

BOOK REVIEW

Greek Tragedy: Themes and Contexts. By LAURA SWIFT. New York, NY.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. Pp. x-125. Paper, \$29.95. ISBN 978-1-4742-3683-6.

In *Greek Tragedy: Themes and Contexts*,¹ a recent addition to Bloomsbury's Classical World series, Laura Swift gives a succinct account of the conventions and themes of Attic tragedy. As the author herself states, "it is not my aim to argue that there is a simple formula for tragedy or that the tragedians all followed the same basic pattern". Nevertheless, this book will show that we do find deep-seated continuities which enable us to better appreciate tragedy's role in Greek life and the central ideas that it explores" (x). The book is written for the beginner, requiring no knowledge of tragedy and no familiarity with ancient Greek. It touches on all extant plays, save Euripides' *Andromache*, and focuses on those most likely to turn up in the undergraduate classroom (emphasizing the House of Atreus, the Oedipus myth, *Ajax*, *Hippolytus*, and *Medea*).

The book contains eight chapters divided thematically: 1. "Tragedy as a Genre" (focusing on both performance context and what constituted tragic content); 2. "Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides"; 3. "Myth"; 4. "Heroes"; 5. "The Gods"; 6. "Contemporary Thought" (focusing on *nomos* and *physis*, the portrayal of non-Greeks, and rhetoric); 7. "Gender and the Family"; and 8. "The Chorus". The introduction to the role of the chorus is especially lucid, which is not surprising given the author's prior work in this area. The book strikes an excellent balance between general comments that can be applied to all tragedies and the consideration of specific examples from individual plays. While avoiding the imposition of a one-size-fits-all model, Swift also avoids focusing so exclusively on each play's unique features that no coherent whole emerges. With the exception of the analysis of two choral odes in the final chapter, the book tends not to

¹ The Google Books preview is available here:
<https://books.google.ca/books?id=I5ihDAAAQBAJ>

consider extended passages, instead privileging broader consideration of character and theme.

The book concludes with additional reference material. A “Chronology” presents parallel columns detailing, on the one hand, the estimated performance dates of all surviving tragedies, and on the other hand, a short list of literary and historical dates from 525 BCE (birth of Aeschylus) down to 404 BCE (the end of the Peloponnesian War). Despite a few odd omissions (why exclude Euripides’ death when Aeschylus’ and Sophocles’ dates are given?), the timeline is an extremely useful feature. “Suggestions for Further Reading” gives an overview of texts and translations suitable for beginners, followed by a list of books offering further discussion, organized by chapter. While these selections are solid, quibbles are perhaps inevitable given the brevity of the list (on average only four or five books per chapter). For example, instead of Vernant’s *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*, the author might have chosen *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (co-authored with Vidal-Naquet), which offers similar structural analysis of Greek thought but gives students more help in applying these ideas to tragedy. In addition, the book includes a “Glossary of Greek and Technical Terms Used” and a short index, including, most helpfully, each play by title.

Swift’s writing is admirably clear, succinct, and easy to read and abstract concepts are framed in a way that is likely to be accessible to the average undergraduate. Rather than falling back on the somewhat antiquated idea of the Sophoclean hero, for example, Swift reframes this as a Sophoclean interest in the perils of decision-making (20), a concept likely to be grasped more intuitively by most students. The book also occasionally refers to modern concepts to help students understand the ancient world. For example, internet fan fiction and Alfred Hitchcock are invoked in Chapter 3 to differentiate between surprise and suspense and explain why well-known myths and characters did not rob the plays of their interest for ancient spectators.

One disappointment is that this book offers less historical and socio-political context than it probably should. There is no separate chapter on the major historical events coinciding with the heyday of Greek tragedy and what little attention is given is largely confined to Chapter 6 (“Contemporary Thought”). While the Persian Wars receive some attention in the consideration of the portrayal of non-Greeks, the author makes almost no effort to consider how the Peloponnesian War (mentioned only once in passing) might be reflected in the tragedies concurrent with that conflict. While social history is given more

attention, particularly the role of women in Athenian society (Chapter 7), the book is in places misleading in the absence of explicit consideration of issues of wealth, class, and social status.

To offer one example, in her discussion of myth, Swift offers the observation that, “since poetry was one of the foundation stones of education, a Greek child would have grown up steeped in this world from an early age” (25). To the student who is unfamiliar with fifth-century Athens, this implies that all Athenian children received the formal schooling available only to some. The book does explain some aspects of Athenian democratic society – for example, the disproportionate influence of aristocratic orators (47–48)—but these explanations are too brief and diffuse to be of much help to the beginner. For example, Swift assumes too much when she somewhat vaguely invokes “the number of ordinary people who attended a play” (p. 82). What precisely Swift means by “ordinary” is unlikely to be clear to most students.

The cover blurb of *Greek Tragedy: Themes and Contexts* claims that this book is a “much-needed up-to-date introduction to Greek tragedy,” which is rather an overstatement in light of three other recent introductions to Greek tragedy: Edith Hall’s *Greek Tragedy: Suffering Under the Sun* (2010),² Ruth Scodel’s *An Introduction to Greek Tragedy* (2010),³ and Nancy Rabinowitz’s *Greek Tragedy* (2008).⁴ Swift’s contribution is comparable in price to all but Hall (which retails for about \$65, rather than \$30). While Hall’s monograph offers much greater breadth and depth of analysis and synthesis, Scodel’s a more concerted effort to provide alternatives to well-worn approaches and interpretations, and Rabinowitz’s closer attention to issues of social and political context, the great virtue of Swift’s book is its brevity (x + 125 by comparison with xiv + 413, viii + 216, and xii + 218, respectively). Swift covers almost everything one would want in such an introduction to tragedy with remarkable clarity and concision. For the student who is truly a beginner in the field, Swift’s introduction is perhaps likely to be the least daunting and most easily absorbed upon first reading of the recent available options. This book is best for use in an introductory course. It offers an efficient and palatable way to prepare students to engage in informed discussions about a

²https://cj.camws.org/files/reviews/2011.06.04%20Worthen%20on%20Hall,%20Greek%20Tragedy%20_Web_.pdf

³<http://bmc.brynmawr.edu/2011/2011-06-45.html>

⁴<https://cj.camws.org/files/reviews/Goslin%20on%20Gregory,%20Rabinowitz.pdf>

single tragedy or a selection of plays without predisposing them to any particular interpretation.

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