

Euripides: Orestes. By MATTHEW WRIGHT. Duckworth Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy. London: Duckworth, 2008. Pp. 176. Paper, \$24.00. ISBN 978-0-7156-3714-2.

Although Euripides' *Orestes* is often overlooked among classical tragedies, it has much to recommend it, as evidenced by reviews of the play during its run this past spring as part of the New York Classic Stage Company's production of *An Oresteia*. Wright's (W.) fine introductory treatment of *Orestes* highlights the richness, complexity and entertainment value of the play in a way that should benefit both the book's primary intended audience—students and theater practitioners unfamiliar with both *Orestes* and details of Athenian theater—and more advanced scholars who have been without a new book-length treatment of Euripides' tragedy for 14 years.

The first two chapters are prefatory. In "Setting the Scene," W. provides background information on Euripides, tragedy, and tragic festivals, and explores why *Orestes* has received so much less attention than other tragedies in the 2400 years since its initial production. One of the main problems, he suggests, is that *Orestes* does not correspond to many people's sense of what tragedy is. There are no murders or suicides; there are comic elements; and the play ends happily (at least on the surface). Furthermore, there is a sense of absurdity in the extent to which traditional portrayals of heroes have been stretched to fit the innovative plot. Chapter 2, "Dramatic Structure and Performance," provides a cursory summary of each scene and a brief yet effective explanation of its value to the play as a whole. It also gives numerous illustrative examples of how productions, from the Reading School's in 1821 to that of London's Shared Experience in 2006, have set the tone of the play and dealt with ambiguous or challenging scenes.

At this point the book moves more to matters of literary interpretation, and the author's thoroughly reasonable point of view becomes clearer, even as he gives respectful space to his scholarly colleagues and predecessors. In Chapter 3, "Humans and Gods," W. attempts to interpret the play as a classical Athenian might have, with "heredity, reciprocity, familial love, revenge, guilt," etc. brought to the fore (p. 52). He examines each character with the aim of bringing to light the ethical and moral complexity that, he claims, many scholars, starting with the scholiast, have overlooked. W. then looks at three issues that complicate the characters' choices: the conflict between loyalty to friends and enmity to enemies that confronts characters who often fall into both categories at once; the dubious portrayal of the gods, who are absent for most of the play and are accused of malevolence toward their human wards; and the am-

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biguous *deus ex machina* appearance of Apollo, which resolves matters on a practical level while leaving many tensions simmering.

W. next addresses more theoretical approaches to understanding the play. In Chapter 4, "Late Euripides," he explores ways in which *Orestes'* status as a work produced late in Euripides' life, in extant Athenian tragedy, and in the Peloponnesian War has influenced its interpretation. While appropriately skeptical of the veracity of the biographies' portrayal of Euripides' late life, including his supposed flight to Macedon, W. examines how the identities the biographies attribute to the poet in his old age—as an embittered outsider or a rebellious innovator—have affected and perhaps distorted critics' interpretation of the play. He cites Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* as an influential view that Euripides was reshaping tragedy so radically late in his life that he was effectively destroying the genre. W. also notes a perspective common among contemporary scholars that *Orestes* reflects a moroseness common to depictions of Athenian life at the time of the play's production: Athens was on the brink of falling, tragedy was on the wane (in the estimation of later observers), and *Orestes* was full of mythical figures humbled. Thus, according to many, the play pessimistically reflects the finality of everything the now-resentful artist once held dear. While W. admits that the symmetry of *Orestes* with these events is somewhat compelling, he cautions readers not to take the parallels too far—Athens was still several years away from losing the Peloponnesian War, new tragedies continued to be produced well past Euripides' death, and Euripides himself produced later tragedies, like *Bacchae*, that suggest an attachment to traditional tragic forms that some would see *Orestes* overthrowing. W. concludes the chapter by exploring how the play corresponds to "late style" in authors throughout history, as Edward Saïd identified it in his 2006 book on the subject.¹

W. starts Chapter 5, "Politics," by laying out various scholars' thoughts on whether Athenian tragedy as a whole should be taken as political, and if so, whether its political content was focused on Athens of the time of production, or on more universal political issues. W. claims that the whole of tragedy is so diverse that it would be difficult to classify the genre as a whole as political, though individual plays likely were both broadly political and specifically attentive to events of the time of their production. A particular *message* along those lines, however, he argues, is difficult to discern, due to the dialogic nature of the genre. While *Orestes* offers many anachronistic reflections of contemporaneous Athens, it is among those W. contends is devoid of an obvious message, since no one group or

¹ E. Saïd, *On Late Style* (London, 2006).

