CREDO QUIA IMPOSSIBILE

R. SCODEL: *Credible Impossibilities. Conventions and Strategies of Verisimilitude in Homer and Greek Tragedy.* Pp. 216. Stuttgart and Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1999. Cased. ISBN: 3-519-07671-3.

Fictional worlds are incomplete. Scodel takes Homer and the Greek tragedians but does not set herself the usual fashionable task of discussing the ways in which readers of fictional texts create aesthetic coherence across the gaps, inconsistencies, and absent or weak motivation of their characters; rather she explores verisimilitude, the cause-and-effect material of the narrative surface. She argues that to trivialize the problem of practical credibility is to deny experience. This is an interesting project.

Deploying Rabinowitz's distinction between narrative and authorial audiences, and Phelan's division of fiction into synthetic, mimetic, and thematic levels, S. finds an elegant way of categorizing the poets' strategies for keeping an audience involved when verisimilitude may be imperfect: local motivation (an explanation or plot device introduced only at the moment when it is needed and not further developed); apology (the poet 'admits' the lack of verisimilitude, perhaps by a claim of truth or the operation of fate); or authorial thematization (the poet foregrounds the difficulty and directs the audience to find significance in the very absence of verisimilitude). The audience too has its strategies: co-extensive with the rule of notice is the principle of inattention to implausibilities, internal contradiction, excessive coincidence, etc. S. argues that in Homer, the principle of inattention may be conventional. The audience also has a principle of generosity (a flaw in verisimilitude is noticed, but ignored). The lengthy exposition of Euripidean prologues is a case in point. The audience's third strategy is one of naturalization: if the poet leaves a gap, the audience creates a reasonable hypothesis to fill it.

S. then takes examples of inattention in Homeric chronology, discussing notorious examples of gaps, analepsis, and inaccurate prediction. She suggests that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were, among early Greek epic, exceptional in their concern for verisimilitude, citing the proem to the *Iliad* with its chain of causal words. She contrasts the unobtrusive nature of the local motivation when Hermes gives Odysseus moly (because Athena does not help him on his adventures) with the major motivation of the scar: this is elaborately introduced, and the narrative of how he received it is thematically important; as usual, the rule of significance governs expansion. Why Odysseus decides to bring his best wine to explore an unknown island and why he chooses to remain in the Cyclops' cave is also discussed.

Tragedy seeks to reach Homeric standards of verisimilitude too: according to S. there is a steady rise throughout the fifth century in the authors' attention to credibility. Where Aeschylus prefers distraction to create affective credibility, Sophocles places motivation and apologies within dramatically intense contexts. Euripides is more tricky: just as he lays bare the formal elements of tragedy, so he also marks motivation and apologies; as we all know, sometimes it is difficult to decide whether he is inserting a local motivation or apology, or actually playing with the genre in a form of antimimetic thematization. Alcestis' necessary silence in the final scene is a case in point (*Alcestis* being a two-actor play). Are ll. 1143–6, in which Herakles explains that she will be unable to speak for three days until she is deconsecrated, inserted for apology or amusement?

It is unlikely that this, and similar kinds of dilemma which have been discussion points for centuries, will ever be unequivocally resolved. There is no guarantee that

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they were uniformly apprehended by the original audience. The book contains some minor irritations ('Forward' for 'Foreword'; March 1987 referred to in the footnote to p. 33 but omitted in the bibliography). But S. has a sharp eye and discusses issues with subtle vigour. She has established some lucid category headings under which critics will henceforth be able to marshall their arguments, and proved their usefulness throughout the chapters of her book.

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GENDER-BENDING SPEECH

LAURA MCCLURE: *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama.* Pp. viii + 203. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. Cased, £24.95. ISBN: 0-691-01730-1.

This volume is a well-researched, clearly organized, and often insightful investigation of gendered speech in fifth-century Athenian drama. A revised and much expanded version of McClure's 1991 University of Chicago dissertation on rhetoric and gender in Euripides, the book consists of six chapters that explore the politics of discourse in five tragedies and two comedies: Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, Euripides, *Hippolytus* and *Andromache*, and Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Ecclesiazusae.* These plays, according to M., were selected because they illustrate in a similar way how disruptive and dangerous women's voices can be if left to themselves, unchecked and uncontained by male-governed social and political institutions.

If that seems a familiar song, it is because M. pays heavy homage to her main influences: Simon Goldhill, Helene Foley, Froma Zeitlin, and Charles Segal. Still, scholars who are familiar with the history of scholarship on this subject will find much to praise in M.'s language-based approach. In Chapter I, M. carefully and articulately explains her main objective: to show that the speech patterns of women in the seven plays reveal Athenian 'anxiety about the transmission and consolidation of power among the political elite during the rise of democracy in Athens' (p. 28).

By employing speech genres such as gossip and seductive persuasion, women in these plays are metaphors for the real-life demagogue who, through the same highly effective and influential speech patterns, poses a threat to emerging democracy in the *polis*. Adopting Winkler's idea that women have the unique capacity to understand and employ both female and male speech patterns simultaneously, M. describes how successful Clytemnestra, Phaedra, and Medea are in subverting the *status quo* by utilizing their talent for rhetorical 'bilingualism' (p. 27).

In Chapter II, M. provides a very useful background to women's speech genres from the archaic to the classical periods: ritual lamentation, ritual obscenity, ritual cries, female choruses, gossip, and seductive persuasion. Though it is risky and often unverifiable to create absolute categories of male and female speech, M. is successful in convincing the reader that it is possible not only to distinguish male and female discourse but also to illustrate in a creative way how gender-bending speech genres can effectively shake up the social order.

Chapter III is devoted to proving how gendered speech works in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Working her way through the trilogy, M. concludes that there is a shift in gender focus from feminine (figurative and erotic, thus false, in the character of Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon*) to masculine (divinely sanctioned, thus true, in the

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