

BOOK REVIEW

Tragic Pathos: Pity and Fear in Greek Philosophy and Tragedy. By Dana LaCourse MUNTEANU. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xiii + 278. Hardcover, £60.00/\$99.00 ISBN 978-0-521-76510-7.

Munteanu's book demonstrates admirably that new approaches can provide illuminating insights into much-studied topics. As she states in the Introduction: "The novelty of my study lies in recovering various cultural facets of the emotional responses to tragedy through a synthesis of sources, such as philosophical descriptions ..., fragments of comic poetry, and dramatic scholia ..., reports about the original tragic performances, and emotional expressions of the internal audiences (i.e. characters and chorus witnessing the suffering of others within drama). ... In the treatment of each tragedy, most original are the assessments of the relationship between the emotional expressions of internal audiences and the likely and reported reactions of the external spectators" (2).

After a broad survey of issues concerning aesthetic emotions (Introduction), Part I provides some background on Indo-European drama, and studies the views of Gorgias, Plato, and Aristotle, whose ideas about *catharsis* are wisely relegated to an Appendix: "As the meaning of *catharsis* is perhaps unattainable, I have tried to turn to a more practical type of analysis of the emotions—which is an Aristotelian thing to do, after all" (250). Part II puts the theoretical ideas presented in Part I to good, practical use, by studying four plays, including one by each of the three major tragedians.

I found two key ideas, presented throughout, to be of particular interest and importance. First, Munteanu's emphasis on the two audiences—internal and external—helps her to arrive at many original interpretations of entire plays and individual scenes, and insights into the possible responses of the original Athenian audience. She argues, for example, that Aeschylus's *Persians* would have aroused in the external audience the kind of *fear for* the Persian army that the Queen expresses within the play, while descriptions of the army by the Chorus would have aroused *fear of* the enemy (Chap. 6). *Prometheus Bound* (Chap. 7) contains numerous appeals to pity, as Prometheus himself invites both audiences to watch and sympathize (169). Nevertheless, many of the internal responses are

unlike those discussed by theorists (179–80), and the complicated responses of the internal audiences may have challenged contemporary ethical, political and religious ideas (164). Chap. 8 provides some excellent analyses of metatheatrical elements in Sophocles' *Ajax* that arouse pity, and discusses ways in which the play exemplifies Aristotle's views about tragic pity, while also going beyond Aristotle to suggest that this emotion can have the ethical benefit of *sophrosynê* (202). I would, however, take issue with her statement that Odysseus' pity for Ajax does not lead to direct action in this play (232–3). It could be argued that his pity leads him to help Ajax to gain burial after his death. Chap. 9 examines Euripides' departures from the Aristotelian norm in his *Orestes*: "The dramatist . . . plays with the convention, suggesting infinitely more possible reactions to tragic events" (225).

Second, Munteanu focuses on the idea of seeing events in the mind's eye, expressed in Aristotle's injunction to the poet to bring the events "before the eyes" (*Poet.* 17, quoted p. 78): "Seeing with the mind's eye, imagining, in Aristotle's theory is the essential feature in the formation of pity: the emotion relies on one's ability to relate to the suffering of another by envisioning a future or past similar misfortune with respect to the self. Aristotle prefers tragic plots that are so well designed that they can be imagined even without being directly seen" (231). She also calls attention throughout to the "frequent *verbal* references to seeing and sight" in the tragedies (231). Her detailed analyses of many specific examples help the reader to understand Aristotle's ideas, and the powerful emotional effects of the tragedies. Her study will also enable readers to appreciate similar ideas in modern art forms, from what was called "the theater of the imagination" in the early days of radio, to this statement in Dickens' *David Copperfield* (beginning of Chap. 55): "As plainly as I behold what happened, I will try to write it down. I do not recall it, but see it done; for it happens again before me."

Less convincing is Munteanu's account of the "proper pleasure" of tragedy, a kind of pleasure that in some way derives from the painful emotions of pity and fear (103ff.). She provides some good correctives to views (including my own) that tend to emphasize cognitive pleasure at the expense of emotion. Her ideas, however, could be better explained and supported. She identifies the "proper pleasure" of tragedy with what Aristotle calls a "supervening completion" (108ff.), but fails to provide adequate discussion of this highly controversial concept. Moreover, her statement that "the 'proper pleasure' of tragedy is cognitive" (131) might appear to support the very views she opposes. Finally, although Munteanu gives a good account of the pleasure of mourning as involving memory of the past (117ff.), she neglects passages in ancient sources that could

be used to support her own views about the importance of non-cognitive responses. For example, in Homer, mourning often seems to be the satisfaction of desire (*eros*), like the desire for food or sex (e.g. *Il.* 24.227), and Plato writes of the tragic poet who “fills up” that part of the soul that “is starved for weeping ... being of such a nature as to desire (*epithumein*) such things” (*Rep.* 10.606a; see my *Tragic Pleasures* (Princeton, 1991) 228–9).

Finally, I note a few problems and errors.

(1) The argument is sometimes hard to follow, attempting to cover too much in too short a space. Chap. 1, on Indo-European ritual, is not sufficiently detailed to be very useful, and Chap. 3, on Plato, covers too many dialogues and subjects in too little detail. In particular, more careful analysis could have been given to important passages in *Rep.* 10.

(2) More attention could have been paid to relevant work on narrative theory. For example, Munteanu does not cite Irene de Jong’s important study (*Narrative in Drama: The Art of the Euripidean Messenger-Speech*, Leiden, 1991), which contains (108–14), good accounts of the reactions to messenger speeches of “internal addressees” and “external addressees.”

(3) There are a number of careless errors. For example, the header on p. 103, “Proper pleasure as a species of *mimesis*” should read “as a species of *the pleasure of mimesis*,” as p. 105, bottom, indicates: “tragic *hedonè* does appear to belong to the larger category, the *hedonè* of *mimesis*.” The capitals in the Greek quotation on p. 195 are confusing, and are not in the text of Lloyd-Jones and Wilson, the date of which is incorrectly given in the bibliography.

(4) The translations by the author are sometimes inaccurate or poor. For example, *τοῦ θρηνώδους* (*Rep.* 10.606a8-b1) is confusingly translated as “this mourning” in the long quotation (64), but accurately translated at the bottom of the same page as “the ‘grieving part.’” Important phrases are sometimes omitted from translations, e.g. *διὰ μιμήσεως* (71), *αὐτῆς* (79–80), and *μᾶλλον* (91). *ὦ πόποι* is translated by the unfortunate phrase “Oh wow” (126).

Although *Tragic Pathos* is not always easy to read, it well repays careful study. Munteanu opens up important new ways of approaching old problems, and a broader perspective on ancient texts. Her book has important implications for further studies of literary, philosophical, and political issues, both ancient and modern.

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