

Thumiger, C. 2007. *Hidden Paths. Self & Characterization in Greek Tragedy: Euripides' Bacchae* (Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies Supplement, 99). London, University of London Institute of Classical Studies. xvi, 266 p. Pr. £30.00 (pb).

This book is first and foremost a study of character in Euripides' *Bacchae*, a play shown by Thumiger (henceforth T.) to be "extreme", not only chronologically (it premiered posthumously in 405 BC and belongs with *Iphigenia at Aulis* to the 'late' extant Euripidean plays) but also thematically. Moreover, the study explicitly aims at providing "a reading of characterization in Greek literature, and especially in tragedy, as function of a wider 'view of the self'" (p. 1). This twofold aim is reflected in the structure of the book: it first offers a model necessary to tackle character depiction in Greek literature up to Euripides (Chapter I) and subsequently deals with characterization in *Bacchae* and this tragedy's place within the genre (Chapters II-IV). The four chapters are preceded by a short introduction (1-2) and followed by a conclusion (213-7), tables (219-31), a bibliography (233-59) and indexes (261-6).

In the first chapter ("Character and the Greek View of Man", 3-57), T. gives a concise, critical survey of the literature discussing the representation of the self in Greek thought (3-11) and foregrounds a number of its characteristic aspects in "literary embodiments from Homer to tragedy" (11), among which an analogy between man and world typical of pre-Platonic Greek thought will be one of the central notions informing the subsequent analyses. She then focuses on notions of *tragic* character and presents her own approach as a synthesis ("composite", 22) of the representational ("humanist-behaviourist", 19) and textual (character as an artificial product, 19-20) strands found in modern-day scholarship.<sup>1)</sup> In order to pinpoint the often-noted 'meagreness' (the "disregard of the daily and the idiosyncratic", 3) of tragic character, she introduces a useful distinction between 'sense of individuality' ("attention to the concrete and the private particulars which shape one's individual, daily life", 23) and 'psychological depth' ("a profound attention to human motivation, to the deepest mechanisms of decision-making, to the emotional sphere and relationships with others", 23), and explores these notions in

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<sup>1)</sup> In view of some of the items dealt with in the subsequent chapters, some attention to other scholarly approaches to character would have allowed a fuller contextualization. The distinction between actantial and representational approaches to character (cf. Rimmon-Kenan, S. <sup>2</sup>2002. *Narrative Fiction. Contemporary Poetics*. London/New York, Routledge, 34-6 on 'being or doing'), for example, could have been a useful complement, particularly in view of the discussion of character as represented through action and character development in *Bacchae* (167-71).

some examples of Greek literature before the advent of tragedy. She observes a lyric ('analytic') sense of individuality that is profoundly different from the tragic ('synthetic') mode (26-30)<sup>2</sup> and then proceeds to discuss some aspects of psychological depth in examples from Homer to tragedy. These are decision-making (30-41) and relationships both with the gods (41-9) and with the community (49-52). Her conclusion is that meagreness in characterization is a specific trait of the 'sense of individuality' in Greek tragedy, whereas psychological depth is developed "according to the worldview presented by the single play or author" (57). Although this is illustrated with good examples which are analyzed convincingly, the book's general claims about character in 'Greek literature' are perhaps somewhat disproportionate to the relatively limited number of texts investigated.

The textual analyses of *Bacchae* consist of two parts. Firstly, T. discusses verbal instantiations of character representation, dividing her attention between the self as secluded from interpersonal relations (the 'private self', Chapter II) and the self in its interrelation with others (the 'relational self', Chapter III). Secondly, she focuses on so-called 'supra-personal' aspects of characterization (Chapter IV), somewhat vaguely defined as aspects which are "not directly expressive of personal identity" (implying, incorrectly I think, that all aspects discussed in Chapters II and III are), "but that nevertheless contribute to the view of man or the world held in the text, and therefore affect characterization" (163). Chapter II ("Verbal Instantiations of Character Representation in the *Bacchae*: The 'Private Self'", 59-106) argues convincingly that the treatment of madness (60-86), disease (86-100) and the motif of tying and freeing (100-6) sets *Bacchae* apart from the characteristic norms of earlier tragedies. Whereas the development of these points in Homer and earlier tragedy implies an objectified worldview and a belief in a firm systemic order, she argues, the multiplicity of viewpoints and the lack of self-referentiality and self-awareness in *Bacchae* imply a more subjective, internalized and personalized view of character. (The definitions of externalization vs. internalization, self-awareness vs. unawareness and objectification vs. subjectification on p. 95 are crucial and would have allowed smoother reading if provided earlier in the book.) Character in *Bacchae* is less readable, ultimately incommunicable and correlates with a deconstructive worldview.

