

Michael Vickers (Oxford)

EURIPIDES' *BACCHAE*, CRITIAS AND ALCIBIADES

It used to be the case that scholars thought that Greek tragedy kept aloof from contemporary events, but things are changing. These days, if tragedy is thought to be political at all, it usually is in terms of generalities about macro-political themes such as 'imperial hegemony', 'the polis', 'competing models of elite leadership' or the like. I prefer to think that tragedies might be micro-political, concerned with the role played in politics by specific individuals. Given the intensely personal nature of Athenian politics, this should not be surprising. Even history, according to Aristotle, might be personal: for him it dealt with particulars, such as 'what Alcibiades actually did, or what was done to him' (*Poetics*, 1451b.11). Given the stature of Alcibiades as a public figure, we might speculate that if Greek tragedy did deal with politics at the personal level, then he might figure as large on the tragic stage as he apparently did in comedy.¹ It was said of Alcibiades' relationship with the Athenians that 'they love him, they hate him, and they cannot do without him' (*Ar., Ra.*, 1425).

But Alcibiades was not the only individual to have his character dissected on the stage. Another was his contemporary Critias, a man who gained notoriety the lawmaker of the Thirty Tyrants who ruled Athens with a bloody hand after the city's defeat by the Spartans in 405. The sources relating to Alcibiades are plentiful, but those relating to Critias are few. This is in large part due to the fact that Critias' excesses towards the end of his life contributed to the deliberate excision of his actions from Athenian folk-memory, formally enacted in the oaths 'not to remember evils in

¹ Cf. *Lib. Decl.*, 50.2.1: 'What play did not include [Alcibiades] among the cast of characters? Did not Eupolis and Aristophanes show him on the stage? It is to him that comedy owed its success.'

the future' (μη μνησικακήσειν: Xen., *Hell.*, 2.4.43) once democracy was restored after the fall of the tyrants in 402 BC.

Critias is slowly emerging from the shadows. Several works have recently been devoted to his influential, but ultimately deleterious role in Athenian life and politics during the later fifth century BC. One thinks in particular of the studies by Monica Centanni, Umberto Bultrighini, Alessandro Iannucci, and Peter Wilson. Critias was something of a polymath and a political theorist of a distinctly conservative bent. His career was intimately tied up with that of Alcibiades: both came under the influence of Gorgias of Leontini, and their excesses were cited among the charges laid against Socrates in 399. I once suggested that Plato's *Gorgias* was written in order to exculpate Socrates from any blame for the careers of Critias and Alcibiades; the one a bloody tyrant and the other essentially a thug who traded on his wealth, lineage, good looks and charm. I argued that in *Gorgias* Plato employs Callicles as a mask for Alcibiades and Polus for Critias.²

I still believe this analysis to be essentially correct, but the work in particular of Iannucci and Wilson has brought the study of Critias to a higher level of subtlety and sophistication. Iannucci has shown that even the slight testimonia concerning Critias and Alcibiades can reveal fresh insights. These include the suggestion that Critias' ostensibly light-hearted verses in praise of Alcibiades (4 D.-K.) might be a parody of a praise-poem of the kind Euripides composed for Alcibiades' magnificent, but resented, Olympic victory of 416 BC. They may contain a violent threat at the end where Alcibiades' reclining position at a banquet will perhaps 'be that of a dead man'. Critias and Alcibiades were ultimately to be mortal enemies, with Critias arranging for Alcibiades to be assassinated; it is interesting to see evidence for such enmity apparently so early. Critias' claim in another poem (5 D.-K.) to have sponsored the recall of Alcibiades from exile in 411 makes best sense as an attempt by Critias to clean up his own image after his participation in the rule of the Four Hundred (oligarchs who briefly ruled Athens in 411), and the occasion was probably when Critias himself had gone into exile in 408.

