

BOOK REVIEW

Greek Tragic Women on Shakespearean Stages. By TANYA POLLARD. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. 331. Hardcover, \$70.00. ISBN 978-0-19-879311-3.

Pollard makes a valuable contribution to our appreciation of the classical tradition and its reception on the early modern stage. She argues that English dramatists and their audiences derived the power of tragedy from the dyads of grieving mothers and their bold, sacrificial virgin daughters found in Euripides, rather than from the isolated and anguished Greek male protagonists or Seneca. The combined evidence of manuscripts, printed editions, translations, and performance records suggests that Greek tragic scripts enjoyed greater currency in the sixteenth century than commonly asserted, with *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia in Aulis* as the most popular, and with *Hecuba* becoming more emblematic for her grief than her vengeance. In short, “*Hecuba*” and “*Iphigenia*” became a kind of synecdoche or touchstone for tragic theater then, just as “*Hamlet*” or “*Lear*” have for us now. Even if Pollard does occasionally overstate the case for Euripidean echoes, the book belongs on the shelves not only of university libraries but also of those researching and teaching advanced surveys of tragedy.

After the introduction deftly expounds the approach and scope of the study, the first chapter documents the reception of Greek drama in books, school curricula, and performances, then challenges the purported gulf between academic drama and the commercial drama that emerged in the later sixteenth century. Pollard focuses on two plays, Jane Lumley’s oft-neglected *Iphigenia* (1557, the first English translation of a Greek play) and George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmersh’s *Jocasta* (1566, a translation of *Phoenician Women* and the earliest documented publicly performed Greek play). The second chapter examines how bereaved and suffering women motivate grief and violence in Thomas Kyd’s extraordinarily popular *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587) and *Titus Andronicus* (c.1592, collaborators include Shakespeare and the academic George Peele, who translated *Iphigenia*).

The third chapter, perhaps the heart of the book, revisits an article from *Shakespeare Quarterly* on *Hecuba*’s presence in *Hamlet* to suggest that Shakespeare self-consciously reflects upon the tragic genre, and “*Hamlet* implicitly competes with

Hecuba" (22; but note that Pollard rejects Harold Bloom's agonistic theory on the anxiety of influence, 14). The fourth chapter attempts to detect Greek tragic women in Shakespeare's comedies via the mediating texts of *Apollonius of Tyre* and Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*. But the analysis of *The Comedy of Errors* never mentions Plautus' *Alcmena* as the obvious intertext for Adriana's laments, and the fruitful comparison of Viola with Iphigenia devotes only two paragraphs to *Iphigenia in Tauris* and the *Electra* plays. The fifth chapter neatly recapitulates and strengthens arguments for hearing the resonance of *Alcestis* in *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Pericles*, and *The Winter's Tale*. The final chapter takes Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* as an Aristophanic mockery of Shakespeare's Euripidizing.

While the book sharpens our awareness of the reception of Euripides, that somewhat blinkered focus has two limitations that invite further study. First, Pollard pursues traces of *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*, the specific plays of Euripides, rather than the more general mythic figures of Hecuba and Iphigenia. Such single-source criticism violates a fundamental truth about the transmission of mythic figures and narratives: a myth is never coterminous with a particular instantiation. For traditional tales, the countless and sometimes ephemeral literary, oral, visual, and dramatic sources form a web of "texts" that surround producers and consumers of art. While Pollard claims that her attention to Euripides "does not exclude other depictions of Hecuba from [Shakespeare's] web of literary engagement" (123, but note "literary" rather than visual or dramatic!), the book's narrow focus precludes exploration of the web. Thus, after Pollard lauds the concept of "confluence" rather than "influence" (21), a choice I wholeheartedly endorse, "confluence" never reappears in her study, while "influence" appears *passim*.

Second, despite the book's sweeping title of "Greek Tragic Women," Pollard's tight focus ignores potential Sophoclean and Aeschylean intertexts that could corroborate her perceptive insights. For example, Hamlet resents queen Gertrude's failure to perform the role of female mourner, a necessary catalyst for righteous vengeance, and he himself struggles to fulfill the role of male avenger. Can a prince assume both gendered roles? Sophocles' princess *Electra* faces a similar dilemma, using female lament to activate male vendetta, only to become the avenger herself once she believes Orestes has perished.¹ [1]

Pollard builds a solid foundation for further study, yet her approach may not appeal to everyone. Some will miss engagement with bolder, more sophisticated

¹ See Helene P. Foley's *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton, 2001), 145-171, a book Pollard cites for Euripides.

theoretical approaches grounded in feminist studies and audience response. Pollard's reliance on the rather vague term "affective" in phrases such as "affective transmission," "affective impact," and "affective possibilities" allows for varied audience emotional responses but ultimately begs clarification. While generally cautious and judicious in discussing texts rather than authors, Pollard's pervasive use of "self-consciously" raises the uncomfortable specters of knowing authorial intent or conflating author with character.

The book's prose is smooth and lucid, with all Latin and Greek appearing in both original and translation. Seven useful appendices compile the known early modern editions, translations, and performances of Greek and Senecan plays. Pollard's meticulous research densely annotates the text with ample and current bibliography from both English and classics. Endnotes rather than footnotes necessitate a constant toggling (e.g., the twenty-three-page introductory chapter carries eighteen pages of endnotes). Few will regret the time invested in reading and pondering Pollard's significant study.

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