

Euripides

bakkhai

Translated by Anne Carson

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REVIEWED BY KAY GABRIEL

Specters of Dying Empire: The Case of Carson's Bacchae

What's at stake in the desire called Anne Carson, the Canadian classicist, poet, and translator? Carson seems to thrive on enigma, and she's done so happily since the 1980's when she left academic classics for a wildly successful writing career. Her over 20 published titles include widely read translations of Sappho and the Greek tragedians (*If Not, Winter*, 2002; *An Oresteia*, 2010), non-fiction on classical themes (*Eros the Bittersweet*, 1986; *Economy of the Unlost*, 1999), and creative adaptations of Stesichorus and Sophocles (*Autobiography of Red*, 1996; *Antigonick*, 2012). But Carson's poetic practice draws primarily on a range of formal techniques she discovers in a 20th-century canon of modernism and the avant-garde. So while in content Carson updates ancient Greek texts, in form she adapts Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, H.D., Samuel Beckett, and Paul Celan, among others.

This alignment produces a *frisson* of transgression, a little thrill of thumbing your nose at the canon. It's about as punk as cutting school to go read in a park, but more than occasionally Carson's work scandalizes professional classicists. In 2012, George Steiner reviewed Carson's *Antigonick*, an adaptive translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*. "Translation should embody an act of thanks to the original," Steiner blustered. Carson's apparently didn't: a "vulgarit[y that] subverts this most adult, unsparingly formal, and radiant of masterpieces." As Steiner's literary pearl-clutching shows, Carson provokes chagrin in an academic old-guard. But it's unclear from

this irritation what Carson's would-be transgressive classicism actually enables, beyond a breath of fresh air from academic cloisters and ponderously faithful translations.

Carson's translation of Euripides' *Bacchae*, released from New Directions in late 2017, provides another chance to ask this question. A synopsis if you aren't familiar: produced posthumously in 405 BCE, the *Bacchae* relates the story of the god Dionysus' arrival in the Greek city of Thebes. The ruling house of Thebes resists adopting his cult, so he drives the women mad and sends them out of the city to Mount Cithaeron to observe his ritual practices. Dionysus then engineers the humiliation and demise of Pentheus, the king of Thebes and his cousin. He makes Pentheus lose his senses, dress in the clothes of a female worshipper of Dionysus, and spy on the women's rituals on Cithaeron. Pentheus is discovered and ripped apart by his mother Agave, who suffers exile along with her father Cadmus. The curtain falls on a whole new Thebes and a gory pile of limbs.

Generically Carson's *Bacchae*, transliterated in her preferred style as *Bakkhai*, sits between the recreative urges of *Antigonick* and her more straightforward translations of Greek tragedy represented in her *Electra* (Oxford UP, 2001) or *Grief Lessons: Four Plays By Euripides* (NYRB, 2006): Carson's version adheres broadly to Euripides' Greek, albeit frequently torqued in form and idiom. But Carson specifies that Euripides himself licenses this innovative formal play. As she writes on the back cover copy:

Euripides was a playwright of the 5th century BC who reinvented Greek tragedy, setting it on a path that leads straight to reality TV. His plays broke all the rules, upended convention and outraged conservative critics.

This assertion aligns Carson's *Bacchae* with her translation of Euripides' *Orestes* in Carson's volume *An Oresteia* (FSG, 2010): "[Euripides] has revolutionary instincts," she writes. "He wants to shatter and shock. He goes about it subversively. Leaving the external structure of the myth and the traditional form

of the play intact, he allows everything inside to go a tiny bit awry.” In other words, a mirror of Carson’s own practice, at least as she appears to imagine her work: the renovator of traditional forms who pushes tradition over the edge of a crisis.

This image of Euripides as Athenian tragedy’s modernizing enfant terrible isn’t unique to Carson. But she illustrates this assertion in her *Orestes* translation by way of a highly particular figure: the effeminacy of the Trojan slave in the *Orestes*, “a sort of hysterical Trojan version of Venus Xtravaganza” (2010, 177). Carson’s nod to Xtravaganza—a Latina trans woman and ballroom drag performer profiled in Jennie Livingston’s 1991 documentary *Paris is Burning*—is a curiously presentist gesture, a too-timely attempt at shock value through the citation of contemporary trans experience to explain the force of Euripides’ xenophobic messenger speech.

In fact, this association of radical Euripidean form and feminizing gender transition characterizes Carson’s take on the *Bacchae* as well. Her introductory paragraph goes on:

The *Bakkhai* is [Euripides’] most subversive play, telling the story of a man who cannot admit he would rather live in the skin of a woman, and a god who seems to combine all sexualities into a single ruinous demand for adoration.

