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BACCHAE AND FROGS IN CONTEXT

LUIGI BARZINI, *Mystery Cults, Theatre and Athenian Politics: A Reading of Euripides' Bacchae and Aristophanes' Frogs*, Bloomsbury Academic: London 2021. Pp. xiv+260. ISBN: 9781350187320.

AFTER A ONE-PAGE GLOSSARY of key terms (xiii) and a convenient summary of the two plays under discussion (3–4), the author explains the importance of his enterprise: “no scholar has attempted a comparative reading of these two plays in their common political and religious context” (5). Fortunately, this claim appears more moderate later on: “there has been little research and comparative study on the similarity of their religious, ethical and civic content” (119). The book’s main argument is clear and formulated from start: “the plays advocate collective adhesion to the ethical and civic values and rituals of the mystery cults as the way to facilitate a civic and religious reconciliation between the warring factions [in Athens]” (6). The book, arising from Barzini’s 2019 thesis at the University of Exeter, is divided into two halves, “Context” and “The plays”.

The first part starts with a description/timeline of the rituals comprising the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Great Dionysia (7–12). Then those festivals are compared to other mystical initiations in pre-modern cultures. From Ancient Greece to Australia’s aboriginal tribes, such rituals had a double function: to maintain social-civic cohesion and to transform the individual’s psychology through ecstatic experiences, in contrast to modern mass religions whose rituals have low emotional impact (14–6). The Demetrian and Dionysian initiations clearly met these criteria, and despite having some differences—the former was more formal, the latter more wild—they both offered a liminal experience (16–20). Their uniqueness lies in their eschatological content and non-obligatory nature, which made initiation a matter of personal ethical choice and, by extension, created a polarity between the

virtuous initiates and the violent uninitiated (20–2). The civic importance of mystical initiation is nicely illustrated by Plato and Plutarch: Plato’s dialogues famously associate the philosophers’ closeness to divinity with their political virtue, and Plutarch, in his rendition of the Dionysian rituals, asserts that both in mystical initiation and in studying philosophy the crowds pass from noisy disorder to humble order (23–7). Those sources are characteristic examples of the literary imagery of the mysteries: light, meadows, silence and order are traditionally linked to the initiated; darkness, mire, noise and disorder to the uninitiated. Interestingly, modern reports of near-death experiences have striking similarities with that literary repertoire (27–33).

The next section of the first part aims at evaluating the presence and influence of mystical initiates in the Athenian audience. 40% of the estimated 60,000 population of Athens at the end of the fifth century seems to have been Eleusinian initiates —of course, both figures are based on much speculation— which suggests “a sizable and influential minority in the population of the city” (39). To support the claim of influence, Barzini suggests that the archon *eponymos* of 405 BC, and a devoted *mystes* himself, the wealthy aristocrat Callias III (the one featuring in Plato’s *Protagoras* and Xenophon’s *Symposium*), may have given approval to *Frogs* and *Bacchae* because he sympathised with the authors’ politico-religious beliefs (40). But the Lenaea, at which *Frogs* was performed, was not supervised by the archon *eponymos* as is erroneously claimed, but by the *basileus* (39). *Frogs* was indeed “produced in the archonship of Callias” but this is only a formulaic indication of chronology, not of the archon in charge of the plays.¹ Moreover, the dating of *Bacchae*’s composition is never discussed in detail, as one might have expected (passing references on pp. 4–5, 117–18, 142), and therefore the ‘Callias hypothesis’ collapses from both sides.

Turning to the demographics of the audience, the author rightly emphasises the presence of metics and few slaves at the theatre of Dionysus, which thus served as a relatively inclusive forum for the Athenian community to engage with ethical and religious issues. As for the question of female spectatorship, Barzini (whose collection of evidence omits the most important contemporary source, *Peace* 963–7) argues that, given the well-attested prime role of women in Dionysian rituals of the Anthesteria, it is “highly

1. See the Third Hypothesis to the play. Compare to *Acharnians*, a Lenaeon play too, whose Hypothesis also mentions the archon *eponymos* of the year, but the play itself openly addresses the archon *basileus* (*Ach.* 1224–5, with D. S. Olson’s commentary *ad loc.* for further references).

unlikely that women were barred from attending the climax of the Athenian festival of the deity who had a special affinity with them, Dionysus, at the god's own theatre" (48). While I sympathise with the hypothesis of female spectatorship, in the context of Barzini's discussion the particular argument seems circular, if the religiousness of drama is both the premise and the conclusion.

