

BOOK REVIEW

The Gentle, Jealous God: Reading Euripides' Bacchae in English. By SIMON PERRIS. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. Pp. xi. + 237. Hardcover, \$114.00. ISBN 978-1-4725 1353-3.

One encouraging outcome of today's anxious discourse over the future of Classics is the increasing appreciation of the academic legitimacy of translations. Simon Perris' monograph is thus timely. Comprised of seven analyses of 20th and 21st century English-language translations of the *Bacchae*, framed by a discussion of translation and reception theories, this book compellingly proves Perris's emphatic conclusion that "Translation *matters*" (171).

Three prefatory chapters provide a historical and theoretical framework for the subsequent analyses. The introduction argues that reception, including translations, shapes our current understanding of the meaning of ancient texts. The concepts of *skopos* and nominal and expressive authenticity are useful for the analyses to come: the translator's *skopos* (target) may range from close adherence to the original source (nominal authenticity) to attempting to evoke an emotional immediacy in the modern audience (expressive authenticity). Nominal authenticity runs the risk of alienating a modern audience, while a translation whose *skopos* is expressive authenticity might lose the authority of antiquity.

Two subsequent chapters use the *Bacchae's* theme of *spharagmos* as a metaphor for translation and performance. Every adaptation is an act of necessary violence to the original text, drawing out its unique existence from the entrails of Euripides' tragedy. Looking at a variety of adaptations to the stage, screen, and page, Perris concludes that "the necessary and sufficient conditions for appreciating *Bacchae* in the modern era are ... mass violence and mass social upheaval" (57).

The chapters discussing individual translations emphasize the cultural and political climates that shape the choices the translator/adaptor makes. Some of the chapters are more successful than others: in an engaging chapter titled "Dionysus, Lord and Savior" on Gilbert Murray's 1902 translation, Perris first lays out compelling evidence that this version of the *Bacchae* "dramatizes a proto-

Christian fable" (68) before noting that Murray did not believe in organized religion and was repulsed by Christianity. Murray was, rather, a fervent believer in secular humanism, for which he used his theological translation of Euripides' play to proselytize.

The following chapter is ostensibly on H.D.'s 1931 "Choros translations from the *Bacchae*." Before getting to H.D., however, Perris touches on Louis Zukofsky, Ezra Pound, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Eugene O'Neill. And even when he finally arrives at H.D., he interrupts his discussion of her translation (which, ironically, he finds repetitive and meandering) with a digression on Alice Oswald's *Memorial* (2011). With only two female translators of the *Bacchae* included in this volume, Perris' perfunctory treatment of H.D.'s contribution is disappointing.

The subsequent three chapters, on Derek Mahon, Colin Teevan, and David Grieg, demonstrate the divergent outcomes that emerge from similar initial conditions. Mahon's 1991 Irish-inflected translation attempts to be apolitical and comic, but can escape neither the play's inherent pathos nor the sectarian violence that has given form to modern Irish identity. Teevan's 2002 translation aims for a metatheatrical commentary on the ability of the *Bacchae* to heal the world: Pentheus is portrayed as a xenophobic Western conservative, Dionysus as an enlightened Easterner, and the play's conclusion represents the deconstruction of the globally catastrophic East-West divide. Grieg's 2007 production, headlined flamboyantly by Alan Cumming, is supersaturated with referents, from sexual liberation and camp to Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. This "more-is-more" approach, however, ends up not so much radically replicating the original performance as creating a too-clever atmosphere of "neoliberal bourgeois hedonism" (149).

The Epilogue focuses on Anne Carson's 2015 translation, which, like much of Carson's work, interrogates the nature of *erōs*. For her, like for Grieg, Dionysus is hypersemiotic—he is untranslatably *daimonic*, *deinos*, the yellow-green of bittersweet desire. Unlike Grieg's, Carson's translation succeeds in capturing the ineffable essence of Dionysus's *daimon*; the chapter concludes that "the '*daimonic*' is a suitable metaphor for classical reception: a complex interplay of present and past, self and other, pleasure and pain, conscious and subconscious" (162).

Perris's Conclusion reaffirms the importance of translation while emphasizing the particular appropriateness of the *Bacchae* for the sorts of creative translations this book focuses on. But can an ancient Greek tragedy really mean all the things these translators want it to? Or are their abstract interpretations anachro-

nistic? Perris raises these questions in his Introduction, framed as a debate between Charles Segal and Malcolm Heath playing the parts of a polysemic Dionysus in conflict with a skeptical Pentheus. And in his Conclusion, Perris, like the play itself, embraces the ambiguity: “*Bacchae* needs risky, unfaithful translations as well as dependable faithful ones” (164).

This book is of value to students and teachers alike, particularly its summary of approaches to translation and reception studies in the Introduction and its close readings of poetic translations. The back matter—an appendix listing translations of the *Bacchae* into English between 1751 and 2015 and a “Glossary of Terms and Greek Words”—renders this already useful book even more so. My only complaints are the surprising paucity of attention paid to issues of gender and sexual identity (there are no entries for either “sexuality” or “gender” in the index) and the monochromy of the translators included. Perris touches several times on Wole Soyinka’s *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1969), but a more sustained engagement with Soyinka’s text would have provided a contrast to the Anglo-American focus of the book while also allowing Perris to more richly illustrate his theoretical discussion of the blurry barrier between translation and adaptation. Despite these few criticisms, on the whole, Perris has admirably achieved his skopos of demonstrating that “Translation *matters*.”

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