

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Politics of Youth in Greek Tragedy: Gangs of Athens*. By MATTHEW SHIPTON. London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2018. Pp. 208. Hardcover, \$114.00. ISBN 978-1-4742-9507-9.

In *The Politics of Youth in Greek Tragedy: Gangs of Athens*, Matthew Shipton examines the portrayal of youthful characters in seven Attic tragedies. Throughout the study, he uses the term “youth” flexibly to include both the characteristics attributed to young people and the associated social category. His stated goal is to make a case for youth studies as a sub-discipline of Classics similar to gender studies. Shipton ties his analysis of specific tragedies to the shifting social and political landscape of 5th-century Athens. He argues that the reforms of Cleisthenes precipitated a gradual evolution away from vertical family relationships toward horizontal age-group relationships – the “gangs” of the book’s sub-title – leading to increasing generational opposition and ultimately the factionalization of Athens along age-related lines. Tragedy, he suggests, allows us to track changes in how older generations perceived youth across time. The plays express different forms of anxiety about the potentially destabilizing effect of young people on Athenian society, from the relative political stability of the mid-5th century through the various upheavals of the Peloponnesian War.

In addition to a methodological introduction and a brief conclusion, the book offers its argument in seven chapters that proceed chronologically. Chapter 1 locates tragedy within a broader literary context starting with Homer and emphasizing Thucydides. Chapter 2 examines *Prometheus Bound* as a play that expresses anxiety about the new tyrannical regime of a younger generation. Chapter 3 frames *Antigone* as exploring the extent to which young people should participate in politics. In Chapter 4, *Heracleidae* is shown to highlight society’s expectations of the young as citizen-warriors, even as it excludes young men from speaking roles. Chapter 5 considers *Philoctetes* and its reflection of a post-Sicily Athens anxious to return political decision-making to older men. In Chapter 6, *Orestes* – with its focus on Orestes, Pylades and Electra – is used to explore the

dynamics of a youth “gang.” Finally, Chapter 7 considers two plays – *Bacchae* and *Iphigenia in Aulis* – which demonstrate the disastrous consequences of the failure to properly negotiate intergenerational relations. Notes, bibliography (featuring almost exclusively English-language scholarship) and an index follow.

This book is a concise introductory foray into the role of youth in Greek tragedy. This concision is often a virtue, as Shipton habitually acknowledges without unnecessarily engaging in long-standing academic debates (e.g. the authorship of the *Prometheus*), leaving the focus on his own original contributions. The book avoids extensive engagement with the Greek text; all Greek is translated with a few key words transliterated and, with the exception of the *Philoctetes* chapter, the Greek vocabulary for youth is not heavily emphasized (appropriately so, given that, as Shipton explains, what is implied by “youth” in English does not map onto any single Greek term). While some will undoubtedly regret the absence of sustained philological analysis, minimal emphasis on the Greek makes this book accessible to a broad audience without sacrificing depth of analysis.

Unfortunately, the briefness of the arguments presented occasionally leaves gaps where those familiar with this literature might want more extensive analysis. For example, Shipton spends only a page on sustained discussion of youthful characters in Aristophanes in Chapter 1; the *Heracleidae* chapter does not address Macaria as a young character; and the characterization of the old servant so prominent at the beginning of the *Iphigenia in Aulis* is only briefly addressed. Concision perhaps also contributes to what sometimes seem over-simplified readings of the plays. In the *Antigone* chapter, for example, Shipton establishes a contrast between Creon, who stubbornly and inflexibly embodies the values of an older generation, and Antigone and Haemon, who “seem to promote views on justice that are less grandiose and more tolerant of a plurality of perspectives” (69). While this describes Haemon at points in the play, it is difficult to understand how this ever applies to Antigone, who is as stubborn and inflexible as her uncle. Although Shipton does complicate the generational opposition he establishes, ascribing youthful attributes to Creon, the way in which Antigone and Haemon are paired in his argument sometimes effaces important similarities between Creon and Antigone as well as differences between Antigone and Haemon, somewhat distorting elements of Sophocles’ characterization.

A similar simplification occurs through the chronological structure of both the book and Shipton’s argument. While he is always careful not to overstate his case when it comes to connecting particular plays to particular historical events, the neatness of the pattern he establishes through the chronological trajectory of

the book can at times seem a bit forced. Can Athenian social constructions of youth really have changed that much from the performances of *Philoctetes* and *Orestes* (in 409 and 408, respectively) to those of *Bacchae* and *Iphigenia in Aulis* (performed posthumously in 405 but composed earlier), as the book's structure implies? Rather than arguing for a continuous chronological evolution of views about youth, the book might have conveyed the same ideas more persuasively using a looser structure (perhaps considering plays in three groups: pre-war, early-war and late-war).

In all, however, this is a stimulating book that does effectively make the case for youth studies in the Classics. Scholars of tragedy will experience the book as a welcome nudge to consider old issues in new ways. The impetus to understand the youthful characters of tragedy beyond their place within familial structures (particularly father-son relationships) is especially refreshing and will, one hopes, prompt new investigations into the portrayal of young people in the literature of the 5th century and beyond.

ADRIANA BROOK

*Lawrence University*, [adriana.e.brook@lawrence.edu](mailto:adriana.e.brook@lawrence.edu)