The question of the affinity between theatrical performances and mystical rituals is now addressed directly. That Gorgias and Plato described poetry's (and by extension theatre's) supernatural attractiveness in quasi-mystical terms; that music and especially the *aulos* was an integral element of both drama and mystical rituals; that both occasions aimed at *katharsis* in the sense of psychological cleansing; and that many spectators would have been familiar with choral dancing, either as chorus members themselves and/or as ritual initiates — all these lead Barzini to argue that the theatrical audience would experience the same feelings as in an initiation mystery, and therefore the plays would have an intense impact on them (50–65). The most significant, perhaps, point of contact is strikingly ignored: masking and costuming as practices of ritual-and-theatrical initiation.

Next, the author explores the poetic tradition of connecting mystical cults with politics, to prepare his reading of *Bacchae* and *Frogs*. The *Homeric hymn to Demeter*, the earliest textual evidence of the Eleusinian cult, already shows, or rather establishes, the political values of mystical cults. The *hymn* features a stranger goddess who re-organises the society upon egalitarian values and a polis which works collectively to overcome a crisis, with the *demos* in the forefront: "an early form of a democratic community" (73). In theatre, this mystical/political ideology appears already in *Oresteia*, in which darkness, pollution, *stasis* and tyranny progressively give way to light, purification, judicial institutions and political moderation — here Barzini, rightly but somewhat inconveniently for his argument, avoids to speak of democracy — with Athena reorganising the people of Attica as a coherent community (73–80).

The final section of "Context" is a compilation of historical narratives which demonstrate that "whenever the socio-political division of the polis was felt to jeopardize its survival, the Eleusinian and Dionysiac cults provided a spur for a renewal of its unity, cohesion and solidarity" (81). For example, in several accounts of Cylon's *stasis* — Cylon was an archaic would-be tyrant — Athens is collectively purified and pacified by a holy man, Epimenides, through religious rituals. In late fifth century, the defacement of the Herms and the mock enactment of the Eleusinian Mysteries with

Alcebiades' involvement was simultaneously seen as an impious and an antidemocratic deed; in his return to Athens in 407 BC, Alcebiades decided to lead a procession of mystagogues and priests to Eleusis to restore his civic-and-religious reputation. A last example is Xenophon's account of the rise and fall of the Thirty, which draws a sharp contrast between the democratic and religious sentiments of the Athenians on the one hand, and the tyrants' escalating violence and impiety on the other. The peak of the tyrants' hubris was the massacre of the Eleusinians, designed to horrify the Athenians. However, the democrats won the ensuing battle in Piraeus, a battle which concluded with Cleocritus' plea for peace on a religious tone. After the fall of the regime of the Thirty in 403 BC, the democrats granted amnesty to the oligarchs not directly involved with the crimes of the Thirty. But while this political solution was flagrantly dictated by Sparta, as Xenophon explicitly acknowledges (2.4.38), Barzini underestimates the external intervention to allow room for his moral explanation, i.e. that "the democrats in Athens *chose* not to take revenge on their political opponents but embracing instead the [Eleusinian] values of peace and reconciliation" (105–6; my italics).

