

BOOKREVIEW

Virginia Woolf's Greek Tragedy. By NANCY WORMAN. Classical Receptions in Twentieth Century Writings. London, UK and New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2019. Pp. viii + 152. Hardback, £80. ISBN: 978-1-4742-7782-2.

In this short but well-researched volume Nancy Worman illustrates how Greek tragedy is central to Virginia Woolf's writing. Worman's approach is to read a selection of Woolf's writing in parallel with Greek tragedies that Woolf studied, focusing on the tragic language Woolf uses as well as specific references to ancient Greek language and culture. Worman argues that the previous tendency of scholars towards a biographical approach to Woolf's work have mostly ignored the political nature of her engagement with ancient Greece. Worman finds that Woolf, like other modernist writers, has a complex relationship with imperialism and colonialism, as she both critiques empire, and war, but also exoticizes Greek culture. Worman offers a new approach to Woolf's use of Greek tragedy, and encourages us to go back to the novels with fresh insights.

In the first chapter Worman situates Woolf within a broader modernist tradition that primitivizes the ancient Greeks. Woolf makes Platonic dialogue the province of male characters, while female characters are aligned with tragedy, restrained by the limited opportunities that their lives afford them. In Woolf's early short story, "A Dialogue Upon Mount Pentelicus" (1906), two male English friends are in modern Greece, looking for the ancient Greece of their English imaginations, one framing ancient Greece in romanticism and the other in scholarship. They think themselves more Greek than the native Greeks they encounter, until finally they meet with a monk who seems to embody ancient Greece, a universal and primitive but noble "Man." The Platonic dialogue of the two male tourists leaves no room for the female viewpoint. In *The Voyage Out* (1915), Woolf's first novel, the female characters are untutored in ancient Greek language and literature, while the male characters possess this knowledge. Worman argues that the un-classically educated heroine Rachel Vinrace is set up as a Greek tragic heroine, specifically Antigone, dreaming of a cavernous space and dying a virgin. Worman moves on to Woolf's essay "On Not Knowing Greek" in *The Common Reader* (1925), where Woolf focusses on Electra as an isolated

female tragic character.

In Chapter 2 Worman begins by discussing Greek aspects of Woolf's post war novels *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *The Waves* (1937). In *Jacob's Room* Jacob is compared to statues of Achilles, Ulysses and Hermes, in London and in Greece, by a succession of female characters. Worman argues that Greece can be seen to stand in for the war, in which Jacob will be killed, a "dream space" and "space of death," so that although Jacob returns to England from his trip to Greece before he goes to war, the women in his life are already mourning him. Death also stalks Clarissa Dalloway as her life intersects with that of suicidal war veteran Septimus Smith. Greece again signifies death; Septimus is haunted by his dead friend Evans, and hears sparrows singing in Greek, while dead flowers must have been picked by Evans "in the fields of Greece." As tragic survivor, Clarissa hears of Septimus' suicide at her party and thinks herself "very like him," and is "glad that he had done it." At the beginning of *The Waves* young student Edward is reading the *Antigone*. And later his cousin Sara reads his translation and engages with descriptions of Antigone attending Polyneices' unburied body and of Antigone buried alive. The isolated and less well-educated Sara misreads the text, but captures the emotion of it, while Edward approaches the play academically, taking pleasure in the (Greek) language.

In Chapter 3 Worman argues that Woolf uses a "choral voice" in her novels with its roots in the tragic chorus, using *Mrs Dalloway*, *Jacob's Room*, *The Waves* (1931) and *Between the Acts* (1941) as examples. In *Mrs Dalloway* Septimus Smith hears singing when he sees his dead friend Evans, including the chorus of sparrows, while in *Jacob's Room* a choral effect is rendered by the use of "we" by the narrator, and through the voices of female characters, commenting on the tragedy that war will bring to the young men. *The Waves* is choral throughout in the internal voices of the six main characters, Neville, Louis, Bernard, Susan, Jinny and Rhoda, as they comment on the tragedy of their friend Percival, who is likened to a Greek hero, and dies falling from a horse in India. Worman also discusses how Woolf uses birdsong throughout the novel, as the birds sing together and then separately, for example when the friends see Percival for the last time before he leaves for India, never to return. Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts*, centers on the performance of a village play and includes many references to Greek tragedy.

Throughout the novel human voices and voices of nature merge into a noisy chorus comprising animals, birds, trees and bushes, and these natural voices drown out the words of the play, so that names including Agamemnon and

Clytemnestra are heard without context and the sound of cows as chorus brings it to its conclusion. Worman ends the book with a commentary on Woolf's use of *Antigone* in *Three Guineas* (1938), where gender inequality is the contemporary female tragedy and Antigone as the female outsider who resists represents the resistance of contemporary women.

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