Iannucci interprets some hexameter verses devoted to Anacreon (1 D.-K) in which choruses of women perform nocturnal rites, as a negative caricature of the decadent Athenian symposium prevalent at the end of the fifth century, and which Critias wished to replace with a restrained Dorian

² Vickers, 1994.

symposium more in keeping with traditional values and his philo-Laconian, his Spartan, principles. These are well expressed in Critias' denunciation of current Athenian dining practices (6 D.-K). Vessels 'which a Lydian hand, Asiatic-born (Ἀσιατογενής) invented' are spoken of disparagingly, as is the custom of multiple toasts, after which Athenians 'loosen their tongues to tell disgraceful tales (αἰσχρὸς μῦθος) and enfeeble their bodies'. Critias' Anacreon is 'a restrained pleasure seeker'³ by contrast with Athens' gilded youth.

These works of Critias will have been composed before his appointment as one of the five ephors of Athens installed by the Spartans in 405, and before his bloody participation in the rule of the Thirty who controlled Athens until their fall, and Critias' death, in the winter of 404/3 BC. But even before the truly violent phase of Critias' career there are indications of his zero-tolerant attitudes. His proposal after the overthrow of the Four Hundred at the end of 411 BC that the body of the dead Phrynichus be put on trial for treason (Lyc., *Leoc.*, 113) bespeaks a tendency to go too far. Critias' role during the regime of the Four Hundred itself is far from certain,⁴ but it would appear from a hitherto unconsidered document that his sanguinary proclivities were already in evidence. This document, if that is the word, is Euripides' *Bacchae*.

I have argued elsewhere that in some of his later plays Euripides was peculiarly sympathetic towards Alcibiades' cause, exculpating him from some of his worst actions. Euripides' motivation may even have been financial, for he composed a praise-poem, an epinician ode in the style of Simonides, on the occasion of Alcibiades' flamboyant participation in the Olympic festival of 416 BC (Plut., *Alc.*, 11.1-3; Ath. 1.3e; cf. Isocr. 16.34), and he was presumably paid for his trouble. In the *Helen* of 411, for example, Euripides shows Alcibiades in the best possible light, given the misdeeds and misunderstandings of the past few years. He seems to stress such topics as the embarrassment many thought Alcibiades had caused King Agis, Alcibiades' supposed influence with Tissaphernes, and the promise that Alcibiades might be another Themistocles. Aristophanes, meanwhile, consistently held an anti-Alcibiadean stance (this was Aristophanes' political position), and he appears to have reacted against Euripides' propaganda in the following year by using in *Thesmophoriazusae* Euripides' own plots to emphasize the more discreditable aspects of Alcibiades' recent history: his entanglement with the oligarchs, his imprison-

³ Wilson, 2003, 192.

⁴ Avery, 1963; Adeleye, 1974; Bultrighini, 1999.

ment at the hands of Tissaphernes, and his irresponsible lack of respect for hallowed custom.⁵

It is still widely held that it is 'improper' to attribute political motives to Greek playwrights – at least to tragedians, and even more so to suggest that their plays might closely reflect current events. But in a world where *Antigone*, *Oedipus*, *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* were all based in one way or another on the complex and disturbed personality of Alcibiades, political allegory may have been the norm rather than the exception. Sophocles, like Aristophanes, usually took a dim view of Alcibiades. Tales of Alcibiades' teenage cross-dressing, his belligerent obstinacy, his desire always to win and come first, and the rumour that he slept with his mother lie, in my view, behind Sophocles' plotting and character-building.⁶

Euripides, by contrast, might treat Alcibiades favourably, and this is certainly the case in his *Bacchae*. It has been said of the two main characters in this play that 'Dionysus is the dispenser of natural joys, Pentheus the joy-hating Puritan'.⁷ We shall presently see how, in detail, Euripides envisages a worst-case scenario for the relationship between an Alcibiades who we know was very 'prone to pleasure' (πρὸς ἡδονὰς ἀγώγιμος; *Plut., Alc.*, 6.1-2), and a Critias who was possessed of 'a strong puritanical streak' according to a recent writer;⁸ between an Alcibiades who was 'of all Athenians, the most notorious for various types of *hybris*',⁹ and a Critias who saw 'tyranny' and *nomos* as brakes on hubris.¹⁰ I believe that in *Oedipus Coloneus*, written at about the same time as *Bacchae*, Sophocles observes the same political scene but from a different standpoint. He sees both good and bad in Critias, showing the good side in Theseus and the bad in Creon. (That there was a quickly forgotten good side to Critias is apparent from Aristotle's choosing him as the exemplar of the famous man whose good actions had to be actively recalled 'since not many people know about them' [*Rhet.*, 1416b26]). The aura of mystery cult that surrounds Oedipus in Sophocles' last play closely reflects Alcibiades' revival of the Eleusinian celebrations in 407. In *Oedipus Coloneus* Sophocles, whose sympathies lay with the oligarchs, expresses the hope that a moderate Critias (in the person of Theseus) might prove to be Athens' saviour, and that a reformed Alci-

⁵ Vickers in preparation.

