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## Reviewed Work: *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* by Helene P. Foley

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**Disciplines**

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**Comments**

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HELENE P. FOLEY. *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides*. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1985. Pp. 285.

By focusing on the representation of sacrificial ritual in Euripides' plays, this book addresses a topic of central importance for the understanding of Euripides and of tragedy in general. The importance of the topic derives from the formal and functional affinities between tragedy and ritual (clearly present

whether or not they hold the key to tragedy's origins) and from the prominence of sacrificial ritual in contemporary theories about one of tragedy's recurrent preoccupations, the nature of human culture. The topic is also of particular importance for Euripides because ritual practice incorporates the confrontation between religious mystery and ordinary experience that Euripides repeatedly made problematic through his discordantly quotidian recreations of heroic myths.

Foley's treatment begins with a long introductory chapter in which she outlines the characteristically Euripidean ambiguities that cluster around the motif of sacrifice, summarizes what is known about actual sacrificial practice in the classical period, and surveys modern theories about the role of sacrifice in society. This theoretical section involves a painstaking examination and classification of various accounts of how in sacrifice violence is transformed to perform a civilizing function, whether by defining members of a community and establishing relations between men, gods, and animals (e.g., Vernant, Detienne) or by recreating primitive violence in a contained and obscured form (e.g., Meuli, Burkert, Girard). But at the end of it, Foley concludes that such theory can be used only selectively and cautiously by a literary critic treating fictional representations of sacrifice rather than the real thing. Foley's distancing of her project from cultural theory turns out to accord well with the plays themselves, for her subsequent analyses of specific depictions of ritual yield far more clarification of Euripides' artistic achievement than of his perspective on the issues raised by theorists of culture.

The rest of the book comprises four long chapters, each analyzing a single late tragedy in which the death of one or more human beings is treated metaphorically as a sacrificial ritual: the *Iphigenia in Aulis*, the *Phoenissae*, the *Heracles*, and the *Bacchae*. In each of these rich and insightful discussions, Foley makes a persuasive case for ritual as the arena in which the multiple issues raised by the play converge and are — to the extent possible — resolved. Particularly compelling is her persistent sense of how the actions in Euripides' dramas are charged with a self-consciously literary significance as part of the poet's ongoing meditation on his role as a reteller of old stories. Thus the ritual actions that resolve immediate, essentially political crises in the lives of the characters are shown also to resolve poetic crises posed by Euripides' uneasy relation to past tradition as embodied in inherited myths. In the *Iphigenia in Aulis* and the *Phoenissae*, the voluntary self-sacrifices of Iphigenia and Menoeceus not only safeguard a faltering military venture, but also bring the plot of the play back in line with the traditional myth from which it was beginning to diverge. Similarly, those actions, like no others in those plays, partake of the glorious spirit of the past evoked in the choral odes, and so create a bridge between the plot and the lyrics that is simultaneously a bridge between a largely corrupt present and a heroic past.

Thus one of Foley's main themes is Euripides' use of ritual as a way of accommodating traditional notions of heroism to the contemporary world of democratic Athens, a project on which she focuses in her discussion of the *Heracles*. There Theseus' institution of a new cult of Heracles in Athens to resolve the crisis occasioned by Heracles' horrifically misbegotten sacrifice allows for a

revision of the violent heroism and the aristocratic preeminence associated with Heracles in the epic and epinician traditions. Ritual thus emerges in the *Heraclides* as a means by which human beings can formalize and come to terms with violent and bewilderingly unforeseeable experiences. That view also informs Foley's discussion of the *Bacchae*, in which she is almost exclusively concerned with the play's explicit demonstration that drama itself shares ritual's distancing and ordering function.

In her treatments of Iphigenia's and Menoeceus' voluntary sacrifices and of Theseus' incorporation of Heracles into Athenian religious life, Foley is able to show us Euripides finding moments of redemption even in a world seen through resolutely unsentimental eyes. Her focus on ritual thus allows her to play an essentially redemptive role as a critic. Her interpretations rescue Euripides from the charges that his plays are clumsily constructed, marred by a lack of connection between the actions and the lyrics, and blighted by cynicism.

But Foley is also aware, as her title signals, that those redemptive moments are highly tenuous, that ritual as Euripides presents it is always tainted by its links to violence, its service to morally questionable divinities, and its situation in a corrupt world. Thus it becomes as difficult to associate Euripides with a stable conception of ritual's relation to society as it does to associate him with a coherent theology; it becomes impossible to assess Euripides' complicity in culture's habit of masking its own originating violence as sacred ritual, as defined by the most challenging of Foley's theorists, René Girard. These plays are so constructed as to divide our attention between the horror of their contents—rituals which fail to circumvent the violent deaths of human beings as rituals properly should—and the success of their form—a type of artifice that turns violent death into something we confront without experiencing it directly. Nowhere is that division more unsettling than in the *Bacchae*, the play with which Foley concludes. In that discussion, she forbears from finding anything redemptive in the outcome of the action, draws attention to the way the parallel with drama highlights the fictional element in ritual, and ends the book suggesting that the order Euripides found only in the linked realms of ritual and art remained always “in an uncertain relation to the realities of the contemporary world.” Through Foley's sensitive and sophisticated readings, Euripides is illuminated as a constructor of dramas that excel in integrating diverse and contending visions; but as a commentator on his culture and its religion, he remains as elusive and ambiguous as ever.

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