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"Splendid Failures": Inclination, Slow Regicide, and Performative Critique.[1]

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Abstract. This paper focuses on Honig's critical reworking of the concept of inclination and her concept of "slow regicide". With "slow regicide" Honig describes a performative critique of the violence of the patriarchal order. However, what Honig underestimates, I argue, is that this intervention must itself be non-violent if it is not to reinstate patriarchal violence. My suggestion is that paying closer attention to the performativity of inclination shows how "slow regicide" enables a non-violent refusal in which the normativity of patriarchy is frustrated and fails.
Keywords: Bonnie Honig; Refusal; Inclination; Violence; Performativity; Critique

[ES] "Fracasos espléndidos": La inclinación, el lento regicidio, y la crítica performática.

Resumen. Este artículo se centra en la reelaboración crítica de Honig del concepto de inclinación y su concepto de "regicidio lento". Por "regicidio lento" Honig entiende la crítica performática de la violencia del orden patriarcal. Sin embargo, lo que Honig subestima es que esta intervención debe ser no violenta para no reinstaurar la violencia patriarcal. Sugiero que prestar más atención a la performatividad de la inclinación muestra cómo el "regicidio lento" permite un rechazo no violento en el que la normatividad del patriarcado se frustra y fracasa.
Palabras clave: Bonnie Honig; rechazo; inclinación; violencia; performatividad; crítica

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In this essay I focus on the second chapter of *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* to ask how the concept of inclination can help us contend with patriarchal violence. In the chapter Honig's offers a unique reading of Euripides's *Bacchae* to argue that the play "teaches the vulnerability of sovereignty to the check of inclination understood not as maternal care, not only, but also as agonistic sororal action in concert."[2] The *Bacchae* tells the story of Dionysus' return to the city of Thebes and the denial of his godliness by the King Pentheus. In the play the women of Thebes, the bacchants, who worship Dionysus, leave the city to Cithaeron where they upend the patriarchal order through revelry, chanting, refusing labour and nursing wild animals. For Honig, in these moments the bacchants undertake a feminist refusal that "enacts a sex-gender equality."[3] Importantly Honig foregrounds a sorority that undertakes regicide in the

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[2] B. Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, London, Harvard University Press, 2021, p. 58.
[3] *Ibidem*, p. 3.

play, both symbolically and literally. When Pentheus, the King of Thebes, spies on the bacchants at Cithaeron, the women led by his mother Agave, murder him. Agave and the bacchants return to Thebes carrying the king's head. In the city Agave recognises the dead body of her son and inclines over his dead body.[4] Focusing on these elements Honig spotlights the violence that inclination aims to displace.

Honig's account can be read as a direct response to Adriana Cavarero's conceptualisation of inclination which she develops in *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (2016). For Cavarero inclination is a maternal posture and a geometry that reorientates normativity, situating us in a question of whether we will respond to one another with violence or care. With the scenes of the collective action of the women of Thebes, Honig reworks inclination as a sororal acting-in-concert. This is a revision that enables the women's regicide which Honig argues is the "true outcome of inclination" that Cavarero "never names."[5] Cavarero understands inclination as opposed to the violence of verticality (as embodied by the Enlightened male and rational autonomous subject presupposed in philosophy). However, according to Honig, by attempting to purify inclination from violence, Cavarero leaves the patriarchal order intact. As such she argues for the necessity of the bacchant's regicide. I fear that when the bacchants murder the king, sororal action legitimises violence as necessary tool to overthrow oppression. In this moment the bacchants actions prop up the normative violence of the patriarchy.

Honig tries to circumvent an explicit legitimation of violence through the concept of "slow regicide" which shows how the sovereignty of the Pentheus is undermined and overturned through each of the inclined actions of the bacchants. However, she does not adequately deal with the violent murder of the King. I suggest that we can deal with this violence when we pay closer attention to the performative critique of the violence of the patriarchal order the slow regicide undertakes. This focus shows how the question that inclination poses already intervenes in our social orders. Inclination understood as enacting a performative critique shows how "slow regicide" occurs not when we justify particular moments of violence, but when the normativity of patriarchy is frustrated and fails.