⁶ Vickers, 2005a; 2005b; 2007; 2008.

⁷ Dodds, 1960, 128.

⁸ Ostwald, 1986, 465.

⁹ Fisher, 1992, 461.

¹⁰ Centanni, 1997, 151 citing Critias' *Sisyphus*.

biades might co-operate with him. In the event, it was the butcher in Critias that came to the fore, and Alcibiades was murdered.¹¹ Euripides in *Bacchae* was also looking to the future, but gives an entirely different spin, and envisages a rather different outcome in having a pleasure-loving Alcibiades give a puritanical Critias the chop.

Euripides' final months, when he probably completed *Bacchae*, were spent at the court of Archelaus of Macedon. He left Athens in the summer of 408, and died in the winter of 407/6. Alcibiades returned from exile with great pomp in the summer of 407, and was active on several fronts. Notably, he caused the Eleusinian Mysteries to be celebrated in traditional fashion, with a procession to Eleusis held for the first time in several years (the Spartan occupation of Decelea having inhibited such activity). It was Alcibiades who appears to have proposed a grant of *euergesia* for Archelaus, Euripides' Macedonian host, early in the archonship of Antigenes (407/6 BC) for having supplied the Athenians with timber for ships (ML 91). Alcibiades was himself treated as a benefactor to Athens by many of its inhabitants, who 'granted him gold and bronze crowns' (Nepos, *Alc.*, 6), and remarkably, 'not only all human, but divine honours', having 'looked upon him as if sent from heaven' (Justin., 5.4). Alcibiades briefly had the populace eating out of his hand (Plut., *Alc.*, 34.7), but was to leave the city for ever in October 407.

It is possible to match most of the characteristics of Dionysus in *Bacchae* with those of Alcibiades, and these will have been readily picked up by the audience. They will have recognised in the god's vinosity an allusion to Alcibiades' having been given to heavy drinking (Pliny includes him in a list of the most famous boozers of all time: *HN* 14.144; cf. Plut., *Mor.*, 800d). Dionysus' beauty will have recalled that of Alcibiades, which was famous: he was *ἠραιότατος καὶ ἐρασμιώτατος Ἑλλήνων* ('the handsomest and loveliest of the Greeks').¹² Dionysus has long hair; Alcibiades 'let his hair grow long during a great part of his life' (Ath., 12.534c). Dionysus has smooth cheeks; extant portraits of Alcibiades show him clean-shaven (Smith 1990). Dionysus' skin is white; so will that of Alcibiades have been after his recent stay in Persia. Persians' bodies were white since they 'never took their clothes off,' at least in public (Xen., *Hell.*, 3.4.19). Dionysus is no wrestler (455); Alcibiades disdained gymnastic contests (Isocr., 16.33). Dionysus is a womaniser; when Alcibiades 'was a young boy' he is said to

¹¹ Vickers, 2005a; 2008, 95-103.

¹² Ael., *VH*, 12.14; cf. Plut., *Alc.*, 1.4; cf. 4.1; 16.4; Pl., *Symp.*, 216c-219e; *Prt.*, 309a; Ath., 12.534c; Dio Chrys., 64.27; Gribble, 1999, 39.

have 'lured husbands away from their wives, but when he was a young man he lured wives away from their husbands' (Bion in D.L. 4.49). Dionysus is much given to luxury; when in Asia, Alcibiades 'outdid even the Persian in splendour and pomp' (Plut., *Alc.*, 23.5). Dionysus is forever laughing in ways that annoy Pentheus; Alcibiadean laughter was to be a by-word in later times for inappropriate behaviour.¹³

