

BOOK REVIEW

The Oresteia: Agamemnon, Women at the Graveside, Orestes at Athens. Edited by OLIVER TAPLIN and JOSHUA BILLINGS. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018. Pp. 251. Paperback, \$15.00. ISBN: 978-0-393-92328-5.

Oliver Taplin has been one of the most important authorities on Aeschylus. In early work such as his essay “Aeschylean Silences and Silences in Aeschylus”¹ and his book *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus*,² Taplin changed the way scholars in Classics and Theater thought about the earliest of the three extant Attic dramatists. Now Taplin has translated Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, the only extant tragic trilogy, and published it in a Norton Critical Edition which he has co-edited with Joshua Billings of Princeton University.

In many ways the volume exemplifies a successful student-centered translation. The Introduction (ix – xxv) assumes no prior knowledge of Greek tragedy. The editors include a map of the Aegean indicating “places relevant to the *Oresteia*” (ix). A section “Aeschylus in Context” follows which provides the basic biographical information about the earliest extant Attic tragedian and his role as an innovator in the nascent Dionysia. This section includes basic information on the theater, actors, and chorus which will be useful for newcomers. A section “Stories and Motifs” focuses on the story at the center of the *Oresteia*, the family of Agamemnon and the cycle of violence within the house of Atreus. Notable in this section is the editors’ analysis of the trilogy’s structure – the similar tripart form in *Agamemnon* and the trilogy’s second play and the differing four-part form in the third play.

Throughout this wide-ranging analysis, the editors introduce and explain the role of actors and chorus and the types of song (choral lyrics or odes; lyric dialogue or *kommos*) used in the plays. The editors also draw attention to motifs in the trilogy’s language such as words for “net” but also of words such as light and darkness, dogs, winds, rich cloth, spilled blood and so on. They note that words which originally seem to carry ominous associations such as *ololygmos*, a cry associated with

¹ HSCP, 76 (1972): 57-97

² Oxford 1977

Clytemnestra and with Agamemnon's murder early in the trilogy, can take on other, positive connotations later, as when *ololygmos* becomes connected with the Erinyes' transformation into beneficent spirits at Athens at the end of the third play. The introductory section "*What is the Oresteia About?*" offers a survey in ten paragraphs of topics relevant in the trilogy: the cycle of revenge; women and men; the trial scene; ethics; motivation for human behavior; human conflict; words (deceit and persuasion); and aesthetic language and ideals. A short section "Erinyes and Some Other Non-Olympian Powers" follows which should be helpful to new readers of Greek tragedy. Here the translator and editors explain their use of the Greek names Erinyes instead of Furies and Moirai instead of Fates. They also explain the retention of the term *daimon/daimones* to apply "to a wide range of divinities without specifying any particular one" and *Daimon* to refer to "a particular kind of *daimon*, one associated with the power of a family doom or curse" (xxiii). The editors round out their introduction with a section entitled "The *Oresteia* from 458 B.C. to the Present," which, though brief and lacking in specific detail, demonstrates the importance of this play in antiquity, its overshadowing by the plays of Sophocles and Seneca in the Renaissance and its reemergence as a major text to be studied and staged beginning around 1800 in Germany and continuing to the present day.

Following the Introduction, the editors turn to some editorial affairs. First, they defend the use of the collective title *Oresteia* for the trilogy, arguing for its antiquity. However, they assert that the traditional titles of the individual plays in the trilogy are less defensible. So, while retaining *Agamemnon* as the title of the first play, they offer the title *Women at the Graveside* for the second play, arguing that it is more "accessible" than the traditional Greek title *Choephoroi* (*Libation Bearers*). They find the title of the third play similarly problematic in that the word *Eumenides* never actually appears in the text, and, while it describes the chorus at the end of the play, it does not capture their essence from the beginning. Therefore, they create a new title for the play, *Orestes at Athens*. There follows a section "On This Translation" in which the translator explains that he "attempts to make Aeschylus' tragedies accessible to the widest possible public" and that "The key aspirations of this translation are openness, resilience, sounding music, and vivid color" (xxx). Taplin opts for an English verse translation that imitates the meters found in Aeschylus's original trilogy. He explains that there are three distinct "modes" in Greek drama: spoken parts (speeches and dialogue) which he renders into English by an iambic beat with an irregular line length, lyric parts of great variety (in the Greek original and thus in Taplin's English translation) and anapests, made into eight-

syllable lines with a trochaic pulse. He goes on to explain that while he has not added to the text, except in rare cases where it is relatively certain something is missing, he has occasionally cut the text. (He does, however, list the cut lines after the translation in a section “Textual Variants” [120–126]).

