

BOOK REVIEW

The Agamemnon of Aeschylus: A Commentary for Students. By DAVID RAEBURN and OLIVER THOMAS. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. lxxiv + 289. Paperback, £29.99/\$55.00. ISBN 978-0-19-959561-7. Hardcover, £65.00/\$135.00, ISBN 978-0-19-959560-0.

David Raeburn and Oliver Thomas have made a difficult but rewarding play accessible to students with this the first commentary on Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* to be published in English since 1958. It offers an impressively wide-ranging introduction to the play that also sets it in the broader context of the *Oresteia* as a whole. Raeburn and Thomas prove to be dependable guides who offer judicious readings of difficult passages; they are even-handed in presenting variant readings or interpretations, and provide the resources necessary for readers to engage with scholarly debate.

Introduction: In 60 pages, the introduction covers the following topics: (1) an introduction to the tetralogy and its playwright, with a synopsis of the storyline of the plays and their mythical background; (2) the historical context of the *Oresteia*, especially recent political events such as Ephialtes' reform; (3) prior versions of the Orestes myth and distinctive attributes of Aeschylus' treatment; (4) ideas in *Agamemnon* (justice, religion, causation and responsibility, learning through suffering, gender); (5) Aeschylus' dramaturgy (use of theater space, performers, stage action, and the structure of the play); (6) the power of words (performative language); (7) the chorus; (8) the characters (referred to as the "solo characters"); (9) language, imagery, and themes; and (10) the textual transmission of *Agamemnon*.

The range of topics covered in the introduction is exemplary, with an overview of the structural elements of Greek tragedy (i.e. what is a *parodos*, *episode*, *stasimon* etc.) and discussion of the biographical tradition about Aeschylus and *Nachleben* of the play being perhaps the only significant omissions. The section treating the distinctive elements of the staging of the play and the way its structure builds suspense is especially insightful, as is the discussion of causation, responsibility and the principle of "multiple determination." Readers about to grapple with Aeschylus' difficult style are given a sympathetic portrayal of the

artistry of his language, including an extended case study of dog metaphors. Throughout, Raeburn & Thomas adduce a wealth of relevant secondary scholarship, cited in footnotes and in suggested reading at the end of sections, often accompanied by annotations. They have restricted citations to scholarship written in English, an understandable arrangement given their intended audience.

However, I had a mixed response to the introduction. Certain sections (e.g. 1 and 5 above) were a model of clarity—as, for example, the discussion of the textual transmission, which equips readers to engage with later discussion of textual cruxes. Others failed to fully spell out the implications of an issue (e.g. by setting the Areopagus reform within the shift to broader-based democratic participation) or to define key terms (e.g. δαίμων is a term used throughout the introduction, but not defined until notes *ad* 768-71 (“evil genius”), 1663 (“luck”), and 1667 (“the guardian spirit of the house”); so too δίκη needs a clearer definition than that adumbrated at xxxi—it would help to note that Dike is often personified, and that she is the daughter of Zeus). *Hubris* is referenced extensively in the introduction and commentary, but never properly explained—especially problematic given the term’s imprecise vernacular use; references to the “hubris syndrome” are even more opaque. Frequent references to Aeschylus’ “theology” and to “sin” are likely to give students a skewed impression of religious thought in 5th-century Athens. The main problem, though, is one of intelligibility, sometimes stemming from prior knowledge assumed, other times from allusive or opaque wording.

Commentary: The commentary itself is pitched at just the right level. Grammatical and linguistic assistance is provided at the right moments, including cross-references to Smyth, Denniston, and the *LSJ* where appropriate. English translations of difficult phrases are provided. Over the course of the book, students are introduced to a wide range of aspects of the classical world. So, for example, students are introduced to the use of Doric vowels in choral odes and are reminded to distinguish between words that look the same but for their accent. Notes offer excellent treatment of the semantic range of individual words; religious and socio-political aspects are also illuminated. Each new episode is given an introduction that treats issues of staging, interpretation, meter, characterization, and plot trajectory. There are welcome references to famous modern echoes of the *Oresteia* (e.g., Robert Kennedy’s quotation of Ag. 179-83 in his speech after the assassination of Martin Luther King; the use of the beacon sequence in Peter Jackson’s 2003 film version of Tolkien’s *The Return of the King*). Such references should be a standard element of commentaries for students; that

this is not yet the case is indicated by the fact that these references are relegated to the bottom of the page as footnotes on notes! Rather broad understandings of what constitutes performative language and ritual and a propensity to spot dark resonances in every utterance are idiosyncrasies of the commentary rather than major faults.

The decision to reprint the Greek text of Page's *OCT* means that on dozens of occasions Raeburn and Thomas (rightly) take issue with their published text. They handle this problem adroitly, using it as an opportunity to introduce students to textual criticism as they lay out the grounds on which one reading is preferred over another. The text has an attractive layout and font, and is free of typos but for a couple of minor slips. End matter includes a bibliography, *index locorum*, and general index, as well as a 29-page appendix, titled "Sound and Rhythm," introducing readers to the meters of the play. This appendix includes tips on delivery as well as discussion of the effects of various meters, and a general introduction to metra and cola. It concludes with a metrical analysis of the play's choral passages, which indicates rests as well as posits which syllables correspond with footfall. Thus the reader benefits from David Raeburn's considerable experience in the performance of Greek drama in the original language. In summary, Raeburn and Thomas have provided a comprehensive and reliable guide to the *Agamemnon* that will be of use to students and scholars alike.

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