1. From an ethics to a politics of inclination

Through the figures of Agave and her sisters, Autonoë and Ino, Honig reimagines inclination away from maternal care to a sororal agonism,[6] giving prominence to the sisters' refusal of the sovereignty of the Pentheus. For Cavarero, inclination is both a posture and a questioning. Inclination offers a new geometry in which we lean toward one another in a relation of care which confronts the vertical, individualist, patriarchal order with an asymmetrical ethics of care. In doing so it opens to the question of the relationality, interdependency and vulnerability of human life and how we will respond to each of these. Cavarero's inclination challenges the philosophical canon calling "into question our being creatures who are materially vulnerable, often in greatly unbalanced circumstances, consigned to one another."[7]

The history of philosophy has posited the upright man, who exists under his own strength, who requires no support, as the normative foundation for autonomy and individuality. Cavarero turns to inclination to resists this posture offering an alternative geometry that supports a non-violent ethics. As Timothy Huzar argues, inclination disrupts verticality by positing a different humanism, one which understands humans to lean into care and support.[8] The human is inclined towards the other in a distinct pluralised ontology that is set apart from and questions the dominant models of philosophy. Cavarero understands inclination as strategically counterposing the masculine philosophical subject with the stereotype of maternity to reveal the constituent vulnerability of human life.[9] The mother -child relation serves as the ultimate image which breaks with the sovereignty of the individual. Such a gesture disrupts and distorts the dominant vertical forms of ontology and ethics which valorise the autonomous individual.

However, Honig argues that Cavarero's inclination runs into a problem: it stands apart from the order it attempts to displace. Inclination as maternal care, Honig argues, is a form of fugitivity that fails to intervene in the "inescapable violence of politics."[10] If refusal has often been characterised through its verticality – Honig reminds us to think of the raised fist of the revolutionary[11] – then inclination subverts this posture. Inclined refusals in a sense become an inoperative move away from a vertical form of use. Honig argues that there is a problem of inoperative and fugitive forms of inclination highlighting that in Cavarero's work inclination moves us towards heterotopia. This is problematic as a maternal inclination is situated as a world apart, failing to contest the vertical order which continues unchallenged. To remedy this Honig suggests to move inclination from a maternal ethics of care towards a sororal politics of collective action and refusal. For her, the heterotopia of inclination can only be completed by returning to the city and by turning to active resistance.

Like Cavarero, Honig notes how verticality is linked to the maintenance of heteronormative patriarchy. She highlights how in attempting to return Agave back into the city, Cadmus, Pentheus grandfather, corrects her posture to a vertical, upright stance telling her to stand straight and look to the sun, thereby reorienting her body and mind away from inclination towards verticality and returning her to the correct moral order.[12] To be upright returns her to her proper, given place as daughter and mother.

Yet inclination as a bodily posture also enacts a feminist refusal. This is described by Honig in four stages in the play. The first is when the women of

4 *Ibidem*, p. xi.
5 *Ibidem*, p. 51.
6 *Ibidem*, p. 47.
7 A. Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude,* Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2016, p. 13.
8 T. J. Huzar, "Violence, Vulnerability, Ontology", in T. J. Huzar and C. Woodford (eds.), *Toward a Feminist Ethics of Non-Violence*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2021, p. 151.
9 A. Cavarero, *op. cit*., p. 14.
10 B. Honig, *op. cit*., p. 47.
11 *Ibidem*, p. 51.
12 *Ibidem*, p. 54.