The introductory matter for this edition is exemplary, as one has come to expect in a Norton Critical Edition. Still, the pressing question for many will be: how does Taplin’s translation of Aeschylus read? This question can only be answered subjectively, with every reader potentially picking a different version. This reviewer’s test for any good translation of the *Oresteia* has always been the so-called “Hymn to Zeus” (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 160–183). Accordingly, I quote below three versions of the famous passage: Sommerstein’s translation from the latest bilingual Loeb edition, followed by Lattimore’s version from the Chicago series, and finally Taplin’s version.

Alan H. Sommerstein, Loeb Classical Library (2008)

Zeus—whoever he may be, if it pleases him
to be so called,
then I address him by that name:
I have nothing to compare,
though I weigh everything in the balance
except Zeus, if one is truly to cast away
the vain burden of anxiety.

The one who was formerly great,
swelling with proud confidence he could fight any foe,
will now not even be spoken of as existing in the past;
and he who was born later
has met his conqueror, and is gone.
One who gladly utters loud songs of victory to Zeus
will score a perfect hit on the target of wisdom—

Zeus who set mortals on the road
to understanding, who made
“learning by suffering” into an effective law.
There drips before the heart, instead of sleep,
the misery of pain recalled: good sense comes to men

even against their will.
 This favour from the gods who sit on the august bench of
 command
 comes, one must say, by force.

Richmond Lattimore (1947)

Zeus: whatever he may be, if this name
 pleases him in invocation,
 thus I call upon him.
 I have pondered everything
 yet I cannot find a way,
 only Zeus, to cast this dead weight of ignorance
 finally from out my brain.

He who in time long ago was great,
 throbbing with gigantic strength,
 shall be as if he never were, unspoken.
 He who followed him has found
 his master, and is gone.
 Cry aloud without fear the victory of Zeus,
 you will not have failed the truth:

Zeus, who guided men to think,
 who has laid it down that wisdom
 comes alone through suffering.
 Still there drips in sleep against the heart
 grief of memory; against
 our pleasure we are temperate.
 From the gods who sit in grandeur
 grace comes somehow violent.

Oliver Taplin (2018)

Zeus –
 whoever he may be – but Zeus,
 if he's contented with that name,
 remains the title I shall use:
 there is no other key or claim,

none to compare, if I should try
to balance all the world by weight,
except for "Zeus": no, not if I
still hope to cast my mind's disquiet
away in all reality.

Zeus –
who set us humans on the road
to finding wisdom on our own,
and fixed this precept for our good,
the truth that "learning comes through pain."
Through hearing its persistent drip,
the agony of pain recalled
molds our thoughts in place of sleep;
and brings sound mind, although not willed.
This favor from the gods' high throne
is kind but forcibly laid down.

All three versions are close to the Greek and relatively close to each other. I still retain a preference for Lattimore: I like his use of the indefinite pronoun in the first line ("Zeus, whatever he may be"); his choice to use a verb like "pondered" rather than a longer participle and paraphrase that English would require; and his rendering of the Greek *pathei mathos* as "wisdom comes alone through suffering." Yet, the fact is that any of these three versions will work equally well with university students or onstage. If all things, then, are relatively equal, why might someone pick Taplin's recent version of the *Oresteia*? The deciding factor may be the comprehensive nature of this book. In one modestly-priced paperback one finds, in addition to a strong, poetic translation, a detailed introduction; helpful explanatory footnotes on the pages of the translation; four pages of black-and-white photographs of vases with scenes related to the *Oresteia*; a section on ancient sources for and responses to Aeschylus; a selection of criticism of the play from Hegel and Nietzsche to the present day; a glossary of Greek terms and names; and a selected bibliography. Errors and flaws are relatively minor.³ I have already used the book

³ Errata: *Agamemnon*: p. 18, line 479, use the singular pronoun; line 489, hyphenate "look-out;" p. 37n1, insert "the" before "story of Procne;" p. 58, "sepulcher" is misspelled. *Women at the Graveside*:

in an undergraduate course that included both study of the play as literature and a series of class group-projects in which students selected scenes, blocked, rehearsed and presented them in class. Taplin's version is indeed stageworthy; and with this volume Taplin and his co-editor Joshua Billings are on the way to making Aeschylus "accessible to the widest possible public."

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p. 85, before line 1020 replace "their" with "his" in the Chorus – they are speaking about Orestes; p. 90: confusing note numbering; p. 91, line 60: replace "from" with "for." *Orestes at Athens*: p. 107, line 635 replace "tented" with "netted." The Criticism section of the book offers brief biographical background for the 19th and early 20th century critics, which will be useful for this book's audience, but gives no biography for late 20th = and early 21st century critics.