

BOOK REVIEW

Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the American Stage. By HELENE P. FOLEY. Sather Classical Lectures. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2012. Pp. xv + 375. \$95.00. ISBN 978-0-52027244-6.

Scholars have frequently written on the modern reception of Greek tragedy and on modern performances of Greek tragedies in Europe, the UK, and elsewhere. Less attention has been paid to the important role Greek tragedy has played in shaping the content and form of American drama. In this groundbreaking work, Helene P. Foley offers a detailed picture of American productions, close adaptations, and imaginative remakings of Greek tragedy extending back into the nineteenth century. (For the most part, she wisely avoids using the nebulous word *influence* in descriptions of Greek tragedy's afterlife.) The work should inspire admiration in anyone who has undertaken work in this field.

While a wealth of material is readily at hand for the study of Greek tragedy's influence on the cinema, for example, drama is a more ephemeral product. Broadway had a voracious appetite for new plays in the early decades of the twentieth century, and many of them have never been published and may exist today only in archives scattered around the country. Foley has undertaken and brought to completion the truly herculean task of assembling a wealth of material and shaping it into a coherent narrative history.

In Chapter 1 ("Greek Tragedy Finds an American Audience"), Foley begins her story with a brief account of nineteenth-century native efforts at presenting Greek tragedy on the professional stage (27). From there she tells how college and university efforts provided stimulus for the production of Greek tragedy, but points out that the Harvard production of *Oedipus* (1881) unfortunately failed to secure a place for Greek tragedy on Broadway (35). It should be noted, however, that this was the production that so impressed the great Sophoclean scholar Richard Jebb, who devoted much attention to it in the appendix to his commen-

tary on *Oedipus Tyrannus* and thus has made this particular staged version familiar to generations of readers.¹

The chapter closes with a brief consideration of the importance of Eugene O'Neill to the "Americanization" of Greek tragedy (71). Yet O'Neill's own appreciation of Greek tragedy was rather short-lived. I would point out that in 1931—the very year *Mourning Becomes Electra* was first produced—O'Neill wrote to Brooks Atkinson that Greek tragedy can only be admired from a great distance, but any attempt to understand it at all is merely a pretense.²

Chapter 2 ("Making Total Theater in America: Choreography and Music") demonstrates that developments in modern dance laid the groundwork for the development of American performances of Greek tragedy in the full range of dimensions the plays had in the ancient world. Chapter 3 ("Democratizing Greek Tragedy") examines the role Sophocles' *Antigone*, Aeschylus' *Persians*, and other Greek originals played in the examination of various historical and political issues of the day in America. The final two chapters deal with "Reenvisioning the Hero: American Oedipus" and "Reimagining Medea as American Other." The book closes with an epilogue and lengthy appendices cataloguing various professional productions and new versions of a number of Greek tragedies.

Many readers will likely identify areas calling for further attention. First, I think it incorrect to make the blanket assertion that with the exception of Euripides' *Trojan Women* "politically engaged theater from 1910 through the 1930s failed to choose Greek tragedy as a vehicle for addressing political issues" (10). Maxwell Anderson's verse drama *Winterset* (1935), which won the first New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, uses a raft of images taken directly from Aeschylus' *Oresteia* to examine the infamous trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in the 1920s. The play has never received the attention it deserves, especially among Classicists. (Foley discusses only Anderson's rather pathetic *Wingless Victory* [204–7], a sugarcoated version of Euripides' *Medea* without the sting.)

Secondly, the plays of August Wilson, most notably *King Hedley II*, call for attention. *King Hedley II*, which reimagines Greek tragedy on the north side of Pittsburgh is, in my judgment, one of the most powerful plays ever written by an American playwright. —with a chorus provided by the crazy and enlightened

¹ See R.C. Jebb, *Sophocles: Plays. Oedipus Tyrannus* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012), 201ff.

² See J.P. Diggins, *Eugene O'Neill's America: Desire Under Democracy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 42–43.

Stool Pigeon. Finally, mention should be made of Richard Schenkkan's Pulitzer-Prize winning *The Kentucky Cycle*, which in nine plays tells the story of America from its earliest days to the present using themes and incidents taken from the *Oresteia*. (I understand that actor Kevin Costner owns the rights to the plays but has indefinitely postponed plans to produce it as a miniseries on HBO.)

Foley's book deserves a wide readership among Classicists and anyone interested in the history of the theater in America. She is perhaps overly modest in describing her role as only that of "a pioneer, clearing the way for later study" (xiv). She has accomplished much more in examining and analyzing various milestones in the history of American drama and bringing to light plays rarely, if ever, studied in their relation to the Classical tradition.

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