Thebes join with the Asian chorus. This undermines the separation between citizen and the foreigner and subsequently the sovereign's power. In doing so it, demonstrates the women's refusal to be domesticated by such powers. The second is found in the women's refusal to stay at home, fleeing to Cithaeron where they relax, nurse animals, dance and chant together.[13]

Described together the third and fourth moments consist in Agave leaning over the Pentheus's body, first to kill him, then to bury him. On the standard (and patriarchal) reading of these scenes Agave is seen to lose her mind in the fury of killing and later comes to regret her actions when she recognises that she has murdered her son. However, Honig offers us a more radically inclined reading. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's account of orientation, she shows how to be disorientated from the heteronormative order draws us into a politics of relationality with the objective world. Indeed, the king's body is now seen to be both subject in life and object in death. This pushes the account of relationality that Cavarero offers further. Seen as a moment of refusal, leaning over the object of Pentheus's body Agave's grief is not simply regret but a continuing of the process of regicide that frees her from domesticity. Her relation to object of the dead body is opened on this inclined reading to various competing significations. The body becomes a "queer object" that "occasions new social relations and does not just restore everyone to their old ones."[14] An inclined refusal then opens up to competition over the new forms of sociality that are enabled. Tellingly, our understanding of Agave's tears at the death of her son are now in a field of struggle signifying both care and violence, disrupting the symbolic order.

Such disruption is enabled through sororal collective action. Honig notes that when the women become aware that Pentheus is watching them from a treetop, Agave calls out to the others to work together to pull down the tree. "In order to bring down Pentheus," Honig writes "the women must incline to each other and acting in concert together to force down the tree" and that "the women attack Pentheus, or maybe it is his verticalism they attack."[15] Pulling down the tree it is not simply an attack directed at the king but at the symbolic order which represents the patriarchal order. This is because, as Cavarero notes, "the verticality of the tree..." not only bears "an exquisitely masculine imprint" but also enacts a moral edict that links together verticality, naturalness, straightness and rightness in opposition to queerness, wrongness and abnormality.[16] When the bacchants act together to tear down the tree, they affirm their relationality while opposing the authoritative tradition which grants ontological security to itself by claiming to be natural and given.

As such, Honig reorientation of inclination leads away from the mother leaning over the child towards the sisters leaning into one another.[17] This move completes an important task of foregrounding the ambivalence of inclination which acknowledges that care and wounding are both possible responses to interdependence. Although Honig notes that Cavarero posits inclination not only as a maternal pacifism but as a question of how we respond to both wounding and care, she argues that inclined heterotopias "leave verticality aside and to build elsewhere is the leave with vertical empowered to do its work".[18] The shift to an agonistic, sororal inclination, Honig argues "better centers 'the alternative between care and wound'"[19] revealing the various possible range of violent and caring postures, between mothers and children, between sisters, humans, animals and objects.

Against Honig's argument that agonism centres both care and wounding I suggest that an ethics of inclination can only be understood as a space apart if there is a hard division between politics, ethics, and ontology. Cavarero's own assertion is that the heterotopia of inclination is not a pure space apart but a generative exercise "superimpose[ed] like a transparent screen, over the rhetoric of the philosophical subject, which highlights the difference between two [horizontal and vertical] ontological, ethical and political models."[20] Rather than "distancing inclination from the agonism it needs" as Honig argues,[21] Cavarero's highlighting of the difference between models can be understood as already agonistic in that it directly reveals the performative manufacture of the patriarchal order. On my reading, Cavarero's inclination enacts an agonistic contestation of the verticalist ontology through undermining its certainty. Inclination renders verticalism vulnerable to contestation. Through challenging its claim to being natural or given inclination reveals verticalism as a social and historical production. It seems to me that in understanding inclination as heterotopian (and inclined heterotopias only as prefigurative) Honig's appears to prioritise the political[22] over the ethical and ontological models where Cavarero proposes inclination intervenes. I propose that Honig's argument that an ethics of inclination leaves in place the vertical structure of patriarchy, risks missing the performative intervention that inclination stages within our ways of reasoning, knowing, seeing, and apprehending, because it neglects to acknowledge what is undone through this intervention.