In Euripides’ play, the god Dionysus humiliates Pentheus, king of Thebes, by dressing him in the clothes of a female Bacchant before leading him offstage to his death. In Carson’s interpretation, this robing scene actually discloses Pentheus’ repressed transsexual desire. Carson again splices a present configuration of gender together with a 2400-year-old representation of transvestism. This interpretation is, to put it bluntly, bizarre, either a baldly anachronistic reading of Euripides’ play or a cynical publishers’ ploy to drive up sales among a voyeuristic cisgender readership eager to consume a titillating trans narrative with an especially violent conclusion.

Either way, Carson has tipped her hand twice, in two translations, by the insinuation that Euripides stays thoroughly modern by the invocation of a feminizing costume, in Carson's hands fused to the specter of 20th- and 21st-century transsexuality. If Carson uses her Super Saiyan avant-garde Euripides as a mirror of her own work, then the pertinent question becomes: what does Carson think the spectacle of feminizing gender variance—in other words, drag—has to do with her translations, even her own poetic practice in sum?

One possible answer: within a certain highly transphobic imagination, a drag-affiliated constellation of gendered sensibilities offers a symptom of cultural decadence. “Euripides presents a twilight where everything is susceptible to tricks of a fading light,” Carson writes in her introduction to *An Oresteia*, quoting the Broadway director Brian Kulick. Where Carson imagines Euripides as a transitional figure, renovating tragedy in the throes of imperial decline, drag then appears to offer her a little window-dressing for her fin-de-siècle ambience—think of the Emcee in *Cabaret*. From this perspective drag symptomatizes, albeit superficially, the anarchic energies of historical break.

But Carson in fact deploys drag to a significantly more programmatic effect as a site of transgressive pleasure and desire on analogy with the aesthetic transgressions of the avant-garde. Her *Bacchae* elevates this analogy into whole historical sensibility mediated by the figure of an avant-garde Euripides. This emerges in the poem Carson appends to the beginning of her translation by way of an introduction. “Dionysus is god / of the beginning / before the beginning,” she writes, gnominically inquiring about “what makes beginnings special”:

Beginnings are special
because most of them are fake.
The new person you become
with that first sip of wine

was already there.
Look at Pentheus
twirling around in a dress,

so pleased with his girl-guise
he's almost in tears.
Are we to believe

this desire is new?
Why was he keeping
that dress in the back

of his closet anyhow?

Carson presents here the seeds of a tidy philosophy of history: “beginnings,” the pretensions of the declaratively and historically new, turn out in her account to indicate a primordial essence (say, a Dionysian “beginning before the beginning”). Pentheus services an elaborate metaphor for Carson’s purposes: she discovers a whole historiography figured in the pleasures of drag, which she provocatively argues to have always been present. This verges onto an ontology: Dionysus reveals what you *really* are; just look at Pentheus.

The punchline arrives in the introduction as in the play itself, in the narrative shift from the pleasures of wine and ritual clothing to ruinous anti-social violence. She continues, describing the women engaged in the ritual worship of Dionysus:

This is the world before men.
Then the posse arrives

and violence begins.
What does this tell us?

The shock of the new

will prepare its own unveiling
in old and brutal ways.
Dionysus does not

explain or regret
anything. He is
pleased

if he can cause you to perform,
despite your plan,
despite your politics ...

something quite previous,

the desire
before the desire,
the lick of beginning to know you don't know.

If life is a stage,
this is the show.
Exit Dionysus.

The narrative effect that Carson introduces is, effectively, a theoretical primitivism: the radically new doesn't just turn out to be quintessentially "quite previous," it also causally reintroduces a primal violence onto the historical scene. As dialectics of enlightenment go, Carson's is anticipated by the anthropologist René Girard in his 1972 tract *Violence and the Sacred*. Girard's account congregates around Dionysus as a figure for the containment of primordial human violence via the ritual act of sacrifice. In Girard's textbook structuralism, the violent outbursts of the *Bacchae* derive from the dissolution of canonical distinctions—women,

men; humans, gods; humans, beasts—and the final *sparagmos* restores the social order via the sacrificial paradigm.

Girard divides his attention between readings of Greek tragedy on the one hand and intervals of an imperialist epistemology on the other, documenting social practices in the global colonial periphery. On loan to Girard's primitivism, the worst excesses of this racist fantasy are nonetheless suppressed in Carson's version: all that remains is the formal appeal to originary violence, Carson's "beginning before the beginning" that takes the form of an authentic Dionysian primal scene. But even this stratum is an arch-ideological effect, a colonialist imaginary that equivocates between some Conradian heart of darkness supposedly animating Greek tragedy and a pre-civilizational violence presumed to characterize the objects of European imperialism.

