

BOOK REVIEW

Looking at Bacchae. Edited by DAVID STUTTARD, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. Pp. xiii + 238. Paper, \$29.95. ISBN 978-1-4742-2147-4.

The intended audience for David Stuttard's collection on *Bacchae* is somewhat unclear, but the work fills several niches rather well. Accessible to the interested layman, it would also support either a college course on tragedy in translation or one on the play in Greek. It has less to offer the specialist.

The volume begins with Stuttard's introductory essay and ends with his own translation. Between are twelve essays by various scholars. Their topics are somewhat scatter-shot, leading to some redundancy between the essays. Multiple narrations of the play inevitably become somewhat cumbersome; reminders of certain key points, however, will probably benefit an undergraduate reading the essays throughout a course. Several of the essays, moreover, offer interestingly divergent interpretations, which should force a student to engage more actively with the genuinely problematic issues in the work.

Stuttard's introduction bespeaks a long familiarity with the play as theater. He has translated the play and directed it on stage. He makes some problematic generalizations, however—presenting as fact a speculative etymology for *dithyrambos*, for example, where most consider the matter unresolved. He is at his best in addressing practicalities of performance.

Edith Hall's "Perspectives on the Impact of *Bacchae* at its Original Performance" covers more than the title suggests. Hall brings a robust understanding of how tragedy works and excavates layers of meaning in the text. She is wary of reductive readings and embraces the play's ambiguity, and explores *Bacchae's* place in the final Euripidean tetralogy, examining its meta-theatrical dimension as well. The essay forms a solid anchor to the whole collection.

Alan H. Sommerstein's "Bacchae and Earlier Tragedy" attempts to locate the play in the larger context of Athenian tragedy. From that suggestive but ghostly landscape, he refers to *Pentheus*, *Edonians*, *Bassarids*, *The Archeresses*, *Semele*, and *The Young Men*. We have nothing approaching complete texts for any of those

plays; it is nevertheless salutary to recall that *Bacchae* did not spring forth *ex nihilo*, but reflects ideas already in circulation.

In “Family Reunion or Household disaster? Exploring Plot Diversity in Euripides’ Last Production”, Ioanna Karamanou argues that these last plays are more Panhellenic in their focus—unsurprising, if they were indeed written in exile. Rosie Wyles’ “Staging in *Bacchae*” asks some interesting questions, but sometimes seeks problems where they may not exist. I am not persuaded that the word *skeuē* is *ambiguous* merely because it’s used both for the ritual bacchic garb and for theatrical equipment: it seems merely a broad term applied to different situations. She claims that the staging of the earthquake and flaming tomb “is open to interpretation.” One may certainly *speculate* on how they were staged; it seems that *interpretation* as such would require some kind of data to interpret: we have almost none.

In “Looking at the Bacchae in *Bacchae*”, Chris Carey focuses on the chorus at the heart of the tragedy. By nature most plays lack a “controlling voice”, but often the chorus provides a center of gravity; here, however, the chorus is partisan and engaged, accentuating Pentheus’ isolation.

Richard Seaford’s “Mysteries and Politics in *Bacchae*” is dense and well-crafted. Seaford’s familiarity with the text shows at every turn (he published a commentary in 1996). He examines the public character of the Dionysus cult, and how the contending individual and collective interests coalesce around political polarities. He argues that Pentheus is not merely an opponent of the Dionysus cult: he is a faithless initiate, who, having seen, nevertheless rejects.

In “A Big Laugh’: Horrid Laughter in Euripides’ *Bacchae*”, James Morwood focuses on potentially comic scenes as contributing to the development of anxiety or horror. Building on a broad recognition of the power of comedy to heighten tragic drama, Morwood comes at the problem from inside and out, drawing parallels from Aristophanes, but also Marlowe, Webster, Ibsen, and others. He pointedly disagrees with Seaford, who overtly rejects any comedic understanding of the play.

David Kovacs’ “New Religion and Old in Euripides’ *Bacchae*” addresses the scholarly reception of the play, noting that a besetting problem in its interpretation is “that it has seemed to be at variance with what its scholarly interpreters thought they knew about Euripides’ religious views”. He unpacks this issue carefully; the prevailing notion of Euripides as a humanistic skeptic is largely based upon unreliable Aristophanic references. Many questions remain unresolved:

why, for example, is Cadmus, who embraced the cult, punished as severely as Pentheus himself? Kovacs plumbs several levels: the nature of religion, the idea of theomachy, and contextual entanglements with the Sophists.

Alex Garvie's "Paradoxes and Themes in *Bacchae*" tackles some of the essential paradoxes in the thematic structure of the play. It explores the idea of "return tragedy", the question of *theoxeny* (a god appearing as a human guest), and madness as an instrument of punishment. It's a spacious and thoughtful discussion.

Hanna Roisman ("Euripides' *Bacchae*—A Revenge Play") contrasts *Bacchae* with *Medea*, because the revenge is divine, rather than human. The extremity of Dionysus' revenge forces audiences to sympathize with Pentheus and his broken household, and to question their belief in the gods. This position intriguingly diverges from Kovacs'; both deserve consideration. One of Roisman's more engaging ideas is that Pentheus' death is "not due to any single act, but to his attempt to meet irrationality with reason". She also argues that the humans in the play have, from the start, no chance to escape their revenge—a perennial matter for discussion.

Sophie Mills' "The Grandsons of Cadmus" compares Dionysus and Pentheus. She argues that Dionysus' revenge comes more from his human nature than from the divine, but provides no firm textual support; the position differs from Roisman's. Mills notes that in most of Euripides' plays, while a god may put the machinery into motion, human agents carry out the revenge itself. Not so here. One interesting line of investigation is an examination of how the stichomythic exchanges shift the center of power subtly but inexorably from Pentheus to Dionysus. "*Bacchae* in the Modern World" by Betine van Zyl Smit explores recent productions. Intriguing as some of them are, these probably will be more of interest to those in theater as such than to classicists.

Stuttard's performing translation forms the point of reference for many of the articles—a mixed benefit. The translation is at points rather free, and occasionally positively misleading. The choruses, moreover, receive a curious E. E. Cummings treatment: words don't need to form sentences or clauses, and capitalization is eschewed. This seems curiously at odds with Euripides' highly structured and intricate lyrics. Material quoted from the translation, moreover, occasionally loses critical punctuation, which is vexing; more systematically problematic is the fact that the translation lacks line numbers, making references hard to locate.

A well-selected bibliography on this play and Athenian tragedy in general rounds out the volume—a handy starting-point for further research. Overall, the collection is mixed but solid. It offers a few points of interest to specialists; as a pedagogical tool, however, it should prove quite valuable. I plan to require it for my own *Bacchae* class next year.

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