2. Slow regicide as performative critique

To draw out this process more fully let me now turn to the question of whether the violent killing of Pentheus is necessary for a feminist politics of refusal. The physical murder in which Pentheus is torn apart by the bacchants comes after the women act together to topple the tree from which he is watching them. This moment of extreme physical violence seems to hold an uncertain place in Honig's work; at times necessary, at others a failure. Developing the link between care and murder, Honig suggests the murder might be necessary. In the killing the women care for both the king and all inhabitants of the city through releasing them from "the false idolatry

13 *Ibidem*, p. 54.
14 *Ibidem*, p. 57.
15 *Ibidem*, p. 50.
16 A. Cavarero, *op. cit*., p. 59.
17 B. Honig, *op. cit*., p. 66.
18 *Ibidem*, p. 71.
19 *Ibidem*, p. 65.
20 A. Cavarero, *op. cit*., p. 14.
21 B. Honig, *op. cit*., p. 66.
22 B. Honig, *Antigone Interrupted*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 10.

of patriarchal sovereignty."[23] [24] However, at another point she suggests that the violence acts as political parable teaching "the need to dismember sovereignty or patriarchy."[25] This ambiguity leaves the necessity of violence open to question. While care and violence are often imbricated, can we really consider the killing of Pentheus as caring?[26]

Moreover, what lesson is learned when we repeat violence? Honig is certainly aware that the violent murder of Pentheus amounts to a "splendid failure"[27] that draws the refusal of the bacchants back into the mimetic violence that inclination attempts to avoid.[28] As she points out the more radical act would have been to avoid responding altogether to the King spying on them.[29] In a recent article that draws attention to this issue Clare Woodford makes clear that agonism always carries a danger of repeating the violence of the patriarchal order.[30] Instrumentalising violence in the name of a feminist politics will fail to free us from patriarchy, instead reinscribing the rightness of the violent normativity of that order. Importantly here it is worth pointing out what type of violence is being instrumentalised. The killing of Pentheus is vicious and brutal. The bacchants "dismember him... as he futilely pleads with them to let him live."[31] If the opportunity to avoid responding to the King's gaze is missed, what happens to refusal that then goes further to ignore the already toppled King's begging for his life? Rather than seeing murderousness as caring might it have helped to distinguish between violence as wounding or as brutal murder?

Despite such concerns, Honig suggests that between the choice of the bacchants' violence and a pacifist maternity we have reasons to prefer the bacchants precisely because their story insists on a return to the city to see what can be changed.[32] Yet I worry here that this argument assumes the morally privileged position that as we are dealing with a violent world, we have the right to use violence. That is the use of murderous violence can be justified if our ends are pure.[33] Although Honig is right to say we must contend with the violence of politics surely, we have to resist the temptation to justify a reciprocal circle of violent means and ends.[34]

Although Honig cautions that to focus on the bacchants murder is to obstruct the affirmative sense of refusal in their actions, to me this moment of extreme violence needs our attention precisely because this question of a violent or non-violent response is what is at stake with inclination. To focus on the regicide is not to undermine the possibility of politics of inclination nor its affirmative dimension. Rather, I want to draw out the specific performative aspect of the politics of what Honig refers to as "slow regicide" as an alternative to the violence that the bacchants display.[35] Here a non-violent regicide takes place slowly, played out from the very moment the women of Thebes refuse the King's sovereignty. This account of regicide does not refer to the murder of Pentheus but to the ongoing contestation by the women of Thebes over his sovereignty and the patriarchal order he symbolises.

Judith Butler (2010) explains that performative agency shifts our attention to the mechanisms through which categories and ontological realities are bought into being through processes of production.[36] Through the redirection of our attention, performative agency both reveals the contingency of established metaphysical and ontological presumptions while allowing for the possibility of their breakdown and the production of new forms of sociality. Drawing on Butler, Honig notes the performative power of the bacchants chants to bring the women together.[37] Here she establishes that the performative power of the bacchants chanting is undecidable: it may lead to both care and violence. The chant of the women may constrain them but may also overtake them leading to violence. As Honig writes: "When the chant is let loose on the world, anything, or many things, may happen."[38] At this point we can say that the move from maternal care to sororal collectivity is enabled by the performativity of the bacchants chant that brings them together.