Dionysus was a god; Alcibiades was said, as we have already seen, to have been accorded divine honours during his brief stay in Athens in 407 BC (Justin., 5.4). Whether this was in fact true, or the invention of the stage, is uncertain. What is the case is that there were divine claims made for mortals about the same time. The doctor Menecrates (c. 390 BC) believed himself to be Zeus after he was accredited with curing epileptics (Plut., *Ages.*, 21), and Alcibiades' Spartan contemporary Lysander (d. 395 BC) was worshipped as a god on Samos in his lifetime:¹⁴ the very place where the Samians had erected a bronze statue in honour of Alcibiades a few years earlier (Paus., 6.3.15). Alcibiades clearly attracted fervent support at times: Aelian reports Alcibiades' claim that 'when he enjoyed favour among the people, he was considered equal to the gods' (*VH*, 13.38), which was almost certainly rhetorical hyperbole;¹⁵ perhaps the same was true of our historian's interpretation of the events of 407 BC.

It is not difficult to see the analogies between Dionysus and Alcibiades in the opening lines of *Bacchae*. Alcibiades was the ward and *de facto* son of the Pericles, known as the 'Olympian', just as Dionysus was the son of Zeus, as we are reminded in the very first line of the play (cf. Διὸς παῖς: 1). Alcibiades was in any case supposedly descended from Zeus *via* Salaminian Ajax (cf. Plut., *Alc.*, 1.1). He gained considerable notoriety by replacing the traditional emblem on his shield with an image of Eros brandishing thunderbolts (Plut., *Alc.*, 16.1-2; cf. Ath., 12.534e), but again this may have been an invention of the stage.¹⁶ Thunderbolt imagery figures large in Dionysus' speech. It was a thunderbolt that assisted Semele's *accouchement* (3), and there are successive references to Dionysus' 'thundersmitten' mother (6) and the remains of the flame (8). If Alcibiades was in the frame, these allusions would have been highly appropriate.

¹³ E.g. Sopat., Rh., Διαίρεσις ζητημάτων 8.127: τὸ γὰρ γελᾶν τὸν Ἀλκιβιάδην ἢ δακρύνει τὸν πένητα ἐπόμενον τῷ πλουσίῳ, καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα—'Alcibiades' laughter, or weeping when poverty accompanies wealth, and the like.'

¹⁴ Plut., *Lys.*, 18.8; Cartledge, 1987, 83.

¹⁵ Currie, 2005, 185.

¹⁶ Russell, 1966, 45; Littmann, 1970.

Dionysus has left Asia behind him, described in terms that extend beyond Lydia and Phrygia to Bactria and Arabia Felix (13-16). This is an exaggerated image of the Asia from which Alcibiades had just come, similarly situated besides the salty sea and full of fine cities occupied by both Greeks and barbarians (17-19). The word Dionysus uses to describe these cities, *καλλιπυργώτους*: 19, is a neologism, one of many in the play (There is said to be 'an unusually high proportion of 'new' words' in *Bacchae*.):¹⁷ Alcibiades was famous for persuading his contemporaries to use new-fangled words (Ar., *PCC*, 205.6-7), and this may be an evocation of that phenomenon. Dionysus came to 'this city of Greece' (Thebes, as often, is to be equated with Athens; cf. Beaumarchais' Seville as a calque of Paris) after he had 'set Asia dancing (*χορεύσας*: 21), and established there my mysteries, that I might be manifest to mankind as a god': 20-1. Alcibiades had likewise made a triumphant journey to Athens after some years in Asia, at Magnesia-on-the-Meander, Sardis, Samos and elsewhere. He had been formally absolved of his sins by most of Athens' priesthood, and not only were the charges of impiety that had been laid against him dropped, but his magnificent celebration of the Eleusinian Mysteries will have involved his initiation. And if the tradition that he was granted divine honours only had its origins in an invention of the stage, perhaps here, it will be very pertinent in the present context.

