

BOOK REVIEW

Euripides and the Poetics of Nostalgia. By GARY S. MELTZER. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. xi + 266. Cloth, \$80.00. ISBN 0-521-85873-9.

The black-figure amphora that adorns the jacket of *Euripides and the Poetics of Nostalgia* depicts Dionysus seated on a mule and attended by a satyr who is dancing and playing the lyre. Beguiling though the image is, it is also misleading, for this book has little or nothing to do with Dionysus. Nor, despite its title, does it have a great deal to do with nostalgia.

Meltzer sets forth his premise in the introduction and opening chapter. He argues that Euripidean drama, despite its reputation for skepticism and iconoclasm, is traditional and conservative, in that certain characters at critical moments express a nostalgia for “clear, univocal meanings and values [derived] from higher powers” (p. 8)—meanings and values now neglected or lost—and a concomitant wariness of the cut and thrust of opposing viewpoints that characterized the sophistic age. Meltzer identifies similar sentiments in the works of Aristophanes, Thucydides and Plato; he also sees a resemblance to the anxieties that beset our own world.

Meltzer’s key text is the agon between the warring brothers Polyneices and Eteocles in *Phoenician Women*. Polyneices opens his speech by claiming that “the word of truth is simple (*haplous*), and just causes have no need of sophisticated interpretation” (469–70). Eteocles points out in rebuttal that if there were universal agreement on the meaning of predicates such as “beautiful” and “wise,” there would be no need for “two-sided debate” (*amphilektos eris*, 500); in fact, however, men use the same names for things, while harboring very different understandings of them. Meltzer identifies Polyneices’ “word of truth” with the Derridean phonocentric tradition, and sees in the opposed perspectives of the two brothers “the central agon of Euripidean drama” (p. 5). Subsequent chapters trace the permutations of this conflict in *Hippolytus*, *Hecuba*, *Ion* and *Helen*.

The book is carefully and symmetrically structured. Meltzer’s procedure for each play is to identify one or more emblematic passages; sketch their implications for his chosen text, often adducing a Thucydidean analogue; and close by suggesting contemporary parallels to the issues explored in the chapter. Chapter Four on *Ion*, for example, shows how the “word of truth” cannot be guaranteed even when it emanates from the gods. Meltzer focuses on Ion’s questioning of the veracity of Apollo’s oracle (1537–8) and demonstrates that Apollo’s deceptions pervade the play. He notes that neither Creusa nor Ion ever gets a chance to tax the god with misconduct and that the issue of his truthfulness is hardly resolved by Athena’s *deus ex machina* appearance at the end. He suggests as modern parallels to the

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play's skepticism about Apollo's veracity both the controversy over the Catholic Church's handling of sexual abuse cases and the issue of "whether and to what extent the private lives of powerful public figures should be open for criticism" (p. 186). I must confess that these and other modern parallels Meltzer adduces (suggesting on p. 225, for example, that the phantom Helen of *Helen* has implications for cloning and identity theft) do not strike me as compelling. The points of congruence between our own age and the 5th century are few and far between; the differences are vast, and the search for specific resemblances risks obscuring both eras rather than illuminating either.

It is true that Euripidean characters regularly voice a desire for a differently ordered and more transparent world, but in assigning these passages metaphysical significance Meltzer too often scants their context. In discussing the Polyneices/Eteocles agon, for example, he does not consider Polyneices' motives for speaking as he does. Eteocles had promised to yield the kingship to his brother after one year, and is undoubtedly in the wrong in breaking his pledge, but in so doing he harms no one but Polyneices. Polyneices is arguably guilty of a far greater wrong, for he is about to attack his native city, an impious, indeed parricidal act that endangers all the inhabitants of Thebes. Polyneices invokes the "word of truth," which he implicitly identifies with his own arguments, not from conservatism or simplicity of heart, but in order to distract attention from the ambiguities of his own position. Moreover, Polyneices' speech is highly structured rhetorically, considerably more so than the answering speech of Eteocles.¹ To construe Polyneices as the spokesman for traditional values and Eteocles as the representative of the sophists is to oversimplify the situation.

I am not certain either that Meltzer has identified the appropriate historical context for the opposition between Polyneices' "word of truth" and Eteocles' "two-sided debate." Meltzer relates this opposition to a particular moment and movement, the late-5th-century intellectual revolution. But as Mastronarde (on *Ph.* 469–72) shows, the associations of "simple" speech with honesty and of "double" speech with trickiness are much older, already appearing in Aeschylus, Pindar and Archilochus. Finally, where is the nostalgia in Polyneices' statement? Polyneices is making a claim for the efficacy of the "word of truth" in the present; he is not harking back to a former time when it possessed enhanced authority. Neither is Medea when, in a passage Meltzer describes as an "explicit form of nostalgia" (p. 19), she wishes for a stamp on men that would distinguish the bad from the good (*Med.* 516–19); nor is Theseus when, in an outburst Meltzer

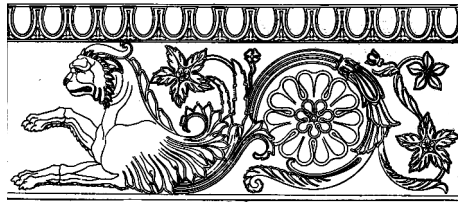
¹ See D.J. Mastronarde, ed., *Euripides: Phoenissae* (Cambridge, 1994) 280, 288. Meltzer has apparently not availed himself of this and other major commentaries on his chosen plays, which do not appear in his "Works Cited."

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identifies as emblematic for *Hippolytus*, he says that men ought to have two voices, so that the just one could refute the unjust (*Hipp.* 925–31). Such sentiments are utopian rather than nostalgic; they represent proposals for how things ought to be, not regret for how they once were.² Although the wishes of Medea and Theseus are clearly fantasies incapable of realization, they have more in common with the progressive accounts of human advancement over time associated with the 5th-century enlightenment than with the nostalgia for a bygone Golden Age associated with traditional thinkers like Hesiod.³ The sentiments Meltzer deems “nostalgic” in fact return us to Euripides the innovator and student of the sophists. If the playwright has a conservative side (and I am convinced that he does), it must be sought elsewhere than in his characters’ utopian imaginings.

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² Meltzer acknowledges the utopian element in Euripides, but redefines it as “an implicit form of nostalgia” (p. 19). He also plays with a second sense of “nostalgia” when he suggests that *nostos* is a major theme of all four plays (pp. 19–20); he does not, however, follow up on this proposal.

³ For an explicitly progressive Euripidean text, describing how human beings developed from a confused and brutish state through divine beneficence, see *Supp.* 201–13.