

## BOOK REVIEW

*Euripides's Revolution under Cover: An Essay.* By PIETRO PUCCI. Cornell Studies in Classical Philology. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016. Pp. vi + 235. Hardcover, \$59.95. ISBN 978-1-5017-0061-3.

The “two overarching aims of Euripides’s poetic game and law of composition” are “to elaborate a consistent criticism of the anthropomorphic nature of the Greek gods, and to provide audiences and readers with the wisdom and the strength to endure the distress of life” (1). Pucci says that these are “at the heart of Euripidean revolution.” Furthermore, he argues that the “revolutionary momentum lies in the first aim, suspending the traditional anthropomorphic view of the gods.” The gods’ passions sometimes cause them to act in “criminal or arbitrary ways” ... while at other times, they are seen as “embodiments of impersonal and cosmic forces” (2). Pucci will focus on the themes of language, *eros* and politics.

Euripides sometimes conflates traditional gods with cosmic principles: Necessity = Zeus, Eros = Aphrodite, and Tukhe = Hera. This conflation gives a hybrid nature to these divine creatures – something that archaic Greeks could relate to. The “conflation of a divine figure with a cosmic force produces an impersonal principle, ‘Necessity’” (11). Mythological characters, such as Zeus, Thanatos and Charon are finally “absorbed by the realm of Necessity.” This allows humans to face the impersonal power without fear and possibly to even learn “to embrace it” (*ibid.*). Tragic poetry can help assuage the painfulness of life and establish a kind of defensive stronghold in the self. The “citadel of the self” is nevertheless “open and accessible” to the important threat of difference and otherness. Wisdom must be carefully measured so that it does not turn into pride and arrogance that can cause danger and self-destruction. For Euripides, it is guided by “pity,” which makes Euripides the “most tragic of the tragedians” (17–18). “Pity straddles consciousness and imagination, the self and the other” (18–19).

In antiquity, as in our world, the matter of sexuality is a complex issue that has many subtleties on all sides. Euripides draws a contrast between “chaste male characters” and female characters (seen as whores, etc.), so that some have called Euripides “misogynistic” (35). There is the further complication in Euripides’

time that gods, especially Aphrodite and Eros were seen as the forces behind human sexuality. As Pucci points out, a prime aspect of Euripides' use of sexuality is the "violence" that affects its subjects, often women, in "excessive, perverse, and sometimes destructive forms" (36). This is an important theme, for example, in Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, where Helen is seen as the "victim" of Aphrodite.

Language as the stimulus of the passions is also the language of "imagination, of the other" (63). Pucci says this amounts to a "witty attack on myth," which Euripides sees as the source of indecent love that continues to corrupt humans. Euripides more often tends to depict corrupt passion in women than in men. But all these reflect "the individual alienation from the integrity of a common culture" (65). We see in Euripides the disintegration of the old culture and the "invasion" of "new alienating cultural interests" (*ibid.*). Eros is especially important here, since it forces the self to confront "otherness", an act that may result in self-destruction at any moment (66). For Euripides, Eros is the "optimal dramatic resource" since it strikes "deep into the marrow of the human being" (66). It attacks both sexes, but women are more often its prey, since men are often engaged in war and politics, while women tend to lack these experiences. (*ibid.*). Pucci discusses the failure of politics in *The Suppliant Women* (95-103). Here Theseus, the Athenian, is the hero. Pucci closes his book with an extended discussion of *The Bacchae*. Here Teiresias is the epitome of rational thinking and wisdom. Whereas he respects the benefits of the god Dionysus, the Theban king Pentheus resists the god's worship. Pucci sees his tragic end and death as the revenge of the god – something that shows Dionysus' "human" side.

On Euripides generally, Pucci discusses the contradictions inherent in poetry: the pleasure it gave both the poet and his audience "allayed and displaced the darkness of human life that the poet's creation brought to the stage" (201). Also, if this poetry could "speak the truth, and heal," it was like a rainbow signaling the end of the storm. His poetry depicts "the unbearable conditions of human life" while also healing men's pains and sorrows (202). This poetry made Euripides unpopular and the frequent target of comic poets, but he held on. This is an author who leads us to imagine his existential torments. He realized the immense wisdom stored in the poetic tradition - a wisdom that philosophy could not translate into its own new terms without both loss and betrayal (203). Euripides created a revolutionary theatrical poetry that contained enlightened wisdom that in traditional theatrical forms renewed the "cultural climate of the theater and the city ... He was a complex and disquieting thinker, poet, and human being" (*ibid.*). This book is an insightful and readable essay on Euripidean tragedy that

should be accessible to most, if not all readers.

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