Relevant here, in the context of the apparently innocuous word *χορεύσας* (dancing) is information we receive in Plutarch about the way Alcibiades walked and spoke. His manner of walking was so distinctive that it was imitated by his son (Plut., *Alc.*, 1.8). He probably owed his peculiar gait, however it might have looked, to a serious wound he had received at Potidaea in 432 (Plut., *Alc.*, 7.4), and it is my guess that it contributed to Sophocles' characterizations of him as Oedipus (in 425) and Philoctetes (in 408); both characters were deficient in the leg department and walked with a limp. Alcibiades' son also imitated his father's distinctive manner of speaking. Alcibiades was unable to pronounce the letter *rho* and would lambdacise it, saying for example *ὀλᾶς*; for *ὀρᾶς*; ('do you see?': Ar., *Ve.*, 44). This is to suggest that if Dionysus in *Bacchae* was indeed characterized as Alcibiades, he will have been heard as describing his recent experience not so much as 'having set Asia dancing' (*χορεύσας*: 21) but as 'having set Asia limping' (*χωλεύσας*), extremely apposite if the play is 're-

¹⁷ Cf. Dodds, 1960, xxxvii, citing Smereka, 1936, 241: 'There is ... an unusually high proportion of 'new' words.'

ally' about Alcibiades. This is not the only pertinent allusion; the parallels, echoes and resonances continue through the play.

Similarly, there are constant allusions to Critias' public image and career in the way Pentheus is represented. His very first words ἔκδημος ὄν (216) that Sandys translates as 'Though at the moment absent from this land' evoke an exiled existence (cf. Pl., *Lg.*, 869e). Critias had been in exile since 408 BC. He has heard of evil νεοχμία at Thebes, a word that smacks of political strife and upheaval (cf. Thuc., 1.12.2); this was Critias' speciality in the eyes of contemporaries, and was probably the reason why he had to go into exile in the first place. Pentheus objects to the women performing their nocturnal rites on the mountains, and suspects that they have base reasons for their activities; if Critias' Anacreon hexameters (1 D.-K.) were indeed intended to be what Iannucci has called 'a caricature of the kind of decadent Athenian symposium against which he is raising the standard of the restrained Dorian alternative',¹⁸ then 'the women's nocturnal choruses' of which Critias complains will be pertinent to the interpretation of Euripides' *Bacchae*.

Pentheus has little time for Dionysus, and refuses to acknowledge his divine status; Critias by 407 will have had little time for Alcibiades, and if divine honours had been granted, we can be sure that Critias would not have been among the devotees. But there may be more at work than this, for Pentheus' unwillingness to acknowledge Dionysus' status as a god may well reflect what has been called Critias' 'functional atheism': his rejection of the gods of the democratic city¹⁹ foremost among whom was Dionysus.²⁰ It should probably not be taken as a reflection of Euripides' own religiosity. Pentheus disapproves of the Asiatic carryings-on of Dionysus and his followers; Critias was a proponent of the 'Dorian muse'.²¹ 'Bromios' as an epithet of Dionysus is a constant theme of *Bacchae*: it occurs 20 times in one form or another (84, 87, 115, 141, 329, 375, 446, 536, 546, 593, 629, 726, 412 (x 2), 584 (x 2), 790, 976, 1031, 1250); the historical Critias also uses the word when he describes in hyperbolic periphrastic fashion the game of kottabos: 'the scale-pan, daughter of bronze, sits on the top of the high peaks of the kottabos, to receive the raindrops of Bromios' (1.10 D.-K.). *Bacchae* begins with the story of a false accusation of rape (26-31); Critias had written a tragedy, *Tennes*, which a false accusation

¹⁸ Iannucci, 2002; Wilson, 2004.

¹⁹ Bultrighini, 1999, 249-50.

²⁰ Dodds, 1960, 127.

²¹ Wilson, 2003, 190.

of rape was made.²² Pentheus' threats of imprisonment in chains and stoning to death (355-6) certainly foreshadow Critias' cruel role during the regime of the Thirty, and perhaps echo his earlier behaviour as one of the Four Hundred. We might even preserve the manuscript reading at *Bacchae* 466, where εὐσεβησ' ('made me reverent') recalls Critias' claim that 'Sobriety is the neighbour of Reverence (Εὐσεβίης)' (6.21 D.-K.). Again, there are many more resonances between details of the play and the testimonia relating to Critias.

