon the Homeric Erechtheus (*Il.* 2.546–51; *Ody.* 7.80–1). He is her “complex” Erechtheus; with him is associated a nexus of elements that defines primordial times of first beginnings, namely, earthborn, nursling of Athena, Athenian king, definer of the land and its inhabitants as Erechtheidai, and the Eleusinian War. In the fifth century, mythmakers distributed these elements to create Erichthonios and a second Erechtheus. In turn, they made Aglauros, daughter of “complex” Erechtheus and savior of Athens, into Kekrops’ silly disobedient daughter who takes her own life. Sourvinou-Inwood argues convincingly for her reconstruction. The motive behind the later mythmaking, which she mentions (37, 40, 65) without development, is to widen the impact of autochthony and extend it to all Athenians in the way of orators at public funerals.<sup>3</sup> The inevitable inconsistencies, she suggests, were “narcotized” (48).

In Chapters Three and Five, Sourvinou-Inwood reconstructs how rites of the Plynteria, Kallynteria, and Panathenaia dovetail around Athena’s *peplos*. In the Plynteria, the soiled *peplos* and the abnormality of closing the goddess’ temple

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<sup>3</sup> For autochthony in funeral oratory, see Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1986) 148–50.

evoke, respectively, pollution and primordiality. The washing of the *peplos* in fresh water by the girls of the *genos* Praxiergidai on the Acropolis and its escorting by procession from Athens to Phaleron set in motion the return to purity and contemporary times. At Phaleron, women of the *genos* washed the statue in sea water and redressed it on the beach. The festival complex is organized around, and embodies the Greek religious ideology of, pollution giving way to purification, primordiality to the present, and the movement out in the Plynteria and back in the Kallynteria. In the Panathenaia, all Athenians present their goddess with a *new peplos* that is an “intensification” (281–3) of the clean *peplos*.

Throughout her investigations, Sourvinou-Inwood illustrates the various ways and degrees of gentilicial involvement in festivals from the high density of the Eleusinian Mysteries to the minimal in supplying the priestess of Athena Polias in the Panathenaia. With her characteristic panoply of arguments that converge like panzer columns upon Lambert’s hypothesis, she deftly prevents its becoming “orthodoxy by default” (313). Like Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot, she commands the final scene where she sets out succinctly that aristocratic *genè* were most prominent in festivals that entailed secrets, e.g., the mysteries and secret sacrifices of the Plynteria. Secrets could be managed, guarded, and transmitted by families whose members were born to their service.

I know Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood only through her writings, but I venture that these writings will become an object of study in their own right. Her methodology is both irritating and compelling by its attention to detail as well as the breadth of its scope, but her small asides also demand attention. That myths are created through a process of “bricolage” (39), composites assembled from separate mythemes, heads off the assumption that the presence of one part of a myth implies the whole myth. Her most famous warning, that against cultural determination, holds true; classical studies has accumulated much “baggage” that someone once thought “felt so good that it *had to be*.”<sup>4</sup> Most Athenians would

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<sup>4</sup> John Sandford’s Detective Lucas Davenport worries about cultural assumptions “that he was ‘locking in,’ a problem he saw with other cops, all the time, the sure sense that something was just so, when it wasn’t. Something felt so good that it *had to be*. You could build a great logical case out of pure bullshit, and it happened too frequently” (*Mortal Prey* [New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 2002] 305; Sandford’s italics).

have accepted her judgment that Antigone is a “bad woman”<sup>5</sup> but surely not that of moderns that she was a Sophoclean hero.

Yet I’m left to wonder whether freedom from such contamination is possible.

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<sup>5</sup> Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, “Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles’ *Antigone*,” *JHS* 109 (1989) 134–48; quotation is on p. 140; and “Sophocles’ *Antigone* as a ‘Bad Woman,’” in F. Dieteren and E. Kloek, eds., *Writing Women into History* (Amsterdam: Historisch Seminarium van de Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1990) 11–38.