

BOOK REVIEW

Greek Fragments in Postmodern Frames: Rewriting Tragedy 1970-2005. By ELEFTHERIA IOANNIDOU. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xi + 195. Hardcover, \$95.00. ISBN 978-0-19-966411-5.

Eleftheria Ioannidou's *Greek Fragments in Postmodern Frames* makes an important contribution to contemporary debates within reception studies, specifically taking up the question of whether tragedy and postmodernism are compatible, and if so, in what way(s). Responding principally to Terry Eagleton's claim that postmodernism forecloses genuine engagement with tragedy, Ioannidou argues that contemporary rewritings of Greek tragedy expand the scope of whose experience Western tradition is prepared to accept as tragic. As she puts it, "textual reconfigurations of tragedy seem to have ethical and political stakes that extend beyond the intellectual self-indulgence that postmodernism is often associated with; rewriting the Greek plays emerges as a radical act of reclaiming tragedy for the silenced, the excluded, and the oppressed" (12). In other words, postmodern rewritings—Ioannidou's term suggesting a focus on textuality, as opposed to adapting a myth (6)—challenge the Western tradition's heritage of delimiting tragedy in specific, privileged ways.

Greek Fragments begins by surveying Modernist theories influencing the reception of Attic tragedy into the postmodernist age, and then analyzes several ways in which contemporary rewritings undermine Eagleton's attempt to draw a hard and fast line between postmodernism and tragedy. The first chapter reviews Modernist responses to and delimitation of tragedy—legitimization of which experiences genuinely count as tragic. This chapter traces agreements, debates, and tensions between the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, George Steiner, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Eric Bentley, Raymond Williams, and the Cambridge Ritualists—but the main antagonist for Ioannidou is Eagleton, whose argument she returns to throughout her analysis. In Eagleton's theory, "postmodernism is entirely at odds with the concept of tragedy: it renounces, in his view, notions such as meaning, coherence, and value, which constitute the indispensable elements of tragedy" (13).

Contra Eagleton, Ioannidou's following four chapters argue that in specific ways, postmodern rewritings of Greek tragedy not only reconcile the two traditions, but expand the sphere of tragic experience. Chapter 2 argues that postmodern rewritings blur the boundaries between "artistic" suffering and everyday catastrophe with the specific intention of legitimizing the tragic (in the everyday use of the term) elements of human experience. Her analysis in this chapter focuses on Steven Berkoff's *Greek*, Helene Cixous' *La Vile Parjure*, and Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender*. Depictions of suffering in these plays resist the (elitist) distinction between the tragic hero's aestheticized suffering and the non-aestheticized suffering of communities facing disaster or mass violence. The next chapter argues that plays like *The Roar* by Pavlos Matesis, *Klytaimnistra?* by Andreas Staikos, *Living Quarters* by Brian Friel, *The Island* by Athol Fugard, and *Medea* by Dario Fo and Franca Rame blur the lines between tragedy and metatheatre, creating self-aware drama that doesn't preclude tragedy. Utilizing self-conscious techniques, "The metatheatrical interplay here entails a reflection on Greek tragedy, featuring certain tensions with both the classical texts as well as tragedy as a genre" (77). Chapter four claims that Ted Hughes' *Alcestis*, Simon Armitage's *Mister Hercules*, Wole Soyinka's *Bacchae of Euripides*, and the adaptations of Brendan Kennelly enact poststructuralist scrutiny of the authority of both the author and the text through hybrid quotation from various ancient plays and modern translations. The final chapter ties the postmodern fascination with textual fragments to the dynamics of gender politics and sexual violence. Using *Medea: A Sex-War Opera* by Tony Harrison, *A Mouthful of Birds* by Caryl Churchill, and Heiner Müller's *Medeamaterial*, Ioannidou demonstrates how "Textual and bodily disintegration ... give rise to new textual configurations as well as to alternative possibilities of gender and sexuality" (139). Ioannidou traces a common thread among postmodern rewritings of Greek tragedy: that they challenge the limited range of traditional Western conceptions of tragedy.

This book makes an important intervention in contemporary theoretical debates about tragedy by arguing for the specifically postmodern/poststructuralist focus on the text in contemporary rewritings. In contrast to many adaptation or reception studies that focus on reworkings of myth structures, Ioannidou asserts that the primary touchstone for these rewritings is the text itself—rewriting the canonical object, as opposed to merely the myth structure, "allows us to follow the process of textual transformation and observe the extent to which the classical text is followed, invoked, or resisted" (6). Given this focus on the text as a concrete artifact, it is somewhat surprising how little direct textual analysis *Greek Fragments*

employs. Of course, fairly short chapters each dealing with three to five plays and a theoretical framework leave little room for extended close readings of either play texts or performances. Ioannidou's focus is principally the theoretical debate over tragedy and postmodernism, and the somewhat cursory treatment given to the primary texts is probably the biggest weakness of this book.

Weighing in at a lean 171 pages of text prior to the bibliography, *Greek Fragments* is a surprisingly quick read considering the importance of its intervention. This book will be of major interest to reception and adaptation studies scholars, modern drama scholars, and postmodernists. Although the book's specific focus may limit its utility in most classrooms, Ioannidou's prose is clear and her summation of dense theoretical material is cogent enough that students in the field will find this accessible.

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