

CJ ONLINE
2009.03.04

A Companion to Greek Tragedy. Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World. Edited by JUSTINA GREGORY. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2005. Pp. xviii + 394. Paper, \$44.95. ISBN 978-1-4051-7549-4.

Greek Tragedy. Blackwell Introductions to the Classical World. By NANCY RABINOWITZ. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2008. Pp. xii + 218. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN 978-1-4051-2161-3.

Readers will welcome the release of a paperback edition of Blackwell's excellent *Companion to Greek Tragedy*, making it accessible to the average student. (Contrast the astronomical \$169.95 for the original hardcover.) In the ever-proliferating world of handbooks and introductions, this volume remains at the top of its class and a superb resource for anyone who wants an introduction to "the variety of approaches, and the lively controversies that characterize the study of Greek tragedy today" (p. xvi). Although the *Companion* has the look and feel of a handbook, the chapters take the form of short, incisive essays rather than encyclopedic articles. As a result, the volume is a delight to read, and the diversity of topics is such that even professional scholars may find material unfamiliar to them, such as Salvatore Di Maria's informative discussion of tragic performance during the Italian Renaissance.

In keeping with its stated goal, the *Companion* offers a diversity of critical opinions, in 31 chapters grouped under four rubrics ("Contexts," "Elements," "Approaches," "Reception"). The selection of authors includes many of the most influential scholars of tragedy today, writing on the topics they know best: Mark Griffith on "Authority Figures," David Kovacs on "Text and Transmission," and Peter Wilson on "Music," to name but a few. Although the approaches of many of these writers will be familiar from their more specialized work, the essays are often more than capsule summaries. In "Tragedy's Teaching," for instance, Neil Croally both reiterates the central arguments of his *Euripidean Polemic: The Trojan Woman and the Function of Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1994), on the educative function of tragedy, and responds to critics of his thesis. The volume promises to "reflect the international scope" of tragic scholarship (p. xvi), and although Anglo-American scholars predominate, the relevant non-English scholarship is adequately discussed and cited, and there are important contributions by Bernd Seidensticker and Luigi Battezzato. A "Further Reading" section closes each chapter; while not exhaustive surveys of the secondary literature, these short annotated bibliographies provide a springboard for exploring the major schools of thought on each chosen topic.

There are nonetheless some inevitable drawbacks in the way the *Companion* has been arranged. As a consequence of the methodologi-

cal pluralism, the chapters sometimes have the feel of stand-alone essays rather than participants in a larger dialogue. An introductory chapter or a short preface to each Part might have helped provide a common organizing principle to link the individual chapters.¹ As it is, the rubrics designating the Parts offer only the loosest of organization. Part III (“Approaches”) is especially amorphous; it is unclear why Martin Cropp’s “Lost Tragedies: a Survey,” for instance, is placed here, alongside chapters on feminist and anthropological approaches to tragedy, rather than in Part II (“Contexts”). Justina Gregory has done a fine job of including major topics of interest, although the final Part (“Reception”) might have been improved via inclusion of a chapter on the French classical drama of Racine and Corneille.

More might also have been done to highlight the disagreements and divergences of opinion that inevitably arise between the volume’s roster of A-list contributors. Cross-referencing between chapters is not as thorough or consistent as it could have been, and is especially needed where there are significant disagreements in method. When Sourvinou-Inwood (in “Tragedy and Anthropology”) disputes the notion that the ancient audience would perceive the *deus ex machina* in Euripides as “an empty gesture of closure” (p. 300), for instance, reference to Deborah Roberts’ earlier chapter, in which this interpretation is defended (“Beginnings and Endings,” pp. 143–4), would have been helpful. Since most readers will not read the volume straight through from beginning to end, such connections would help them evaluate the different methodologies on display. But these are minor quibbles, and the Blackwell *Companion* remains an excellent entry point to contemporary approaches to tragedy.

* * *

If the *Companion* offers breadth and comprehensiveness, Nancy Rabinowitz’s breezy introduction might be described as a protreptic for the study of tragedy. Writing from a progressive political point of view and for a general audience, Rabinowitz (R.) argues that the concerns dramatized in Greek tragedy remain relevant to modern debates about gender, power, race and class. While R. is careful to emphasize the culturally specific nature of Athenian drama, she does not shy away from seeing a contemporary use-value in the questions raised on the tragic stage: “these plays enact morally ambiguous situations in a complicated way, which makes them useful as a way of thinking through difficult scenarios in our own lives” (p. x). R.’s

¹ One might compare Paul Cartledge’s initial chapter “‘Deep plays’: theater as process in Greek civic life,” which successfully set the stage for the contextual approaches that followed in the *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, edited by P. Easterling (Cambridge, 1997).

book is framed, in part, as a polemic against educational conservatives such as William Bennett and Lynne Cheney (in her role as head of the NEH from 1986–93), the self-proclaimed champions of classical education against the threat of postmodernism. R. rightly sees the cultural triumphalism advocated by Cheney and Bennett as a dead-end, and in her readings of individual plays ably demonstrates that the tragic texts unsettle orthodoxies much more than they encode a timeless, humanistic knowledge. In self-consciously positioning her text as yet another salvo in the culture wars, however, R. aims her sights at what is increasingly a straw target. Indeed, the majority of today's undergraduate students seem quite comfortable with the pluralist approaches and questions R. advocates. Yet R. succeeds in presenting a compelling account of tragedy's continuing relevance, without over-simplifying the differences between ancient text and modern preoccupations, and her larger argument remains valuable: Greek tragedy will continue to have a vital place in the canon because of its essentially interrogative power.