The second part of the book ("The plays") begins with another assumption taken for granted, concerning the intended audience of *Bacchae*: "Even if one accepts that Euripides may have composed *Bacchae* during his alleged stay [in Macedonia], he had his Athenian public in mind, and it is unlikely that he composed the play for a Macedonian audience. It is, I believe, implausible that such an openly anti-tyrannical play was intended to be performed at the court of a king known for his tyrannical and violent behaviour" (118). Several objections can be raised. Most important: if the play was *openly* anti-tyrannical, then Nietzsche's conception of Dionysus as cruel and Pentheus as a gentle-hearted ruler would not have "heavily influenced the literary criticism of the play" (125). From Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) to Stuttard's *Looking at Bacchae* (2016), Barzini notes in his literature review, scholars have focused too much on Dionysus' paradoxical nature in interpreting *Bacchae*, and missed the religious and political context of the play, as well as the categorization of Pentheus as a tyrant. This overstatement is largely explained by several gaps in Barzini's bibliography: Murray (1904) 88, Dodds (1960) xliii, *Diller (1968) 477, *Kirk (1970) 54, *Seidensticker (1972) 46, Segal (1982) 56 and *Pucci (2016) 160 are only some of those who characterise Pentheus a tyrant.²

2. An asterisk indicates absence from Barzini's bibliography. Throughout the book, the author is too often ready to comment that previous scholars have ignored or misinterpret

We have now —rather late— reached the heart of the book. The two plays focus on Athens' *domestic* politics, rather than the war with Sparta, Barzini argues, as they both present a crisis within the polis. In *Bacchae*, “the essential elements of the unity of the polis, its religion, communality and solidarity of equals, are in the hands of the maenads on Mount Cithaeron, while the royal palace lies in ruins and the male population stands in fear of its tyrant” (133). In *Frogs*, “the polis is torn between two sets of values in both parts of the play: those of the choral *thiasos* and those of the polis' current leaders in the first part, and those symbolized by Aeschylus on one side and by Euripides on the other in the second part” (137). In both cases, the cities need saving. A short historical diversion follows: according to the Decree of Demophantus in 410 BC, all Athenian citizens had to swear an oath each year, before the start of the City Dionysia festival, in front of the Stoa Basileios in the agora; an oath they would slay the enemies of democracy, a deed for which the Decree provided for legal and religious impunity (139–42). The place and timing of the oath had civic *and* religious significance, Barzini emphasises, but given that this historical information is not discussed in connection to either *Bacchae* or *Frogs*, the section would better fit the “Context” part. The only relevance I can see to what follows is the (rather self-evident) premise that location bears ideological significance.

The choice of Thebes as the setting of *Bacchae* is an expected one, given the longstanding Athenian preconception of Thebes as an impious, brutal, and tyrannical city, contrast to which stands democratic Athens. In Euripides' *Supplikes* this polarity is exemplified by the conflict between Creon and Theseus, and given that *Supplikes* is set in Eleusis and features several Eleusinian motifs, the audience is reminded of the anti-tyrannical nature of mystery cults (142–5). Now in *Bacchae* the polarity is more emphatic, with *eusebeia* personified by Dionysus and his *thiasoi*, and Pentheus being a perfect tyrant: an isolated ruler, ruling by force, with his “feverish but powerless hostility towards the cult of Dionysus” (147), an unfitting mental state and opposition to all civic and religious values of the community. Barzini's description of Pentheus is perspicacious —the most valuable part of the book— but the comparison with *Supplikes* raises more questions than it answers. If Pentheus is another (extreme) Cadmus, then does the author perceive Dionysus as another Theseus? It would be tempting, indeed,

different issues (pp. 5, 13, 14, 36, 37, 50, 53, 56, 101, 105, 117, 119, 121, 123, 131, 140, 151, 178, 181, 188) — a verdict which would require more exhaustive research.

to stress Dionysus' Athenian qualities, especially in a tragedy performed at the Dionysia, but the god explicitly says that he has not been to Athens yet (v.20). Or what about Cadmus in *Bacchae*, who is still a Cadmus but not impious? An axiomatic identification of impiety-and-tyranny with Thebes and of religiousness-and-democracy with Athens does not do justice to the complexity of the plays and their potentially ironical topography (i.e. Thebes as a metonymy for Athens).