In Chapter III ("Verbal Instantiations of Character Representation in the *Bacchae*: The 'Relational Self'", 107-61), T. develops and corroborates this idea by

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<sup>2</sup> The contributions by R. Nünlist ("Pindar and Bacchylides", 233-51), J. Barrett ("Aeschylus", 255-73), I.J.F. de Jong ("Sophocles", 275-92) and M.A. Lloyd ("Euripides", 293-304) in de Jong, I.J.F., Nünlist, R. (eds.) 2007. *Time in Ancient Greek Literature. Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative*, II. Leiden/Boston, Brill, which appeared more or less simultaneously with T.'s book, may offer useful additional reading.

observing a profound and systematic problematization of both natural and cultural constructions of character (seeing, 108-28; animal representation, 128-38; family relationships, 138-45; wilderness and city, 146-61) which no longer offer a safe reference for human self-definition and dramatic characterization as provided in earlier tragedies. These differences between *Bacchae* and earlier tragedy offer T. an example of what she considers to be a contiguity underlying literary representation of world and man, namely that a weaker view of the world-system corresponds to a less externalized, less objective and more personalized representation of man. She is careful not to present these differences as clear-cut oppositions, but as a matter of degree (although this is not conveyed by the overview on p. 95, where the table does not seem to leave much room for gradations) and even as an evolutionary process from epic and early tragedy to Euripides' *Bacchae* (e.g., "a drifting away", 81; "not... readable... any longer", 82; "a world which is no longer... understandable", 163). Like the second chapter, this chapter offers sharp observations which make for stimulating reading (for example, the exploration of the relations between seeing and knowing and the discussion of focalization as a characterizing activity of the self, 111-21).

Chapter IV ("Tragedy and Character: Narrative Facts, Stylistic Facts and the View of Man", 163-212) argues that a number of narratological aspects (such as plot, time and metatheatrical aspects; 164-89) and stylistic aspects (189-212) in *Bacchae* contribute to the internalized, idiosyncratic and non-communicable representation of character observed in Chapters II and III. Here, the persuasiveness of some claims would have profited from a more detailed discussion of earlier material. Examples are the representation of character in *Bacchae* as a departure from usual typologies (164-5) and the use of simile and metaphor in pre-Platonic literature (190-6). Whereas T.'s claim that the general absence of striking metaphors or similes in Euripides, and *Bacchae* in particular, is to be connected with a change in the view of man and the representation of character is persuasive, her explanation of the difference between metaphor and simile as "a different articulation of subjective and objective" (196) risks downplaying authorial agency and freedom to privilege the exhaustive and systemic nature of the proposed reading.

To conclude: this elegant book offers an incisive analysis which makes for stimulating reading and is informed by a thorough knowledge of both primary and secondary sources. It will undoubtedly be of interest to students of Euripides (and tragedy in general) and literary characterization alike. T.'s readings of character reveal particularly well the presence of three distinct but interrelated layers of relativism in *Bacchae*. (In this respect, the Aeschylean example discussed on pp. 93-4 is emblematic of one of the book's major points.) Firstly, *Bacchae* problematizes a trust in a systemic worldview, thus thematizing, I would say, relativism on an ontological level. Secondly, it also foregrounds relativism of an epistemological kind, by questioning the belief that reality is reliable and knowable. Finally, it

challenges the possibility of communication in a straightforward manner, thus thematizing a communicative type of relativism. T. convincingly demonstrates that these three levels of relativism set Euripides' *Bacchae* apart from the epic and earlier tragic traditions. On the other hand, a case could be made that they are also conspicuously reminiscent of the three types of *skepsis* foregrounded in (more or less contemporary) sophistic philosophy (notably by Gorgias),<sup>3)</sup> an examination of which could have offered useful contextualization of the 'new' view of character and world as developed by Euripides.

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<sup>3)</sup> See, for example, Sextus Empiricus, *Contra Mathematicos* 7.83-6 on Gorgias.