Book Review of Meagher, R.M., Euripides’ Bakkhai

Katerina Zacharia, Loyola Marymount University

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A theatrical translation constitutes the main corpus of the book. M. is an eloquent translator and experienced producer of Greek drama, and his polished poetic language makes the play more accessible to modern audiences by the simplification of some rather intricate syntax, by the reconstruction of the lacunae and occasional omission of lines which are intended to render the text more dramatic (p. vi), and by the addition of lines which often clarify the meaning of the text. As the jacket blurb states, the translation aims to ‘provide a playable script, which [...] cries out for production [...] as viable contemporary drama’ (p. iv).

Yet additions are not always beneficial: Dionysos is ‘the boy-child of Zeus’ (p. 1, line 2) and Semele ‘a mere girl’ (p. 1, line 4); Dionysos’ voice is ‘like a bolt of light’ (p. 32, line 6) and truth ‘is like a knife’ (p. 61, line 6). As for the omissions, M. confesses to having deleted ‘less than 2% of the whole’ (p. vi); yet, though he lists the omitted lines, he fails to supply line numbers in his translation, information which, in the first place, is of interest only to a reader familiar with the Greek language.

A concise ‘Commentary’ (pp. 69–90, in essay form) is appended to the translation, though hardly attached to it in any direct way. The questions addressed range from Dionysos’ and Pentheus’ encounter in the Bakkhai to Euripides’ career as playwright; M. ventures even further to embrace the whole of Greek drama and ‘point to a blind spot’ (p. 71) in Aristotelian criticism, namely the absence of Dionysos in the Poetics. The main thesis is that the Bakkhai, a text ‘as close as we may ever come to the “Poetics” of Euripides’, ‘offers a remarkably appropriate and revealing introduction to ancient Greek tragedy, as well as a badly needed corrective to the monoscopic vision of Aristotle’ (p. 70) by being the Dionysian drama par excellence.

M.’s Commentary offers some valuable insights, but on the whole it is dense, obscure, and of little use to the general public. One actually wonders how general M.’s public is, since knowledge of Greek tragedy seems a prerequisite: M. does not even state the date the Bakkhai was performed, save for the information that it was produced ‘posthumously’ (p. 70).

In discussing the revel and revelation of Dionysos in the Bakkhai, M. considers ‘a span of ideas and realities, from fluid nature to intransigent truth’ (p. 82). His arguments are drawn from Plutarch’s comment on Dionysus’ fluid nature (p. 72f.), Plato’s theory of human eidesis (p. 54f.), and Heraclitus (pp. 73, 80, 81); examples come from such disparate sources as the Halloween (p. 78f.) and molecular chemistry (p. 87).

M. concludes his thesis with a consideration of the metamorphosis which takes place in all Dionysian drama, where the boundaries between divine, human, and bestial natures are crossed and ‘truth and untruth can be explored with relative impunity’ (p. 88); he argues that Euripidean ‘aesthetic is essentially moral’ (p. 89) and in his dramas humanity is invariably restored. M. fails to detect an open-endedness in Euripidean dramas or a challenge of traditional values; he, at the close of each Euripidean play all loose ends are tied and order and safety reinstated.

University College London

KATERINA ZACHARIA


This rather discursive book argues that in Euripides figurative language from hunting emphasizes either the uncivilized violence with which persons pursue and capture their objectives, often other persons, or the running with which innocent victims are ensnared. Hunting can therefore be a metaphor for hybrid: so the hunters of Iliad (Thoas), Hela (Theoclymenous) and And. (Hermione and Menelaus) are thwarted, while those of Iliad (Agamemnon) and Orestes (Orestes) are in part coloured by the inherited imagery of Aeschylus’ treatment of their family story. In Hippolytus and Heracles the metaphor applies both figuratively and literally to the main characters, illuminating their personal natures but also the field and process of their destruction. In Bacchae the representation of Dionysos as a ‘hunting’ god makes the whole play an allegory for man’s constant vulnerability to the violence between men, and between this god and man.

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