Dionysus tricks Pentheus into dressing up like a woman, in fine linen (821ff.), a far cry from the Spartan garb favoured by philo-Laconians like Critias. Likewise, the luxury (ἄβρότητα: 968, τρυφᾶν: 969) with which Pentheus is bedecked before his ill-fated rendezvous with his mother on the mountains is redolent of the East, and surely foreign to the Dorian ideology that Critias was zealous to inculcate even in the unwilling. Pentheus' pretty curls are the object of comment (928); we may well speculate that Critias kept his hair long in the Spartan manner (cf. Hdt, 208.3; Xen., *Lac.*, 9.3). Topical elements will have added to the humour of the dressing up scene,²³ and the total effect will have been to hold the historical Critias up to ridicule before an audience that had perhaps already suffered at his hands, and whose subsequent sufferings might well have been all the harsher thanks to Euripides' invidious imagery.

No enemy of the historical Critias could possibly devise a punishment that was more exquisitely cruel or shameful than the one that Euripides gives to his tragic hero, Pentheus. To be torn down from his observation post by crazed Bacchantes was bad enough, but to be torn limb from limb by his own mother and to have her brandish his head was just not cricket. Euripides arouses feelings of pity even for a Critias by dwelling on Agave's delusions, and on the grief shown by Cadmus for his dismembered grandson. Pity will, however, have been mitigated by those who recalled Critias' demand that the body of Phrynichus should be put on trial in 411. Euripides' gruesome conceit was arguably informed by this event.

Bacchae won first prize, but one cannot help feeling that its subsequent survival was due to the fact that Euripides' analysis of the forthcoming political situation was in principle spot-on, but in fact a kind of mirror image of what actually happened. For it was Alcibiades who was the victim of an ambush in open country, and who was shot at with arrows. It was Al-

²² Wilson, 2003, 188.

²³ On which see Seidensticker, 1978; 1982.

cibiades whose headless corpse was to be lovingly tended, not by his mother, but by camp-followers called Theodote and Timandra (Nep., *Alc.*, 10.6; Plut., *Alc.*, 39; cf. Ath., 13. 574e-f).

Aristophanes' *Frogs*, was probably performed at the same festival, in 405. The precise relationship between it and *Bacchae* is uncertain, but it is likely that Aristophanes knew the broad outlines of the play at least,²⁴ for his Dionysus too 'comes forward' as Alcibiades, as I have argued elsewhere.²⁵ Aristophanes' Dionysus is 'supple, fickle, wayward, panicky, opportunistic, and unscrupulous ...' and 'changes like a chameleon';²⁶ in other words rather closer to the picture of Alcibiades that we receive in Plutarch. For him, 'Alcibiades, among his other extraordinary qualities, had this especial art of captivating men by assimilating his own manners and habits to theirs, being able to change, more quickly than a chameleon, from one mode of life to another' (Plut., *Alc.*, 23.4).

I must stress that all this is provisional; it is very much work in progress. But one cannot help wondering why the points made here are not already part of *Bacchae* commentary (and there are plenty more correlations between myth and contemporary history than I have been able to discuss here). It perhaps has much to do with what E.R. Dodds, a recent editor of *Bacchae*, wrote in another, but related, context, that 'it is an essential critical principle that *what is not mentioned in the play does not exist*'.²⁷ This critical principle underlies, and invalidates, much current scholarship. If the analysis presented here is correct, there is a huge job to be undertaken to restore the text of *Bacchae*, and to further elucidate Euripides' delicate but incisive commentary on current affairs. That he chose in this instance to fling a 'disgraceful tale', an *αἰσχρὸν μῦθον*, at Critias – the mortal enemy of his patron Alcibiades who was also his current Macedonian patron's friend – was merely one example of the way political debate at Athens extended to the stage. So far as my limited experience has taught me, it is a phenomenon not without parallel in modern Georgia.

²⁴ Cantarella, 1974.

²⁵ Vickers, 2001.

²⁶ Stanford, 1973, xxix-xxx.

²⁷ Italics original: Dodds 1966, 40; 1973, 68; 1983, 180.

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