While Honig focuses on the ambivalence of performatives, it is important to note that these are always conditioned by the social norms, language and forms of subjectivity that proceed them. Butler's explanation of the different effects of speech acts highlights this. Speech acts can produce effects that change the social order but equally rely on broader set of relations and practices.[39] Although the speech act requires a speaking subject, the possibility of the speech relies on discourse to make it both possible to be said and heard. Similarly, as Honig explains performatives depend on "an audience, listeners, interlocuters, contexts, moods, sensibilities, larger arcs, rituals, worldly (in)capacities for responsiveness, contingency and more."[40] What we can say and the effect this will have depend on a model of language and norms that pre-exists it. Now we can understand it is not only the chant of the bacchants to draws them together but also the conditions that make the chant possible. Therefore, the performative agency of the chant is diffused throughout the interstitial

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23 B. Honig, 2021, *op. cit*., p. 66.

24 See also Honig's claim that the murder and dismemberment of Pentheus' body advances the arc of refusal. *Ibidem*, p. 12.

25 *Ibidem*, p. 58.

26 *Ibidem*, p. 66.

27 *Ibidem*, p. 5.

28 *Ibidem*, p. 71.

29 *Ibidem,* p. 21.

30 C. Woodford, "Refusing Post-Truth with Butler and Honig", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 2023, Vol. 49(2), p. 225.

31 B. Honig, 2021, *op. cit.,* p. 50

32 *Ibidem*, p. xiii.

33 J. Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, London, Verso, 2020, p. 13.

34 *Ibidem*., p. 9. Similarly, Marina Calloni through a reading of the creation myths of Rome, Athens and Thebes, cautions about the need to break with the cycle of gendered violence. M. Calloni, "Legitimizing political power from below. A reinterpretation of the founding myths of Thebes, Athens and Rome as a critique against private and public violence"*, Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 2023, Vol. 0(0) pp. 1-18.

35 B. Honig, 2021, *op. cit.,* p. 23.

36 J. Butler, "Performative Agency", *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 2010, Vol. 3:2, p. 147.

37 B. Honig, 2021, *op. cit.,* p. 19.

38 *Ibidem*, p. 20.

39 Butler points out that there are both illocutionary and perlocutionary performative speech acts. Illocutionary acts in themselves bring about particular consequences while perlocutionary acts require particular sets of conditions to be in place to have effects. See J. Butler, *op. cit.,* 2010, p. 148.

40 B. Honig, *op. cit.,* p. 20.

moments where norms and discourses are iterated. As Eva von Redecker writes "performativity does not celebrate excessive variability. It is tied to petrified anchor structures and regulated alignments, and is more about the perpetuation of complex arrangements of power than about self-stylization."[41]

How are we then to understand a praxis of "slow regicide"? That is if agency is dispersed and not intentional, but an ongoing process of performative iteration, how can we distinguish between the moments that the bacchants action provides a critique of patriarchy, thereby allowing for its breakdown and the performative repetition of such norms through which patriarchy is reproduced?[42] Distinguishing between performativity and performative critique von Redecker's work is instructive here. If the theory of performativity can be understood as showing how agency is dependent on preceding norms and structures, performative critique describes an undoing of those structures and norms. Specifically, this undoing enables the occurrence of what had previously been considered impossible.[43] However, the success of this critique cannot be thought on what is bought forth because the outcome of the performative as Honig states is undecidable. Rather, performative critique reveals the insecurity of naturalised social orders. At the same time, as Davina Cooper argues, performative acts operate as if impossible alternatives are already available. This is not to say that alternative values and meaning a transposed from elsewhere but rather performative acts put into question what role particular social and political formations play and why. In fact, it is not success that enables performative critique but failure. Performative agency is not a process of choosing to iterate established norms differently but a repetition that reveals the contingency of pre-existing norms and relations of power. It is the failure or discrepancy between the norm and the performative that makes the impossible available.[44] Put differently, the bacchants refusal of the principles through which they are subjected, their taking up of positions which the patriarchal order has deemed impossible, destabilises the naturalisation of this order. In these terms 'slow regicide' dismantles the authority of the Pentheus over the women. To break with the cycle of violence that the bacchants find themselves in would have been the impossible task that inclination performatively makes feasible. Yet when they kill him, they undermine the possibility of this transforming their social relations in any lasting way. That is, they performatively restage the intelligible norms of violence rather than resignify what had been up to then impossible, a destabilisation of the patriarchal tree.