Still, Carson varies from Girard to the degree that sacrifice in her version offers no resolution to a social crisis but only initiates its anarchic unfolding. "The posse arrives," in her version, "and violence begins... The shock of the new / unfolds its own unveiling / in old and brutal ways." By citing a cliché ("the shock of the new") used to designate a canon of modernism, Carson implicates the 20th century in her vision of nightmarish progress. The apocalyptic tones of this conclusion bound over Eliot's melancholic handwriting on the "futility and anarchy of contemporary life" towards a Yeatsian poetics of total social disaster, which the peaceable tones of Carson's stoic authorial persona narrate from an unruffled remove.

But here the force of Carson's deployment of drag as a metaphor becomes clear. Her introduction proceeds in sequence from Pentheus putting on the dress with pleasure, to the male incursion into the women's ritual gatherings, to the conclusive Dionysian violence that proceeds, as Carson says, "despite your plan / despite your politics." This narrative sequence discloses a formal argument: the phantasm of a nebulous trans desire precipitates a climactic dissolution of the social. Complete with the critical detail of the

male intrusion into a separated female realm of the social, the apocalyptic progression of this narrative recalls Janice Raymond's 1979 *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, an infamous document of anti-trans feminism directed against the specter of the "medically constructed transsexual" infiltrating women's movements.

So in Carson's hands a spectacular constellation of trans-inflected desires and behaviors represents less a mere symptom of social catastrophe than its privileged figure. What does this have to say for her translational practice? Or, to rephrase this question: how does Carson situate her poetics in the vortex of her historical sensibility? Carson marshals a narrative of vertiginous collapse implicating her own moment: a direct line advances, she writes, from Euripides to reality TV. This rewrites Eliot's "direct line between antiquity and contemporaneity" into an aggressive analogy between the most immediate present—say, season 9 of *RuPaul's Drag Race*?—and the 5th-century B.C.E. Athenian empire. The common term that mediates this analogy is "imperial decline."

Here the curious double function of Euripides as transitional figure discloses its full force: recall that Euripides in Carson's hands is both a metonym for imperial "twilight" and a writer with "revolutionary instincts" who "wants to shatter and shock." In other words, a writer just shy of a climactic rupture, stuck in an old regime and ruthlessly paddling towards the sublime new. If this is the function of the avant-garde in an unfolding crisis, then in the privileged figure of drag that we may now name without qualification as a transphobic phantom Carson discovers all the transgressive pleasures and all the cataclysmic undertones that animate her would-be subversive classicism.

Carson therefore ignores the realities of trans lives in attempting to achieve a historical narrative via the operations of metaphor. She thereby betrays a theoretical tendency that Viviane Namaste diagnosed already in 2000 in her book *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. Namaste asserts that the queer theory that had come to prominence in the

1990's used drag as a metaphor of social relations in general by dodging a confrontation with the social realities of trans lives in particular. She offers as an example Judith Butler's citation of (once again!) Venus Xtravaganza's life in Butler's book *Bodies that Matter*. Writing about Xtravaganza's murder by a client, Butler asserts that her death represents "a tragic misreading of the social map of power." Namaste rebuts:

Since Butler has reduced Xtravaganza's transsexuality to allegory, she cannot conceptualize the specificity of violence with which transsexuals, especially transsexual prostitutes, are faced. This, to my mind, is the most tragic misreading of all.

It should be amply clear by now that Carson falls into a nearly identical trap via her opportunistic overreading that unites Pentheus' Bacchant costume with transsexual desire. The deployment of trans people always as a figure for something else entirely is sheer stigma raised to the level of rhetorical effect.

Worse yet, Carson advances her historical allegory in the service of what we can now recognize as a staunch cultural conservatism. Her historical narrative accords—ironically!—with a proposal infamously advanced by none other than George Steiner in 1961, the contention that the moral universe of tragedy no longer had anything to say to the anarchic world of the present. Carson, in effect, demonstrates her fidelity to Steiner's position in the common ideological ground of that empty abstraction called "modernity": Carson agrees with Steiner on the anarchy of the present, and disagrees only in that she continues to translate Greek tragedy for New Directions. This catastrophism ultimately gives way to a political quietism utterly out of sync with those who have a stake in the alteration and overcoming of the world as we know it. That it takes the shape of an exploitative deployment of trans lives in the mode of historical allegory demonstrates the hard limits of Carson's project in means and ends at once.