

## BOOK REVIEW

*Euripides and the Politics of Form*. By VICTORIA WOHL. Martin Classical Lectures. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. xviii + 204. Hardcover, \$39.95. ISBN 978-0-691-16650-6.

Do not misinterpret the title: Victoria Wohl's new book is not about Euripidean politics. Rather, it amounts to a profound, twenty-first century *Poetics*, weaving threads of tragic scholarship and those of literary theory into its analysis of Euripidean plot. Aristotle looms especially large over the argument: for this reviewer, the book's abstract analysis of tragic form as a matrix for *psychagogia* provides counterpoint to Aristotelian poetics and their limitations. It's a complicated study—frequently illuminating, occasionally perplexing, but wholly thought-provoking.

For Wohl, abnormalities of plot structure are neither vacuous poetic experimentation (as formalists might claim) nor a window onto Athenian society (as historicists might claim). Tragic plot, she argues, is active, both generating and shaping aspects of Athenian political discourse – not so much the *mimesis* of a *praxis* as a *praxis* in its own right. Euripides is the argument's ideal poet because of his atypical plots; citing Arrowsmith, Wohl asserts that his aesthetic is one of “dissonance, disparity, rift, peripeteia” (3). As Aristophanes and Plato make clear, such aesthetic choices were politicized already in antiquity; in *Frogs*, the shade of Euripides even claims that his plays are “democratic” (952) for challenging the audience to think. Wohl's study takes up all these points and argues that ideology is not contained in but is rather articulated and enacted by dramatic form: its peculiarities prompt an audience to consider the attitudes and ethics to which a play commits them.

The emotional trajectory of *Alcestis* provides an introductory example. Although the play emphasizes the democratic universality of death, its trajectory encourages sympathy for an elite protagonist whose aristocratic connections repeatedly come to the rescue. Inasmuch as one desires its happy ending, the plot structure produces cognitive dissonance: “*Alcestis* asks us to acquiesce in its romance of elite prerogative” (17). The result is no Aristotelian catharsis; this

prosatyrlic curiosity instead provides a democratic audience with a framework for evaluating emotions, politics, and dramatic form's possibilities.

Each of the study's five chapters probes similarly other curiosities of form. The trajectory of *Ion* (chapter 1) invests the audience in a particular vision of the future (namely, of Athenian imperialism), but the many sharp reversals of plot demonstrate the contingency of that outcome, which is governed as much by *tyche* as by probability and necessity. *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba* (chapter 2) ask whether pity and fear (and their catharsis) can produce justice: in the latter play, a sympathetic audience is implicated in the protagonist's retribution, prompting the conclusion that "longing for justice does not make us just" (62). *Electra* (chapter 3) conjures a utopian fantasy only to thwart it, and the mechanism for doing so—a paratragic *anagnorisis* and a myth that depends upon aristocratic action—creates what Wohl calls "structural bad faith" (71). Empty formalism, which requires Orestes' return, recognition, and revenge, runs counter to the play's egalitarian elements.

*Suppliants* (chapter 4) questions the contradictions and possibilities of 'political tragedy'. The funerary procession and *kommos* of the play's conclusion, which enacts metatheatrically a ritual of the tragic festival, reveals a novel synthesis of the poetic and the political, of form and content. A bold capstone to the study is provided by *Orestes* (chapter 5): its plot does not simply represent dramatically the social turmoil of 411 in Athens, but its sudden *metabole* and *peripeteia* also anticipate or "pre-enact" (120) the future crisis of 404, establishing the context—the 'structure of feeling'—in which it can unfold.

You can probably detect that Wohl's complex arguments and their theoretical underpinnings defy concise summary. But when one frames the study in terms of the history of tragic poetics (and Aristotle, especially), both its insights as well as its limitations stand out. In theorizing how tragedy engages in *psychagogia*, Wohl's study is very much the descendent of ancient criticism. Yet where the ancient sources largely limit the scope of their conclusions to poetry's benefits or deleterious effects on soul or polity, her argument integrates tragedy into a thriving political discourse. By asking what abstract form actively achieves, Wohl unites formalist and historicist trends in tragic scholarship while preserving the concerns of ancient critics. Tragedy does not so much tell an audience what to think via its structure as establish the question(s) or framework(s) for reflection, a

critical perspective that radically reconfigures the relationship of aesthetic form, content, and reception. Ugliness is as meaningful as beauty.

The argument is not without its limitations. The abstract appraisal of form, for example, can result in somewhat blinkered readings. Alcaeus fr. 38a (Voigt) probed death's universality via the paradigm of Sisyphus in much the same way as Wohl argues *Alcestis* does (but in a non-democratic, sympotic context): the idea is not unique to tragic form (or even novel). More slippery is the central claim about the role of tragedy in public discourse: when one reads that "tragedy not only recreates its historical context but in fact *creates* it, producing the historical reality that it is usually thought to reenact" (111) or that Euripides "is no mere reporter, and his play does more than transcribe the history of the civil war: it intervenes actively in it" (120), one cannot help but raise an eyebrow at the artist-as-visionary; is the claim specific to Euripides? If so, the analysis of *Orestes'* form one-ups Nietzsche's idea that Euripides killed tragedy (3), suggesting instead that he (pre-)enacted the destruction of Athens itself. Or have we come full circle, back to Aristophanes' criticisms of Euripidean tragedy—only framed as praise this time?

Wohl's study is the product of deep reading and advances tragic poetics innovatively. It is perhaps designed to perplex; as with the poet whose form it considers, the argument's many theoretical and scholarly threads lead to a certain dissonance, disparity, and the occasional rift. This is doubtless appropriate to a twenty-first century *Poetics*, the result of rereading Aristotle after Marx, Lacan, Vernant, Goldhill, etc., and very much befitting the author of *Intimate Commerce* and *Love Among the Ruins*.

C. MICHAEL SAMPSON

*University of Manitoba*, mike.sampson@umanitoba.ca