



Honig's *Bacchae* / Euripides' Theory of Refusal

In December 2020, I was privileged to read an advance copy of a new book by the distinguished political theorist Bonnie Honig—already known to classicists for her significant rereading of the political possibilities of Antigone in *Antigone, Interrupted*. This new book, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, is based on the Flexner Lectures that Honig gave at my home institution of Bryn Mawr College in 2017, and it returns to Greek tragedy as both provocation and springboard for her vital and creative ideas. This time, she works with Euripides' *Bacchae*, and it immediately seemed to me that the book demanded response from classicists both as textual scholars and as civic subjects thinking about how classics may be used and misused in the world.

Then, on January 6, 2021, came the insurrection at the US Capitol, and the idea of responding to *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* gained urgency. After all, the rioters at the Capitol were practising a politics of refusal too, though certainly not a feminist one, and they too were mobilizing themes and motifs from classics; and the results were ugly and violent and incalculably damaging to the body politic. We are still reckoning with their bitter effects, both within the US and elsewhere in the world, and we shall be doing so for a long time.

What, then, should a *feminist* theory of refusal look like? How does the *Bacchae* help us to realize that vision? And how might we expand upon it?

In *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, Bonnie Honig uses scenes from the *Bacchae* to develop a fierce feminist activism that is grounded, paradoxically, in a refusal to act—or rather, to act within prescribed patriarchal frameworks—and she treats the retreat of the Theban Bacchae to Mount Cithaeron as a paradigm of this refusal. Honig uses Giorgio Agamben's "inoperativity" but reads beyond it to show how women may reclaim inaction for their own use in the heterotopia they construct—and

then return to engage in political action. She then mobilizes Adriana Cavarero's theory of "inclination," arguing that the women on Cithaeron model a "postural ethics" grounded not, as Cavarero envisages, in the maternal, but in sisterhood. Honig argues that this "inclination" need not be passive or pacific; on the contrary, it is these counter-patriarchal ethics that lead directly to the regicide of Pentheus. Finally, Honig uses Saidiya Hartman's notion of "fabulation" to elucidate what is at stake for the women in their return to the city at the end of the play—a return that Hartman would construct as of dubious value but that Honig embraces as a corollary to their politics of refusal. Without accepting the agonistic stance of return, the heterotopian retreat on Cithaeron will always be vulnerable to invasion or erasure.

To think through the implications of *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, I convened a panel of classicists at the meetings of the Society for Classical Studies in January 2022, and Bonnie Honig herself graciously agreed to act as a respondent. The participants in the panel each have very different approaches and theoretical formations, but they are united by their passionate engagement with questions of how classical themes, and specifically those of Greek tragedy, may speak to us in the present. This special issue of *Classical Antiquity* is the result of that panel. It is a snapshot of a specific moment of conversation—but, I think, a particularly stimulating one.

By happy chance, each of the three papers published here privileges a different one of the theoretical frameworks with which Honig engages the *Bacchae* and challenges it to disclose aspects of a new and revivifying politics. I have presented them, therefore, in the order suggested by the book that is their inspiration. First, Luigi Battezzato takes up the theme of inoperativity and applies it not to the Theban bacchantes, who are Honig's primary concern, but to the chorus of Asian bacchantes. He explores the tension between the two groups, and presses particularly on the nature of the regicide—the murder of Pentheus, which is crucial to Honig's argument—and their divergent responses to it. Next, Ava Shirazi thinks with and beyond Cavarero's inclination and Honig's postural ethics, mobilizing the body and its postures "as it emerges from the text of drama" (below, p.17). Shirazi departs from the *Bacchae* to provide a reading of the prone body of Hecuba in Euripides' *Troades*, taking that body as emblematic of a posture of refusal. In the course of her reading, she brilliantly encapsulates the politics of *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* as animated by "a recuperative mode of reading that works around and against the archive" (below, p.22). Finally, Helen Morales uses a work by the contemporary Black artist Kehinde Wiley to prompt two fundamental challenges to Honig's own use of fabulation: what about Dionysus? and what about the madness of the Theban bacchantes? In Honig's account, the first is decentered, the second depathologized. But, Morales asks, even as she also sows the seeds of her own doubt, is madness in fact essential for political action?

The original panel also included a paper by Vanessa Stovall, "'Actin' Womanish"—Fabulation, Cosmetics, and (En)gendered Sophistry with Euripides and Hartman in Bacch(ant)ic Canon." Stovall has developed her thoughts at far

greater length and will be publishing her paper elsewhere; but her most significant contribution, for our purposes here, was to insist on the importance of music in the way we think about the *Bacchae* and devise our responses to it. Emphasizing the power of fabulation, as her title suggests, Stovall attended to and played with the role of Sappho in the development of tragic music and (following the work of Joshua Billings) in the assertion of dramatic *muthos* over philosophical *logos*. Like Battezzato, Stovall focused on the chorus, but expanded her scope to other choruses both Euripidean and wholly contemporary, enjoining us to *hear* them, not just (with Hartman and Honig) to register their presence. “Euripides,” she says, “is one of Sappho’s sons.”

We conclude here with Bonnie Honig’s thoughtful and generous response to all four papers. This is partly why I describe this volume as a snapshot. The conversation was so rich, and the ideas engendered so multivocal, each suggesting further routes of inquiry, that we were obliged to freeze the exchange in time—or it could have become an endless regression of revisions and counter-arguments. Suffice it to say that for each of the contributors this is the beginning of a conversation, not the end; and I hope that readers too will feel some of the excitement and open-endedness of the exchange in the papers collected here.

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