

BOOK REVIEW

Euripides and the Gods. By MARY LEFKOWITZ. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xviii + 294. Hardcover, \$45. ISBN 978-0-199-75205-8.

Euripides continues to evade labels. Was he a misogynist or a proto-feminist? A realist or a romantic? An atheist or a pious believer? Mary Lefkowitz tackles this last question in her book on Euripides and the gods. She argues that Euripides' ancient critics have prejudiced modern scholars to see him as an iconoclast who challenged belief in the traditional gods. A monotheistic worldview, she claims, also clouds modern readings of the gods in Euripides' plays.

Lefkowitz, by contrast, aims to take the gods who appear in Euripides' plays "literally and seriously" (xii). She advocates an approach free of irony or disbelief, as opposed to other approaches, which she characterizes as treating the gods "merely as projections of human desires or as a quaint literary convention" (20). For the latter view, Lefkowitz cites J. Michael Walton's *Euripides Our Contemporary* (2009), a book that is not primarily interested in the role of the gods. She also mentions Cacoyannis' (1971) film adaptation of *Trojan Women*, which omits the opening dialogue between Athena and Poseidon. Yet these two works do not represent much of the scholarship on the gods in Euripides, which on the whole creates a more nuanced picture of the gods' roles in the plays.

My main concern with Lefkowitz's stated methodology is that it creates a false dichotomy between those who take the gods "seriously" and those who don't. In fact, Lefkowitz follows in a long tradition of scholars who aim to take the gods seriously. She cites Lloyd-Jones (1983) and Mastronarde (2010) as exemplars of a serious approach, among a few others, but I would add scholars whose approach she challenges, including Foley (1985) and Hall (2010).¹ Lefkowitz's interpretations of the gods in Euripides may be different from Foley's or Hall's, but they are neither more serious nor less guided by modern assumptions about ancient beliefs.

¹ Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, 2nd edition, Berkeley, 1983; Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides*, Cambridge, 2010; Foley, *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides*, Ithaca, 1985; Hall, *Greek Tragedy*, Oxford, 2010.

The first chapter debunks ancient biographers' claims that Euripides, like Socrates and other sophists, challenged belief in the traditional gods. The argument of this chapter will be familiar to those who have read Lefkowitz's work on poets' biographies, and on Euripides' *Vita* in particular.² Her caution against reading Satyrus or Aristophanes as historical fact is sensible, but does not break new ground.

The second chapter focuses on Euripides' *Heracles*, which includes some of the most controversial statements about the gods in ancient drama. Lefkowitz argues that Heracles' speech denying prayers to Hera because she destroyed him, though he did nothing wrong, would not have been controversial to its original audience. She claims that the original audience would have understood these lines as "simply a statement of mythological fact" (52). While I agree that Heracles' statement should not be conflated with Euripides' beliefs, or even with Heracles' beliefs in a less anguished moment, I have a hard time swallowing the adverb "simply," which mutes the power of Heracles' outcry against the injustice of Hera.

Most of Chapter 2 reviews other scholars' misconceptions about the gods in *Heracles*. At the end, Lefkowitz tentatively claims, "Here Euripides may be making the point that in certain respects human morality is superior to that of the gods, if only because the inevitability of suffering and death in human existence makes humans better friends and parents" (73). This claim could have helped focus the chapter with an interpretation of *Heracles* that makes a larger point about the gods in Euripides. Instead, the review of scholarship distracts from new insights about the play's theology.

Chapters 3–6 make important points about individual gods in Euripides' plays. In Chapters 3 and 4 Lefkowitz surveys the roles of Athena and Apollo, respectively, in several different dramas. Because of her special relationship with Athens, Lefkowitz argues, Athena plays a "constructive role" (77), whereas Apollo's intentions often defy mortal understanding, since he is the god of obscure prophecy (99). The Athena chapter focuses on *Suppliants*, *Erechtheus*, and *Iphigenia among the Taurians*; the Apollo chapter on *Alcestis*, *Ion*, and *Orestes*. These unusual pairings bring out similarities between plays often not discussed together. I had never thought, for example, about Apollo's nick-of-time

² See, for example, "The Euripides *Vita*," *GRBS* 20 (2), 1979: 187-210 and *The Lives of the Greek Poets*, London/Baltimore, 2012 (2nd ed.).

interventions in both *Ion* and *Orestes*. The chapter on Apollo also points out how distant Apollo remains from the mortals in whose lives he intervenes. In the tragic universe, gods and mortals can never truly understand each other.

Chapter 5—on “other gods”—juxtaposes two very cruel gods (Aphrodite in *Hippolytus* and Dionysus in *Bacchae*) with two empathetic gods (Thetis in *Andromache* and Castor in *Helen*). Lefkowitz argues that Aphrodite and Dionysus, typical of the Olympians, lack empathy for mortals, whereas Thetis, who lost her mortal son, and Castor, who was once mortal, can grasp human suffering. Chapter 6 discusses the gods behind the scenes of *Medea* and *Hecuba*. Both plays, which lack a *deus ex machina*, raise questions about the role of the gods. Why do gods permit injustice sometimes, but demand justice in other circumstances? Why do they let innocent people die? Lefkowitz concludes that Greek theology allowed, even promoted, questioning.

Lefkowitz’s study challenges readers to comprehend distant and cruel gods, so different from those with which many readers will be familiar. The book also calls attention to the gods’ roles in some less well-known and fragmentary plays. I would have found Lefkowitz’s claims more convincing, however, if she had not dismissed scholarship that takes a different theoretical approach from her own. Some of this scholarship, such as Helene Foley’s *Ritual Irony* (1985), has illuminated the more provocative and questioning aspects of Euripides’ theology. I also found problematic Lefkowitz’s imprecise terminology for rape.³ It is startling, for example, to read that Tereus “seduced” Philomela (199). While *Euripides and the Gods* will not significantly change the way that most scholars approach the gods in Euripides’ plays, this book does make some interesting observations, especially about the roles of individual gods.

ERIKAL WEIBERG

Florida State University, eweiberg@fsu.edu

³ Lefkowitz acknowledges that Apollo raped Creusa in *Ion* (102), a welcome change from her position in “Seduction and Rape in Greek Myth,” in *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies*, edited by Mary R. Lefkowitz and Angeliki E. Laiou, Washington, D. C., 1993. Elsewhere, she uses “seduces” and other euphemisms. On Apollo: “In traditional myths, he *makes love to* mortal women and begets mortal children . . .” (99). On *Tereus*: “Tereus had *seduced* his wife Procne’s sister Philomela, and then cut out her tongue so she could not report what he had done” (199). On *Io* in *Prometheus Bound*: “When she refused Zeus’ advances, he turned her into a cow, so that he could *approach* her in the form of a bull, thus keeping his wife Hera from seeing what he was doing” (202).