The polemical stance of R.'s book makes it likely that it will draw comparisons with Rush Rehm's *Radical Theatre: Greek Tragedy and the Modern World* (London, 2003), which also sought to articulate the radical questions ancient performance poses for modern practices. But unlike Rehm's book, which offered a sustained critique of contemporary American theater performance, R.'s aims are more modest, and her readings of specific tragedies are often open-ended in their conclusions. The format of the book follows a mostly conventional structure for an introductory volume, and accordingly provides much of the contextual information a reader unfamiliar with Greek tragedy will want and need. Bibliographical references are kept to a minimum, though sections on "Suggestions for further reading" close some chapters. After a brief introduction, the volume is divided into two parts. Part I discusses the context of ancient performance in Athens in chapters on generic features, the political context of performance, and the religious context respectively, while Part II offers short readings of ten separate works.

An "Introduction" sets out the kinds of questions R. advocates, surveying some of the most influential interpretive approaches in tragedy scholarship of the latter part of the 20th century: New Criticism, structuralism, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. Unfortunately R.'s capsule reviews are too short to make these methodologies intelligible; of the difficult Lacan, R. simply states "He is best known for his concepts of the mirror stage and the symbolic, both of which can be used to decode tragedy" (p. 5). It might have been better to omit such name-dropping, especially since R.'s readings of individual plays in Part II show a greater affinity for

the kind of structuralism associated with Vernant and Vidal-Naquet than for the other approaches sketched in the introduction.

R. begins Part I ("Tragedy in its Athenian context") with a chapter on the culturally specific understanding of tragedy in ancient Athens and with a brief discussion of Aristotle's account in the *Poetics*. R. wisely engages with Aristotle only to elucidate some of his more influential concepts (*hamartia*, *peripeteia*, *katharsis*); although these are sometimes glossed a bit too superficially (e.g. *katharsis* described as the purgation of the emotions, p. 17), R.'s account admirably preempts major misconceptions of the terms students are likely to bring with them (such as the notorious "tragic flaw"). On the vexed question of the "function" of Greek tragedy, R. introduces an important sub-theme of her book, that tragedy provokes both an emotional and an intellectual response from the audience, since emotions engage the audience in an ethical response to the drama. Tragedy cannot be reduced to either an "aesthetic" or an "educational" function *tout court* (pp. 18, 58).

The rest of Part I does a fine job of synthesizing current mainstream opinion on the contexts of performance, political ideology and religion. On difficult questions R. is often agnostic; concerning the shape of the theater during the 5th century, for instance, she simply presents the evidence for a round and a rectangular orchestra, and describes the effect the shapes would have on theatrical meaning (pp. 21–3). R.'s account, however, nicely emphasizes the difficulty of using context as a guide in the interpretation of tragedy. In summarizing the contrasting positions of Goldhill and Seaford (pp. 54–5), for instance, she shows how even scholars who offer contextual readings of tragedy can reach strikingly different conclusions about the role of ambiguity and closure in performance.

Part II includes readings of ten tragedies, all treated under four separate rubrics that illustrate the conflicts concerning gender, power and the divine that R. sees as constitutive of tragedy ("War and Empire," "Family Romance and Revenge in the House of Atreus," "Victims and Victimiziers," and "The King and I"). This is where R.'s book stands out from the most recent crop of introductory volumes, including the Blackwell *Companion*, since it demonstrates the value of a contextual approach to tragedy through short, incisive readings of entire plays. As a consequence, R. does not provide much in the way of stylistic analysis of each tragedian, aside from noting the effect of the Peloponnesian War on the thematic emphases of Euripides and late Sophocles, in contrast with Aeschylus (pp. 116–17). Nor does R. always delve into the canonical problems presented by each play; there is no discussion of the enduring problem of how to stage the final scene of *Oedipus the King*, for instance. Instead, she focuses on how tragedy interrogates binary cultural oppositions

such as male/female, Greek/barbarian, and so on in a familiar structuralist manner, privileging interpretations that illuminate the fundamental ambiguity underlying these oppositions. In other ways, too, R. emphasizes the interrogatory nature of tragedy, which works to draw the audience into active engagement with the ethical dilemmas presented on stage. In her discussion of the ending of *Hecuba*, for instance, R. draws back from interpretive certainty about how to evaluate the heroine's act of vengeance: one's reaction "will depend in part on the performance ... and admittedly on your personal predilections and tolerance for violence" (p. 146). At such points, R. frequently develops analogies between the concerns of individual plays and of the modern world, in order to bring home how complicated an audience's response may be. R.'s discussion of possible Athenian reactions to Aeschylus' *Persians* in the light of the American intervention in Iraq is particularly apt (pp. 94–5).

The Epilogue, written in collaboration with Sue Blundell, surveys modern performances of Greek tragedy, outlining some areas in which they have creatively engaged with the past to address contemporary issues. The chapter leans more heavily towards Anglo-American productions of tragedy (understandable, given the documentation available), though the authors have important notices on non-Western productions and on the appeal Greek tragedy has had for subjects of European colonization (notably in the work of Athol Fugard and Wole Soyinka). That R. fails to bring film adaptations (e.g. the Euripidean trilogy of Cacoyannis, Pasolini's *Edipo Re* or Lars Von Trier's *Medea*) into her discussion seems a missed opportunity, given that such media might easily be incorporated within a course on tragedy.

This is thus an engaging introduction to the subject, especially for instructors interested in exposing their students to the broadly contextual approaches R. advocates. Some readers may find R.'s repeated references to the contemporary world a bit too free; but she works mostly through suggestion, leaving it to her readers to think through the implications of her analogies and continue the dialectic between past and present.

OWEN GOSLIN

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill