

BOOK REVIEW

EDITH HALL, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. x +413. 40 illustrations. Cloth. \$55.00/ £30.00 ISBN: 978-0-19-923251-2.

This most elegantly produced¹ book by Oxford University Press is as fine a book on the subject of Greek tragedy as I have ever read. The dust jacket blurb refers to the volume as an introduction, but it is not for the casual reader or the beginning student. It supposes of the reader a general familiarity with the subject and some knowledge of the 33 extant plays of the main corpus, but does not require knowledge of Greek; in fact, few (perhaps too few) Greek words associated with the subjects at hand are provided in transliteration. The author's style is quite formal, the illustrations pertinent and often quite amusing.

As an exploration of the 'Interactions between Ancient Greek Drama and Society', Hall's effort here to use the subtitle of another of her books is an indispensable read for classicists who do not specialize in drama (and many who do will be given frequent pause by the novel connections the author forges), for teachers of general world literature or history of drama courses, and for undergraduate and graduate students of the classics who seek to master the subject in detail. The book seems to have an affinity to Simon Goldhill's 1992 book, *Aeschylus: Oresteia, Landmarks of World Literature*.² What Goldhill does for the Aeschylean production – i.e., providing context for the plays within the 5th-century Athenian polis and then examining the plays thematically one by one and finally briefly discussing the reception of the trilogy – Hall does for the complete corpus of extant 5th-century tragedies. She distils for the reader the erudition she and her colleagues have built over decades of studying and writing about ancient drama, focusing on the plays not as mere texts but as cultural artifacts. She is steeped in performance criticism (compare the work of Carlo Russo and Oliver Taplin), and also in the theory and history of the ancient theatre, including reception

¹ Commendable are the designer dust jacket by George R. Barse, the beautiful typography by SPI publisher services, the rich acid-free paper by CPI Anthony Rowe, and the forty-one (including frontispiece) gorgeous illustrations.

² Nothing like Goldhill's 2004 book on the *Oresteia*.

(compare the work of J. R. Green, E. W. Handley, David Wiles, P. Wilson, Eric Csapo and William J. Slater). She has also written works on ethnicity, reception and gender.

The book is divided into chapters/sections as follows, each of which has a separate bibliography at book's end, "Further Reading":

Introduction

1. *Play Makers*: Personnel, writing Roles, Celebrating Dionysus.
2. *Community Identities*: Gatherings, Dealing with Death, Contexts, Myths and the City
3. *Confrontations*: War, Ethnicity and Class, Women and Men, Age Groups,
4. *Minds*: Theology, Cult and Ritual, Philosophy, Psyches, Madness and Medicine.

In the chapters that follow (5, 6, 7), a brief introduction to each of the prime tragedians is followed by an essay on each play that is no longer than seven pages. Bibliographies for each play are divided into "Commentaries" and "Interpretations."

5. *Aeschylean Drama*: Introductory and brief essays on each of the 7 plays
6. *Euripidean Drama*: Introductory and brief essays on each of the 19 plays
7. *Sophoclean Drama*: Introductory and brief essays on each of the 7 plays
8. *Greek Tragedy and Tragic Fragments Today*: Performance, Fragments.

The brief essays written for each play vary considerably in content. Usually a very brief synopsis of the action is given followed by commentary which is often, but not always, centered about considerations Hall has raised in the first four chapters. It would have been helpful if the topics for earlier consideration had been called up for a mnemonic to the reader by exact repetition of keywords used there as she does sometimes e.g., with deliberation and decision-making on page 318: "One of the central issues in the play (*Women of Trachis*) is the importance of deliberation before action." On the other hand the topic at issue is sometimes hammered home fortissimo (again with deliberation) as is the case in the discussion of Medea's deliberation or lack of it on pages 190–193, where the reader is treated to the legal distinctions between first- and second-degree murder from several societies, including a paragraph from section 3 of the *Homicide Act of 1957* (UK). Footnotes to claims made in these essays are inconsistently given and few. In discussing the issue of the authenticity of the *Prometheus Bound*, for example, there are no footnotes, and it is difficult to separate Hall's own asseverations from those of the one source cited in her bibliography (Mark Griffiths, *The Authenticity*

of the *Prometheus Bound*). Incidentally, the grouping of footnotes by inclusive pages is sometimes difficult if one wants to use them in reverse order, i.e., by trying to find the footnoted statement by referencing the footnote itself. When the included pages are few in number (ten to twenty), this method is passable, but when there are forty pages of text referenced on one page of notes, as often in the section under discussion, it becomes very difficult and frustrating.

The substance of the first chapter, "Play Makers," is fairly standard content of the sort first explored extensively in English by A. W. Pickard-Cambridge (supplemented, of course by subsequent studies, e.g., Peter Wilson's *The Athenian Institution of the Khoregia*). Here Hall also emphasizes the importance of song in Greek culture and thus in the tragedy.