How then can performative critique help us respond to the possibility of violence that agonism holds? I propose that it is possible to understand 'slow regicide' as a form of non-violent performative critique of patriarchy. This critique does not require the violent murder of Pentheus but rather rejects this act as performatively perpetuating the hetero-patriarchal order. Inclination undertakes a performative critique of the verticalist, patriarchal order revealing the contingency of the vertical while making possible alternatives that have been denied. This is not to suggest that there is no distinction between sororal collective action and maternal care, nor that at times it is strategic to depend on one over the other, but that the positing of the question of inclination through the gesture that reorientates ethics and politics frames an encounter between the possible and impossible. Both politics and ethics must, as Honig suggest, intervene in an inescapable violence but *that* violence cannot be allowed to determine the nature of the response that inclination demands. The 'splendid' part of an inclined "slow regicide" is when it fails to repeat the violence of the patriarchal order. In that moment, "slow regicide" is an act of performative critique revealing that the tree of patriarchy is not natural but is nurtured by violence.

Conclusion

Honig writes that "suspensive festivals and inclinational heterotopias have their own risks. To leave verticality aside and build elsewhere is to leave the vertical empowered to do its work"[45] Hence the need to return to the city. However, if we are to break a circle of patriarchal violence, we need to start to consider other forms of actions, of ways of doing and being as providing resources for enabling change. These resources cannot only be seen as proper to either a distinctly ethical or political realm but instead offer up new possibilities for how each of these are understood and interact. The ethical is not simply a rehearsal stage that motivates us to political action but is already bound up in the scene of politics in which any ethical demand emerges. Focusing our attention more fully on Honig's concept of "slow regicide" we see in this process not a rehearsal for political action but a performative critique in which agency is diffused between social structures, actors, objects and spaces. Such a shift in our attention takes a different position towards violence seeing it not as one possible outcome of agonism but rejecting it as a tool of patriarchal power.

Honig is right to complicate our understanding of inclination. She shows that there are various answers to the question posed by inclination, thus deepening our understanding of the relation between violence and care. Moreover, she is right to claim that we can never be sure of the outcome of our interventions and that violence is always one possible consequence of agonistic contestation. And yet if we do not focus on what happens when the bacchants kill Pentheus we fail to understand the question that inclination poses. Inclination, as I understand it, is generative in that it opens a space to question the ethical and political models we understand as possible, so that another way of living with one another, leaning on each for support becomes possible. This should not be understood simply as offering a different or new normative ethics. Rather, inclination is the positing of a set of questions that radically alters what we understand to be ontological, ethical and political. And yet

41 E. von Redecker, *Praxis and Revolution: A Theory of Social Transformation*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2021, p. 135.
42 *Ibidem,* p. 136.
43 *Ibidem,* p. 136.
44 J. Butler, *op. cit.,* 2010, p. 152.
45 B. Honig, 2021, *op. cit.,* p. 71.

Honig's focus on the collective makes an important point. The possibility of changing and intervening in oppressive structures requires that we act together, acknowledging our interdependence as a condition of our struggle. Affirming such collectivity is one possible answer to inclination, not one where we stand aside, but that opens on to the further task of asking how we will intervene against patriarchal oppression without resorting to a violence that destroys our interdependency.

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