Moving on, Barzini demonstrates how Dionysus was associated with Demeter in Classical Athens, and that both *Bacchae* and *Frogs* invest in that affinity. The pairing of the two deities was common in fifth-century poetry and particularly popularised in the age of Pericles —consider the east side of the Parthenon frieze— but the coexistence of their cults in Eleusis is archaeologically evidenced since at least the sixth century BC. In *Bacchae*, the two gods are connected mainly through Rhea and Cybele, but also directly on one occasion (vv. 274–80), while in *Frogs* the chorus invoking Iacchus and Demeter is explicitly composed of Eleusinian initiates (vv.324–416). The two deities share common qualities: they are both outsiders who bring financially and socially revolutionary gifts to humankind and promote collective endeavours. Therefore, Barzini argues, Euripides and Aristophanes advocate for a renewal of the polis, yet with a look at Athens' religious foundational myths (153–61). Such an intention is also apparent in the two plays' mystical locations, i.e. “the meadows of the goddess Demeter in Hades in *Frogs* and the Dionysiac wilderness of Mount Cithaeron in *Bacchae*. Both playwrights use the similar traditional idyllic images of wild nature to describe mental and physical places that may be termed as ‘liminal’ space-time ‘pods’ distant from the polis” (161).

Both plays feature mystical lights, fire and torches, as well as *thiasoi*-choruses, in what is effectively an enactment of mystery rituals on stage. The choruses, joyful and cohesive, prefigure the catharsis and communality of the restored polis. The chorus members function as fictional entities *and* as real-life worshipers of Dionysus, and thus their moral and political pleas, expressed in similar structure, formulaic expressions and solemn metres, are made “all the more religiously authoritative and collective” and have “a powerful effect on the plays' audiences” (167). To specify the moral content of the plays, Barzini discusses the concepts of σοφία, εὐδαιμονία, σοφροσύνη and εὐκοσμία in *Bacchae*, and σοφία —much more briefly— in *Frogs*: “These values are emphatically religious and civic, merging mystical wisdom and veneration for the divine with the civic primacy of self control, organization and order” (181).

The final section (“Political implications”) begins with the rash assumption that “Both authors had well-known political positions: Euripides may be considered a democrat [...] while Aristophanes had aristocratic views” (187). For the verdict on Euripides Barzini cites *Frogs* 954—he obviously means 952 (δημοκρατικὸν γὰρ αὐτ’ ἔδρων)—which is probably an ironical statement that receives Dionysus’ scorn (τοὔτο μὲν ἕασον, ᾧ τᾶν): giving voice to women and slaves was by no means democratic by Athenian standards.³ Aristophanes’ political profile is also anything but clear—for example, Sommerstein (1984) saw him as a supporter of radical reformation at old age and Sidwell found enough material to write *Aristophanes the Democrat* (2009). Nevertheless, Barzini rightly emphasises that both dramatists, regardless of their ideological differences, defended the same egalitarian and mystical values as solution to the polis’ crisis, “under the aegis of the deities Dionysus and Demeter” (192).

Some notes on copy-editing: bad syntax on p. 48 (“One of the rituals [...] was one of the Dionysiac festivals in Athens involved a woman.”); a typographical error in “sal23ving” (100); “Bacchae”, as a play title, not italicised (121); a missing space after “all citizens” (141); in the bibliography, Griffith 2011 should be 2013 and Segal 1982 should read “*Poetics*” instead of “*Poetica*”. Three notable omissions are Riu (1999), Gakopoulou (2012), and Corbato (1990).

Overall, the book offers a much informative, thought-provoking and well documented, but rather centrifugal discussion of Athenian mystery cults, drama, and politics. Most chapters give the impression of a loose collation of introductions to diverse topics, at times distractingly lengthy, rather than a progressive analysis of an argument. Despite the dense structure (44 sections for a main body of 194 pages), coherence is problematic for most part and several ideas/information are not followed up on (e.g. the discussion of the Decree of Demophantus). Each part of the book can be read autonomously, “Context” as a useful introduction to mystery cults, and “The plays” as what is announced in the title of the book.

3. See de Klerk (2020).

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