The rich center of the book is to be found in the sections "Community Identities," "Confrontations," and "Minds." Here almost every page contains a startling connection between some plot element or statement in a play and cultural fact (usually an Athenian one). I daresay that under some rubric or another Hall manages to discuss every single *agôn* in the corpus of plays, excepting, perhaps those of *Rhesus* and *Cyclops*. I was hard pressed to think of a single point or counter-example. I found one: in her discussion of the social wall between slave and free master Hall does not mention the poignant interplay between the slave chorus and Electra in *Libation Bearers*, where Electra invites the chorus to be her equal in ministering to the tomb of Agamemnon.

Beyond Aristotle, who discusses tragedy in detail, Hall draws from rather obscure notices from the pre-Socratics (especially Protagoras), courtroom cases and practice, from history (especially Thucydides) from Theophrastus, Herodas (missed by the index), Plutarch, Athenaeus, Hippocrates, and many of the tragic fragments. One instance I found striking is her reference to Plato's *Timaeus* where an analogy is drawn between the divine creator of the universe and the statesman who organizes the choral dancing in the city state. This enables a generalization by Hall: "Their [Athenian audience's] love of the choral dance as collective activity means that they even conceptualized the planets and other heavenly bodies as revolving around a common central point in an unceasing cosmic dance" (p. 94). This idea evokes a long discussion about the ways in which Helios is given some role in the tragedies as the god who is ever present both to the characters in the play and to the live audience who experience the very real presence of the sun overhead. Actually Hall could have pursued these topics further by noting that since the production date of the plays was fixed and unique, one could calculate the appearance of the sky's phenomena were it poss-

ible to affix a modern date to the production (which we are able to do in fourteen of the 33 cases). I was a bit disappointed with the discussion of Helios, especially since “Under the Sun” is part of Hall’s subtitle for the book. It seems to me that the position of the play in the day’s productions would affect the audience’s perception of the sun, and that this fact might be reflected in the plays. But such a study was not undertaken.³

Hall’s thesis is that the essence of the tragedy is suffering. This proposition is not likely to be gainsaid. Beyond that she would add that “it constitutes the dramatic expression of an enquiry into suffering, an aesthetic question mark performed in enacted pain,” (p. 8) and that it does so by inviting “. . . philosophical enquiry into their causes and effects.” A counter-proposition might be that Greek tragedy appealed to its audience, not by prompting inquiry into the witnessed suffering as to how, for example, it might have been reversible, but by simply evoking awe (*thauma*) at the way the moral universe is constructed by the gods (Nemesis).⁴ My personal response to an experience of dramatized tragedy is feeling my moral assumptions being challenged while the play unfolds, and then, only afterward, taking pleasure by recollecting what kind of dramatic quandary the dramatist put her characters in: “Oh yes, she was an Electra figure, bereft of her father’s love by a scheming Clytemnestra of a mother,” or “those characters were put into a Phaedra–Hippolytus dilemma: don’t ask, don’t tell.” Perhaps it is well to fall back on Hall’s original statement: “There have been as many definitions of Greek tragedy as there are surviving plays” (p. 2).

After having said of the book that it is an indispensable read, I must point out a few demerits that one could hope to be emended in any subsequent edition. I have already commented on the method of footnoting that I find frustrating. Even more frustrating is the wholly inadequate index. There is no index locorum,

³ Closing plays of a trilogy (perhaps of their tetralogy) like *Trojan Women*, *Eumenides* are infused with a golden light, i.e., a city in flames, and a torchlight ceremony that led underground; the chorus at the end of *Seven Against Thebes* imagine their song is blowing a *theōros* to the sunless realm of Hades. Conversely, plays opening a production feature dawn or Helios newly risen as in *Agamemnon* and Euripides’ *Phaethon*.

⁴ A central quotation illustrating this thesis comes not from one of the big three, but from Sosisphanes, fragment 3: “O you mortals, most often so unlucky and seldom well off, why do you put a premium on abundance that the light of one day grants and the light of another deprives you of. And if, nothings that you are, you are rolling in easy good luck, you think yourselves to be on a level with heaven, and you do not observe the plenipotent Lord Hades standing near beside you.”

so that, if I should wish to read what brilliant observation Hall makes about a certain passage of, say, *Libation Bearers* that I am reading, I must either have an eidetic memory of my former read or refer, one by one, to the 20 odd references to that play cited in the index as written. And for many entries there ought to be more subdivision as is found, for example, in the entry under "Athens, Athenian," where there are fourteen sub-rubrics.

The many books by Edith Hall and her colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic have added immeasurably to our understanding of Greek theater, and one hopes that nobody cries out "Stop, little pot, stop."

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