

‘DEATH-BED RECANTATIONS’:
EURIPIDES, CHAUCER, AND THOMAS TYRWHITT

Even though they are now discredited, certain long-standing and influential misconceptions and misinterpretations concerning ancient literature still deserve (and reward) fresh consideration, especially when there is no basis for them in the relevant texts. For the question ‘how, then, did they originate?’ becomes all the more pressing, and the answer can be illuminating for modern prejudices and their future avoidance. I have given one large-scale example of this process elsewhere¹, in connection with the, once-wide-spread, excessive ‘idealising’ of Sophocles and his tragic vision. In the present note, I consider a more limited issue involving Euripides.

It is well-known that, on an initial and superficial view, this poet's *Bacchae* seems to present a different attitude to religion and the gods from his earlier plays. “Since the play exhibits the power of Dionysus and the dreadful fate of those who resist him, the first explanation which occurred to scholars was that the poet had experienced (or thought it expedient to feign) a deathbed conversion: the *Bacchae* was a “palinode”, a recantation of the “atheism” of which Aristophanes had accused its author (*Thesm.* 450 f.)... this or something like it remained the prevailing opinion till far on in the nineteenth century”. So E. R. Dodds², who might perhaps have added that a version of this approach proved congenial to Nietzsche in his *Birth of Tragedy*³, so that towards the end of the nineteenth century it was given in certain quarters a new lease of life.

Its inadequacy is now so generally accepted that no time need be spent on this aspect⁴. But, since there is no textual support for the interpretation, we may recur to the question outlined above and ask ‘how, then, did it originate?’. Its *primus inventor* has rightly been identified⁵ as Thomas Tyrwhitt

¹ ‘Leaving out the Erinyes’: the history of a misconception, “Prometheus” 25, 1999, 117-128.

² Commentary on Euripides' *Bacchae* (Oxford 1960²) p. xl f.

³ See especially A. Henrichs, *The last of the detractors: Friedrich Nietzsche's Condemnation of Euripides*, “GRBS” 27, 1986, 369 ff. On pp. 391 ff. of this article Henrichs adds to the list of scholars cited by Dodds (sup. cit. [n. 2]) as subscribing to the ‘conversion’ theory.

⁴ Dodds' treatment (sup. cit. [n. 2]) was particularly influential in discrediting it.

⁵ E.g. by Dodds sup. cit. (n. 2) p. xl (who attributes to Tyrwhitt and “Schoene”, without further reference, the idea that the *Bacchae* “was written to defend Euripides against the

(1730-1786)⁶, who expressed himself as follows on the matter, commenting upon *Ba.* 220: “hanc autem fabulam, ut id obiter moneam, ea mente addidisse videtur poeta, ut gravissimum illud impietatis crimen, quod cum Socrate et aliis eiusdem sodalitiis hominibus commune habuit, a se amoveret. vid. infra v. 427 et seq. 889 et seq.”⁷. The talk in Dodds and other scholars of “palinodes” and “recantations” might have led one to suppose that the biographical tradition attached to Stesichorus and his palinode(s) for Helen had influenced the origin of the misconception in question⁸, but though they may have helped its survival and popularity, Tyrwhitt's bare words do not suggest that that tradition played any role in its birth.

We must look elsewhere, then Albert Henrichs offers a clue when he refers⁹ to Tyrwhitt as “the learned editor of Chaucer”, for that English poet actually did write what has been referred to as a death-bed repentance, though he himself seems to have dubbed it a *Retractation*¹⁰. Whatever the exact truth of that, the language is certainly appropriate to a last-minute repentance: “Wherfore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes; and namely of my

charge of impiety which was soon to overwhelm his friend Socrates”) and more explicitly Henrichs sup. cit. (n. 3) p. 391 and n. 86.

⁶ For an account of his life and achievements see the article on him by W. P. Courtney in *Dictionary of National Biography* vol. 19, pp. 1373-5.

⁷ The remark is to be found in Samuel Musgrave's *Exercitationum in Euripidem libri duo* (Leyden 1762) p. 151. This volume contains at the end an Appendix entitled *Emendationes in Euripidem*, in the *Praefatio* to which (p. 131 f.) Musgrave anonymously refers to their author as “vir mihi amicissimus” from whom he obtained “coniecturas in varia Euripidis loca ex veteris promissi fide”. The remark I quote about Euripides' purpose in the *Bacchae* comes from the section devoted to that play. Tyrwhitt's authorship of the Appendix is confirmed by himself in his later *Coniecturae in Aeschylum, Euripidem et Aristophanem* (Oxford 1822) and the facts are correctly summarised by Courtney as cited in the last note p. 1374B.

⁸ See the passages collected by me in *PMGF* vol. 1.177 f.

⁹ Sup. cit. (n. 3) p. 391 n. 86. For Tyrwhitt's achievements (and deficiencies) as Chaucerian editor see Courtney as cited above (n. 6) p. 1374A (on his edition's first publication, it was greeted as “the best edited English Classick that ever has appeared”).

¹⁰ For details see e.g. F.N. Robinson, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford 1957²) p. 772. The work in question stands “at the end of the *Parson's Tale*, in every MS. which has that tale complete”, and seems to be the source for “the story of Chaucer's death-bed repentance [which] was believed in the fifteenth century”. Tyrwhitt took this tradition seriously: “I think it not improbable that Chaucer might be persuaded, by the religious who attended him in his last illness, to revoke or retract certain of his works – or, at least, that they might give out, that he had made such Retraction as they thought proper” (he calls its positioning at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* “the antidote to the poison”). I quote from *The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer in 14 vols.*, vol. 5 (London 1807) p. 226.

translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns: as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the xxv. Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentynes day of the Parlement of Briddes; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne; the book of the Leoun; and many another book, if they were in my remembrance, and many a song and many a leccherous lay; that Crist for his grete mercy foryeve me the synne"¹¹.

The coincidence that one and the same scholar should have produced the first professional edition of Chaucer and the first modern attempt to explain the 'theology' of the *Bacchae* seems, then, to have led unconsciously to an interpretation of the latter in the light of the Chaucerian retraction¹².

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¹¹ I quote from Robinson's text (cited in last n.) p. 265.

¹² "The "Death-Bed Conversion": Euripides' *Bacchae*" is the heading (p. 391) of the section of Henrichs' article dealing with Nietzsche's view of the relevant play, and the same phrase had already been used by, for instance, Dodds (sup. cit. [n. 2]). Tyrwhitt's conjectures on Euripides were available to Musgrave in or before 1762 (see above n. 6) and his edition of Chaucer was not published until 1775-8, but he will obviously have been pondering his text for a long time previous.