

BOOK REVIEW

The Philosophical Stage: Drama and Dialectic in Classical Athens. By JOSHUA BILLINGS. Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. xiv, 288. Hardback, \$39.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-20518-2

Joshua Billings offers an evocative and lucid reading of Greek drama, both tragedy and comedy, within the philosophical tradition of ancient Athens. He advances two primary arguments throughout the book. The first is that 5th-century drama does not merely reflect trends in the intellectual cultural of Athens but was an active participant in developing it. With this argument, Billings extends a growing body of work on how drama participates in civic discourse. The second argument, more innovative than the first, stems from Billings's careful attention to the relationship between form and thought. He argues that what he calls "scenic forms" are used across different plays to engage particular debates and ideas. Each of the book's three chapters is dedicated to a scenic form and to the ideas that that form develops.

The Introduction, "Tragedy in the Philosophical Age of the Greeks," traces the entanglements of pre-Socratic philosophical and poetic thought, and early on, he sets out the significance of the scenic forms that structure the argument of the book: "Though the forms are developed differently in each drama, and can extend beyond the bounds of a single scene, they are importantly unified in the way that they pose and investigate a central question or problem. It is because of this linkage of topic and form that they can be read as guided by an implicit method" (8). Billings carefully situates his approach within scholarship on philosophy and on ancient drama, and he judiciously evaluates the strengths and the limitations of his synchronic approach to the interactions of drama and philosophy. Though the analysis is primarily synchronic, the book proposes that there is a development in drama's expression of knowledge towards "a democratizing of authority, as monologue gives way to dialogue and debate" (21). The three chapters trace this epistemic development.

Chapter 1, "Catalogs and Culture," lays the foundations for the book's method with a clear example of Billings' approach to form and its relationship to thought.

Here, the focus is on a particular kind of catalogue that appears in drama, the “cultural catalog”: “a listing of inventions, gifts, or capacities that provides an image of culture as a whole, and reflects on the sources of authority and power in human existence” (26). He argues that this scenic form parallels catalogues in other genres but differs in its attention to how human nature differs from animals and from divinity. His analysis focuses on Palamedes in fragments of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides; Prometheus; the Sisyphus fragment; and passages from Euripides’ *Suppliants* and Sophocles’ *Antigone*.

Chapter 2, “Intrigue and Ontology,” explores sophistry, deception and ontology. Billings argues that “concerns of language, truth, and being are profoundly motivating for late 5th-century drama and thought, which explore *apatē* as an ethical and ontological problem” (92). He discusses Sophocles’ *Electra* and *Philoctetes*, as well as Aristophanes’ *Women at the Thesmophoria* and Euripides’ *Iphigenia at Aulis* and Billings gives special attention to the prologues that establish some of the philosophical questions that animate the play’s action. While such deceptions are often read in metatheatrical terms, Billings is interested more broadly in how the dramatists conceive the role of appearance and of language in shaping beliefs. “Dramas thus explore questions untouched by the philosophical tradition: how to live, day by day, when deception is inescapable and truth is obscure” (108). This chapter rewards sustained engagement, as the readings of each play are enriched and layered with references to those discussed earlier in the chapter, and the use of Sophocles’ *Electra*, in particular, as a touchstone for subsequent readings generates compelling perspectives.

Chapter 3, “*Agōn* and Authority,” discusses the development of *sophia* in the Greek imagination. The focus is not the dramatic *agōn* with which readers will be most familiar; rather the focus is what Billings calls the *agōn sophias*: “a group of scenes that, despite differences in formal constitution, stage an opposition between two understandings of *sophia* and debate what it is to be *sophos*” (169). The argument of the book thus reaches a climax as Billings discusses how dramas use dialogue to scrutinize, and to democratize, the foundations of wisdom itself. This chapter includes significant discussions of Euripides’ *Antiope* and *Bacchae* as well as Aristophanes’ *Frogs*.

A brief conclusion, “The Stages of Early Greek Thought,” turns to Plato’s *Gorgias* to suggest how the findings of the book could inform interpretations of the Platonic dialogue.

Throughout the book, Billings presents, in clear and accessible prose, stimulating readings of texts not typically put into dialogue, and while most of the

examples are drawn from tragedy, the inclusion of comedy is welcome as is the significant discussion of dramatic fragments. His sensible, nuanced approach to generic interactions could motivate new studies of philosophical dialogues (as the conclusion suggests) and of other dramas as well. 5th-century drama offers no shortage of material for consideration along the lines Billings proposes, and I would be especially eager to read more about 4th-century drama within the philosophical tradition. A learned and disciplined study, *The Philosophical Stage* should become a starting place for future work on Greek drama and ancient philosophy.

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