**BOOK REVIEW**

*Tragic Modernities.* By Miriam Leonard. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. Pp. xiii + 204. Hardcover, $39.95. ISBN 978-0-674-74393-9.

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iriam Leonard’s *Tragic Modernities* is a tour de force gathering of the energies that Greek tragedy has generated in the millennia since its original composition and performance. The book sets pivotal thinkers of the Western tradition in dialogue with one another, generating from their controversies a profound meditation on tragedy’s influence over the way we imagine the contemporary human condition. Interpretations of tragedy, Leonard argues, prompted foundational ideas in the disciplines of history, philosophy, and psychology that continue to shape the way we imagine ourselves and our relationship to others.

Beginning and ending the book with the disagreement between George Steiner and Raymond Williams over whether tragedy and modernity are mutually exclusive, at the end she particularly underlines Williams’ argument for the tragedy *of* modernity, allowing herself finally a pointed concern about issues of freedom and human agency in contemporary political contexts. This book is important for many reasons, including the depth of its scholarship and lucid summary and explanation of many diverse lines of thinking on tragedy. But this reader especially valued the sense of deep commitment and moral gravity that Leonard conveys. “Tragedy” (the actual phenomenon of Greek drama) and the “tragic” (the ways in which Greek tragedy has been reimagined) form for her a dialectic through which we can examine the always-urgent human struggle against vulnerability, misunderstanding, ignorance, and death.

The arrangement of chapters interlaces the particular and the abstract, moving between considerations of tragedy that have a more concrete bearing on human lives, such as its impact on thinking about revolution, history and gender (Chapters 1, 3, and 4), and those with larger and more speculative ambitions to understand the human subject in its relation to all that is external to it (Chapters 2 and 5, “Tragedy and Metaphysics” and “Tragedy and Subjectivity” respectively). Each chapter treats three or four authors who especially shaped the discourses of modernity as “tragic”, showing how their differing interpretations of the ancient plays lead to sometimes radical splits in theories of political and social change, of the meaning and limits of human freedom, of the movement of history, and of gendered identity.

Leonard has a knack for summarizing her arguments in one or two pithy sentences—“While for Arendt the theatrical is valued because it can give us access to the political spirit that animates it, for Marx spectacle haunts action as a form of inauthenticity” (31)—which makes her command of the history of Western thought accessible to readers less familiar with the texts she treats. Thus she pilots readers familiar with tragedy beyond its narrower definitions and interpretations, exciting interest in thinkers and texts that might otherwise, for lack of sure guidance, remain dark. “The Earliest System-Programme of German Idealism”—a late eighteenth century fragmentary text whose authorship remains unclear—becomes in her argument a core text of the Romantic turn to aesthetics, through tragedy, as the foundation of political and philosophical freedom. This move opens the way for Schelling’s and Hegel’s interpretations of Oedipus as *the* figure of the human subject caught on the rails between freedom and necessity, and tragedy as an “ontological condition” (56).

An important critique of feminist approaches to psychoanalytic theory grounds Chapter 4 (“Tragedy and Gender”). Working through the Freudian appropriation of the Oedipus myth (her elucidation of its contradictions provide a great overview of this foundational principal of psychoanalysis), she then lays out controversies within contemporary feminist scholarship over the relevance or usefulness of Oedipus for conceptualizing gender. Principally, she addresses Bonnie Honig’s rebuttal of Judith Butler, in which Honig shows that Butler’s attention to Antigone as an antidote to the phallic paradigm set up by the Freudian Oedipus runs straight back into the universalizing, masculinist paradigm set up by both Freud and Hegel. But whereas for Honig “it is the classicization of contemporary political activism that reintroduces an unwelcome humanism to feminist readings of Antigone”, Leonard argues that tragedy itself is not to blame. Rather we should look to the eighteenth- and nineteenth century appropriations of tragedy that Leonard has illuminated throughout her book. The classical texts themselves, as she argues at the end, are not the obstacle but the way.

Though the book beats an often dense path through many theories and interpretations, each chapter leaves the reader with a clear sense not only of the principal points of the arguments but also their stakes for ethical life. Chapter 3, “Tragedy and History”, details a vision of history as a play between contingency and universality that many thinkers have discovered in the dynamics of tragedy. Are we merely subject to the vagaries of fortune, or is there some universal law that holds/binds us? Leonard shows surprising alignments between the aestheticizing views of Hegel and Hölderlin on the one hand, and the historical concerns of Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt on the other. Ultimately the ethical question this chapter addresses stands for the book as a whole: in what ways does tragedy inform our understanding of what happens when we confront a limitation and self-consciously struggle against it? Is it too frivolous, or universalizing, to interpret the human condition in its concrete particulars through the lens of an ancient art form with no social or political ties to historical present moments? Leonard argues that the struggle is both “tragic”, in the senses that philosophies of tragedy have developed over centuries, and possibly something else altogether that that ancient art form still remains to show us.

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