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point of view comes away looking particularly good. The cowardice of Menelaus, for example, works against any sense of heroism or martial glory, perhaps reflecting Athenian fatigue over the prolonged Peloponnesian War. The mastery of the assembly by honey-tongued speakers who convict Orestes despite reasonable objections also seems parallel to an exasperation with the Athenian democratic process like that expressed by the Old Oligarch. And Orestes' friendship with Pylades can be likened in many ways to the murderous *hetaireiai* that caused havoc in Athens before the oligarchic revolt of 411. Based on this uniformly unflattering portrayal of all groups, W. claims, "There are no political lessons to be learnt from *Orestes*" (p. 114). If political messages require both a protagonist and an antagonist, that is a valid interpretation. But someone else might contend that this uniformly malignant portrayal is its own political message—*everything* is amiss, both in Argos and, likely, Athens—but that difference of opinion is better addressed in another venue.

The final chapter, "Euripides' Cleverest Play," appears to be one in which the author took particular pleasure. While W.'s conclusion is aporetic ("In the end, it is ... hard to find a philosophical 'meaning' in *Orestes*," p. 136), the chapter is full of his explanations of apparent (or at least possible) references to Presocratic philosophers, sophists, Euripides' own prior work (particularly *Electra* and *Helen*), genre expectations, etc., all of which W. takes as guided by a principle of novelty. W. peppers the chapter with unanswerable questions ("Is the tone of this 'clever' scene comparable to comedy?" p. 124), tentative assertions ("Electra's strange remark *seems* to have an additional ... level of meaning *if* interpreted...," p. 122, italics mine), and recognitions of the limits of interpretive speculation ("Even if no particular philosophical point were being made here, this description would...," 134). Some of the best observations scholars and teachers make are those that cannot immediately be packaged into tightly coherent arguments, and this chapter seems to be W.'s collection of such observations. The questions are carefully researched and eruditely presented, but are generally left open for readers to reach their own informed conclusions.

As with many ostensibly introductory works from scholarly presses, W.'s book is not just for beginners. Beyond its explicit objectives, it also serves as an efficient overview of academic approaches to *Orestes* for scholars needing to be current on it. W. has written several articles on (or at least engaging with) the play in the past few years, and has been active on others tragedies of Euripides as well.²

² Among W.'s relevant scholarly works are the following: *Euripides' Escape-Tragedies* (Oxford, 2005); "Orestes, A Euripidean Sequel," *CQ* NS 56 (2006) 33–47; and "Enter a Phrygian (Euripides, *Orestes* 1369)," *GRBS* 48 (2008) 5–13.

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His immersion in the play and its author is apparent in his lucid engagement with contemporary scholarship and his admirable coverage of pertinent work. Though the bibliography omits a few notable articles and books (for which W. can certainly be forgiven in a work of this sort), his attention to scholarly work relevant to contemporary study of this play makes his book a valuable source for professional academics.³ It serves as an update of sorts to Porter's *Studies in Euripides' Orestes* (Leiden, 1994), which has much more specific scholarly objectives, but which was the last book-length work dedicated to the play.

W.'s Duckworth Companion to *Orestes*, well-researched, accessibly written and carefully edited, is a welcome addition to the field on a number of levels. It deserves a place in the library of nearly every institution in which Classics and/or classical theater are taught, and at its reasonable paperback price, it should also be affordable to many individuals who teach or conduct research on the play.

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³ Most notable among the (again, entirely forgivable) omissions in are: W. Biehl, ed., *Euripides' Orestes* (Berlin, 1965); H. Erbse, "Zum *Orestes* des Euripides," *Hermes* 103 (1975) 434–59; T.M. Falkner, "The Conflict of Generations in Euripides' *Orestes*," in K.V. Hartigan, ed., *From Pen to Performance* (Lanham, 1983) 13–22; C. Fuqua, "The World of Myth in Euripides' *Orestes*," *Traditio* 34 (1978) 1–28; M. Hose, *Drama und Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart, 1995); M. Hose, *Euripides: der Dichter der Leidenschaften* (Munich, 2008); O. Longo, "Proposte di lettura per l'*Oreste* di Euripide," *Maia* 27 (1975) 265–87; J. de Romilly, "L'Assemblée du peuple dans l'*Oreste* d'Euripide," *Studi Classici in Onore di Quintino Cataudella* 1 (1972) 237–51; and B. Zimmermann, "Die Krise der Polis im Spiegel der attischen Tragödie (Euripides, *Orestes*; Sophokles, *Philoktetes*)," in J.V. Bañuls, et al., eds., *El teatre clàssic al marc de la cultura grega i la seua pervivència dins la cultura occidental* (Bari, 1998) 369–80.