

BOOK REVIEW

Euripides and the Boundaries of the Human. By MARK RINGER. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016. Pp. xiii + 377. Hardback, \$110.00. ISBN 978-1-4985-1843-7.

Mark Ringer provides a useful work that analyzes all nineteen of the extant plays attributed to Euripides in chronological order of each one's commonly understood date of completion. Ringer notes the common tendency to treat Euripides as a poet out of step with his time and better understood according to contemporary norms (as argued recently in Walton, *Euripides Our Contemporary*, Berkeley 2009), and he too treats the poet as a maverick in some respects. He contends that the poet was also very much a product of his context, though, best understood in terms of the circumstances and traditions in which he was working. Ringer ties the intellectual impulse of Euripides' works together under a single main theme: "concern with the limitations that define the human condition," which are "necessary reminders of human weakness, cruelty, and arrogance," often through shortsighted use of the human intellect (x).

Ringer applies the thesis to each play at the beginning of the chapter dedicated to it. Each chapter follows that application of the thesis with an explanation of the play's context, then lengthy elaboration on the thesis in an analytical summary. The chapter on *Medea*, for instance, starts with a paragraph on Medea as a "barbarian" woman who possesses "archaic heroic qualities lacking in her spouse" (51), implicitly tying in to the "limitations that define the human condition" theme. The next paragraph sets the play in its historical context, another speaks of it as a "tragedy of immigration" (52) and a third discusses prior versions of the Medea story. From there, Ringer covers many of the play's ideas in the course of a chronological summary of it. The analyses/summations of steps in the play can at times be quite dramatic ("Line 16 encapsulates the pain at the core of the entire play," 53) or essentializing ("The Servant exits with some futile attempts at moralizing after witnessing what no one should wish to see," 65).

Another example is in the chapter on *Helen*, which ties that play to *Iphigenia among the Taurians* as tales for which “alternative versions allow the playwright to recast the familiar in less familiar, though mythically sanctioned ways” (235), a link to the aspect of the thesis focusing on shortsighted use of the intellect. It then explains the poetic history of alternate versions of the Helen myth and the possibility that Helen and Menelaus’ hero cults in Sparta encouraged a less hostile reception of Helen (235-36). After a note on the apparent influence of sophistic thought on Euripides’ construction of the play (236), the chapter begins its summary and analysis with a note on the inclusion of both a palace and a tomb on the play’s stage: “a rather incongruous physical juxtaposition of the palace of the living next to a place for the dead” (236). It moves to a discussion of the Nile (the play’s first word), which has a range of associations in the play itself, both in the mythology in the play’s background and in the minds of Athenian audience members (236-237). A few pages later, Ringer observes that “on the plane of performance a ‘new’ Helen is being exhibited in the theater; still cursed by her beauty, she is cleansed of her traditional moral taint” (240).

On the whole, I find the analyses through the lenses of the thesis to be reasonable, insightful and well-defended. On the other hand, the ideas comprising the thesis are broad enough that they could potentially be applied to the work of many authors. Any effort to seek common ideas that bind the work of an artist over as many as forty years of his life, however, is subject to such criticism, and Ringer shows considerable sensitivity in binding together the works as he does.

Some readers might be distracted by the occasional appearance of intellectual approaches and language choices that are not entirely current. Certain phrasings that Ringer uses in the Preface imply an understanding of a research subject’s mind and intent that most contemporary scholars would likely express in a subtler way. For instance: “Euripides created plays that derive important aspects of their meaning from the author’s awareness of his medium” (x-xi) and “despite his innovative, idiosyncratic sense of dramatic form, Euripides’ vision of life is in some ways the most conservative and traditional of the three great tragedians of Classical Athens” (xi). Also, the use of gender exclusive language in sentences such as “Man’s intellect, his greatest possession, is very often his undoing” (x) is not in line with contemporary norms.

Ringer’s coverage of the massive bibliography on Euripides’ plays is more than representative, with nearly 500 secondary works (all in English) cited in the course of the book. The level of engagement with scholarly sources does not reach the depth for each play that would be typical for an article on each. Howev-

er, it is dramatically more thorough along those lines than the next most recent effort at covering all of Euripides' plays, Morwood's *The Plays of Euripides* (London 2008). Its scholarly engagement also far outdoes the other, much earlier, efforts to give roughly equal attention to each of the plays and bind them under consistent intellectual impulses: Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (New York 1941); Conacher, *Euripidean Drama* (Toronto 1967); and Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides* (London 1967).

All in all, this is a valuable contribution to research on Euripides' works, and it will be a useful addition to many undergraduate and graduate libraries.

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