

does not entail rejection of such resilience as a virtue, but it is not entirely clear how the revisionist vision of human dignity accounts for it.

Perhaps most significantly, the question remains how the concept of human dignity can adjudicate political disputes about which social circumstances are beneficial or harmful. Bird notes that his account is not designed to answer “exactly. . . what an adamant commitment to protecting human dignity requires of a political community” (250). He provides some examples of how dignity revisionism could guide practical political inquiry. For instance, the revisionist account suggests that redistributive taxation is not on a par with forced labor, as those taxed are not “forsaken” by society or stripped of social value (251). Yet socially divisive arguments remain: Does legalized abortion promote or undermine human dignity? What about religious exemptions from antidiscrimination laws? Or affirmative action? To be sure, human dignity might not be able to do all the work in resolving these controversies. But it would be instructive to have a sense of how, if at all, an account of human dignity could help us make complex political judgments in a diverse society.

In sum, *Human Dignity and Political Criticism* contributes to politically attuned philosophical reflection by offering a penetrating and astute look at human dignity.

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Bonnie Honig: *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. Pp. xiv, 208.)

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To think with Bonnie Honig is, to borrow an image from Walter Benjamin, to think in constellations. Based on Honig’s 2017 Mary Flexner Lectures at Bryn Mawr College, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* is an account of democratic citizenship enjoining feminists to embrace “a normative, civic, and feminist obligation to risk the impurities of politics on behalf of transformation” (1). Honig evaluates “three refusal concepts in the contemporary refusal literature: inoperativity, inclination, and fabulation” (xiii). These concepts emerge respectively from the work of Giorgio Agamben, Adriana Cavarero, and Saidiya Hartman—though Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, and Hannah Arendt, Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener,” the life of Muhammad Ali, and the 2015 film *The Fits* form additional sites of reflection. Theorizing refusal as a tripartite arc, not an act, Honig explores refusal through Euripides’s

*Bacchae* and through the requirements of democratic feminism, such as assembly, world building, and agonism. Honig's unusual reading of the fifth-century Greek tragedy centers the play's eponymous chorus, downplaying the contest for leadership between male cousins King Pentheus and Dionysus (xiii). Honig chooses to read the "bacchantes as not mad but knowing (at some level) what they were doing when they took Pentheus down," defying and ultimately annihilating a patriarchal sovereign in slow-motion regicide (87). The elements of Honig's arc do not remain independent of one another: "when inoperativity and inclination are unleashed, the contest of fabulation will follow" (108). Feminist refusal gets us somewhere, namely, beyond "political theory's old debates about civil disobedience and [somewhere] more daunting even than the heroic politics to which we build monuments" (104). It is a phenomenology of political movements, not individuals' great words and deeds.

Of the three concepts, Agamben's *inoperosità* receives the most dramatic reworking. Per Agamben, humans' fundamental condition lacks essential ends, tasks, and work. Honig appreciates an account of "human life [that] is made up of a spectrum of postures, none of which is its essence" (53). The problem with Agamben's inoperativity for feminism is that "it generates no assembly and seems to abjure power," especially in the form of Melville's *Bartleby* (xiv). Abstemious and negative, inoperativity smacks of a contrarian refusal to participate, a preservation of individual purity at the expense of the world and the relationality of those in it. Honig's critique could hardly be more incisive given Agamben's characterization of COVID-19 as an "unspecified risk" used to resuscitate states' waning legitimacy and his subsumption of pandemic safety measures—including vaccines—under despotic biopower (Giorgio Agamben, *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics* [Rowman & Littlefield, 2021]). Where "refusal is something of an end in itself" inoperativity can only "suspend" use (14). Instead, Honig counsels use's "intensification"—a provocative notion that remains somewhat opaque.

Cavarero's inclination "better [than inoperativity] provides for the mutuality and care on which any feminist theory of refusal depends" (xiv) but relies too much on maternity. Where *Antigone Interrupted* interrogates sisterhood as ideology, *Refusal* appears to vindicate sorority over maternity as a disposition of care for the world (its conclusion is titled "Sister Is an Anagram for Resist.") Disentangling absence of hierarchy from powerlessness, Honig argues that sorority "is the more egalitarian kin relation" and that the move away from maternity to sorority pulls inclination away "from being on the cusp of pacifism or violence to being in the dirt, practicing a kind of care and power that seek peace but risk implication in violence, too" (102). Sororal inclination generates feminist power itself—power with the capacity to lay waste. Reworked, inoperativity and inclination sift the normative imperative "to make ourselves useful to others" from degrading instrumentalization, disposing feminists toward politics (102).

