

BARZINI (L.) *Mystery Cults, Theatre, and Athenian Politics: A Reading of Euripides' Bacchae and Aristophanes' Frogs*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Pp. 266. £59.50. 9781350187320.

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Perhaps the best way to start this review is to quote the last paragraph of the conclusions:

Despite the opposite political stances of the authors, *Bacchae* and *Frogs* share a similar ethical and political vision. Political equality, adherence to the traditional values and rituals of mystery cults, class reconciliation and observance of the polis' constitutional system, common to the two plays, are the basis on which the crisis of the Athenian polis can be resolved, and civic cohesion restored (198).

This is a perfect summary of the main thesis of this comparative study of the works mentioned in the title.

The structure of the book contributes to the strength of the arguments. We find a first part giving a contextual panorama in support of the analysis of both works, *Bacchae* and *Frogs*. In Chapter 1, having underlined the strong religious and civic content of both plays, Luigi Barzini describes the traits of the Eleusinian rite and the Dionysian festival to show their significance for the involvement of everybody – citizens and non-citizens, men and women – in those fundamental religious activities.

Chapter 2 starts with an ethnological perspective (the comparison of Athenian mystery cults with 'pre-modern cults'), followed by an analysis of Plato's and Plutarch's opinions and imagery of the afterlife and initiation experiences and, finally, a comparative description of the imagery used in modern near-death experiences. In Chapter 3 Barzini sees a reason for the success of *Bacchae* and *Frogs* in the fact that a good part of the spectators of both works were initiated into the mysteries; he uses the term 'inclusiveness' (as much in social as in gender terms) as a feature of theatrical performances.

Chapter 4 is mainly dedicated to the effect of the performance on the audience, with Aristotle's ἐκπληξίς ('extraordinary passion' in Barzini's translation, 52) and κάθαρσις ('purification') as representative terms. Barzini underlines that the use of the *aulos* (associated with ecstasy) is a significant link between the cult of Dionysus and theatre performances and presents an interesting analysis of the relationship between chorus and audience, sharing what he calls 'mystical values forming a common, civic and religious discourse' (63). In Chapter 5, we find a study of the features of two literary works that contribute to our understanding of the deep relationship between mystical experience, performance and civic context. The first is the *Hymn to Demeter*, in which Barzini finds three special values, described as the political role of Demeter, the response of the socially and gender inclusive polis and the change in the social structure presented by the hymn, where the rulers become the cult's ministers. As for the *Oresteia*, we find there a deep intermingling of religious experience (with allusions to mystery rites) and political evolution: in fact, an important feature underlined by the author is the anti-tyrannical orientation of the trilogy. Finally, in Chapter 6, the author develops the idea of the strong anti-tyrannical orientation of Athenian democracy, by analysing some historical episodes where the concept of *stasis* plays an important role. For different reasons Epimenides, Miltiades, Telines and Alcibiades, the protagonists of decisive moments in Athenian democracy, as well as events like the Arginusae trial or the overthrow of the Thirty, are studied in Part One, thus composing a well-defined picture of the ideological context of *Bacchae* and *Frogs*.

The second part of the book is centred on the plays. In Chapter 7, an important novelty in the study of the *Bacchae* is that, according to Barzini, Pentheus is characterized by Euripides as a tyrant (and that *Bacchae* was composed in Athens). *Bacchae* and *Frogs* coincide, despite the

logical differences, in the defence of traditional political values and the need to stop civic confrontation; very importantly, both authors agree on the importance of mystery cults as essential for civic harmony. Barzini supports this idea through an analysis of the elements of both plays. In Chapter 8, he develops the idea that ‘the crisis of the polis is at the very core of the two plays’ (131). Very simply, we could say that he sees the *Bacchae* as a confrontation between the tyrant and the community ‘of equals’, represented in this case by the maenads, who are supported by the male components of the polis. In the same way, Aristophanes, via the chorus, makes a strong defence of positive traditional values, foregrounding the importance of festivals as a substantial means for the cohesion of the polis.

Chapter 9 underlines the roles of Dionysus and Demeter as benefactors of humanity and, consequently, of the city. Under this frame, the functional assimilation of both deities is reinforced through the profile of Dionysus as a chthonian god, a fact of special importance in relation to the cult at Eleusis (Iacchus) and linked to the Orphic orientation of Dionysism. The link connecting Dionysism, the cult of Demeter, prosperity and civic cohesion pervades *Bacchae* and *Frogs* to some extent, as can be detected in the interventions of the choruses, as much in the contents as in the choice of vocabulary, allusions and concepts. In the final main chapter, the author reinforces his argument about the proximity of the plays analysed, despite the ‘different political outlooks’ of Euripides and Aristophanes. Mystical initiation and participation in collective rituals are paralleled to moral virtue and presented as fundamental for civic concord and proper political activity. Both plays coincide in this nuclear idea. And, of course, poets have a primordial role as ‘educators’ of the citizens in the spirit of egalitarianism, concord and respect for traditional religion.

After the conclusions (197–98), succinctly summarizing the main ideas, follow notes (199–233), references (235–49) and an index (251–60).

I substantially agree with Barzini’s approach, as can be verified in two of my papers, mainly (but not only) centred on *Frogs*: ‘Las Ranas de Aristófanes y la religión de los atenienses’, in A. López Eire (ed.), *Sociedad, política y literatura. Comedia griega antigua* (Salamanca 1997), 197–217, and ‘Religion, Theater, and the Salvation of the City: Some Thoughts on Aristophanes’ *Frogs*’, *Studia Philologica Valentina* 18, n.s. 15 (2016), 449–68. Perhaps I would not be so optimistic regarding the use of the term ‘inclusiveness’ (specially with reference to women), but I think that, in general terms, Barzini has contributed to a better interpretation of *Bacchae* and *Frogs* in the context of the decisive and delicate historical period in which they were performed. Once again, we can verify that ‘religion’ is not an independent category in the frame of Greek culture: theatre, festivals, civic life, political decisions are permeated by the category ‘religion’. This book is a good contribution to our knowledge of this unrepeatable moment that is the Athenian democracy of the fifth century BC.

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BIRD (R.) *Sophrosune in the Greek Novel: Reading Reactions to Desire* (Bloomsbury Classical Studies Monographs). London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Pp. vi + 235. £85. 9781350108646.*
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If one theme can be said to unite the diverse group of texts known as the ancient Greek novels, it would be erotic love. Rachel Bird tackles this familiar issue from a fresh angle by

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