Hartman's fabulation, finally, is "an entry into a contest over meaning, a bid for the posterity that might make a past episode into the start of a feminist future" (xiv). Though it could be mistaken for a kind of Hegelian synthesis, fabulation is more akin to Benjamin's attempt to read history against the grain, both in Hartman's original account—which imagines the unrecorded lives of early twentieth-century Black women—and in Honig's augmented one. Since this node of refusal's arc concerns memory's authority over meaning, Arendt (critically evoked) supplements Hartman here. Like intensified use, which slows experience down, fabulation contests time, although it does so by reorganizing rather than elongating relations between past, present, and future. Hartman's fabulation "rescues" individuals from "careless cruel obscurity" (73). For Honig, fabulation "adamantly claims the city that is always at stake in the contest over meaning," a move Hartman only implies (74). The question is whether "fabulation [can] also collectivize or politicize" as well as individualize; Honig insists it can (74). The capstone of refusal, fabulation enables feminist acts to avoid "reabsorption into the dominant frames that silence or exceptionalize feminist agencies" when transformation is not fully realized, as it almost never is. An act of self-defense and self-assertion, fabulation plays on the meaning of refuse, forestalling patriarchs' consignment of women to insignificant waste; feminists refuse to become refuse by engaging in fabulation. Without it, "women like the bacchantes, who rise in rebellion against a king, are remembered as drunk or mad and therefore worthless, even while men's political action in concert is celebrated as its own kind of intoxication and their ensuing deaths or exiles are commemorated as glorious: poignant, tragic, honorable, and worthy" (103)—an analysis that explains the backlash against #MeToo encapsulated by the 2022 trial between actors Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. Save the sure course of sexist oppression, *Refusal's* prophecy would be as eerie as Cassandra's.

Maneuvering through a complex theoretical web, *Refusal* displays Honig's characteristic refusal of aridity (a lyric from The Killers' "Human" cheekily frames her compelling critique of Agamben). Most vital, though, is Honig's encounter with the *Bacchae* itself. The tragedy's devastation "illustrates, metaphorically speaking, the breadth and depth of patriarchy's grasp, its imbrication in everything we love as well as in the structures and powers we resist" (13). Theorizing refusal as an arc prevents beginnings and ends from monopolizing refusal's meaning. Honig furthers Arendt's rejection of teleology without mimicking her fixation on ephemeral beginnings. In terms of the *Bacchae's* plot, this leads Honig to the play's quieter and strangest moments, which she deems more "radical" than the awesome violence to which interpreters typically attend (15). Particularly memorable is *Refusal's* commentary on the bacchantes' Dionysian breastfeeding of nonhuman animals as a queering of intimate care that "refuses the maternalism of heteronormative reproduction," an interpretation pregnant, so to speak, with significances for reproductive justice, sexuality and pleasure, and feminist

existentialism (22). Women—and all people—need not relegate nurturing to mothering.

The core of *Refusal's Bacchae* is the tragic clash of Agave's relational identities: mother (to the eventually murdered king), daughter (to Cadmus, founder of Thebes), sister, and polis member. Agreeing with Peter Euben, Honig believes "the breaks necessitated by equality tear us apart, rip apart loved ones, and destroy the conjugal and communal bonds we value even though they make us unequal" (13), though equality is clearly worth this sacrifice per *Refusal*. Tragedy does not mean a *wrong* choice has been made; it means that pain attends *all* choices. As Arendt would say, to act is to suffer. Honig's reading intimates that Agave's immense grief for Pentheus would differentiate her from Rousseau's citizen-mother, who cares only for Sparta's victory after hearing that she has lost all five sons in battle. Her choice to refuse her son-cum-leader's orders also differentiates Agave from Homer's Penelope, who obeys Telemachus's order to be silent before laboring alone to preserve Ithaca's paternal monarchy. The bacchant's partial revolution is an enlightenment-esque attempt to displace Thebes's ancien régime. Whatever admixture of "giddiness and nausea" mighty sorority induces when it slays sons alongside kings, its goal is *res publica*: a political community meant to guarantee freedom and equality through rights (11). Now that the United States has officially entered its post-*Roe* reality, Honig's clarity about feminism's normative and civic demands rings all the louder. Only in a world without patriarchs could feminist citizenship be claimed without so much bloody sacrifice.

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Steven D. Smith: *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021. Pp. xvi, 273.)

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We take it for granted that law determines important segments of human activity. A statute is enacted and motorists slow down; a court issues a judgment and money changes hands. When you think about it, this relationship is remarkable. Making law always involves the utterance of language. But any utterance is, as Hobbes observed, something that is "but words and breath" and has "no force to oblige, contain, constrain or protect" (*Leviathan*, chap. 18). There must be something about the circumstances in which legal