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Review of Duckworth Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy

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Duckworth Companions to Greek and Roman

Tragedy. General editor Thomas Harrison. London: Duckworth, 2002-. £12.99 each.

William Allan, *Euripides: Medea*
(2002; 9780715631874)

P.J. Davis, *Seneca: Thyestes*
(2003; 9780715632222)

Barbara Goward, *Aeschylus: Agamemnon*
(2005; 9780715633854)

Emma Griffiths, *Euripides: Heracles*
(2006; 9780715631867)

Jon Hesk, *Sophocles: Ajax*
(2003; 9780715630471)

Brad Levett, *Sophocles: Women of Trachis*
(2004; 9780715631881)

Michael Lloyd, *Sophocles: Electra*
(2005; 9780715632802)

Roland Mayer, *Seneca: Phaedra*
(2002; 9780715631652)

Pantelis Michelakis, *Euripides: Iphigenia at Aulis*
(2006; 9780715629949)

Sophie Mills, *Euripides: Hippolytus*
(2002; 9780715629741)

Sophie Mills, *Euripides: Bacchae*
(2006; 9780715634301)

Hanna M. Roisman, *Sophocles: Philoctetes*
(2005; 9780715633847)

David Rosenbloom, *Aeschylus: Persians*
(2006; 9780715632864)

Isabelle Torrance, *Aeschylus: Seven Against Thebes*
(2007; 9780715634660)

Duckworth's series, 'Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy', is an excellent resource for students as well as for their teachers. The overall quality of the volumes in the series is high. Many of the volumes, in addition to being valuable textbooks, offer much to interest scholars.

On the whole, the volumes in the series are written in clear, accessible prose, with technical and theoretical terms defined. They are a suitable length (generally around 130 pages of text) for use alongside either a translation of the given play or the play's text in Greek. Most volumes begin with a chapter on the historical and performance context of the play in question, as well as a brief summary of the play's plot. The volumes then explore various issues, characters, themes, problems, or critical approaches in more detail. There is always a chapter on the play's reception (a welcome addition to the information usually presented in a handbook), usually at the end, and the volumes conclude with a guide to further reading, a glossary of terms, and a chronology of dates relating to the play's production, historical context and afterlife. A few volumes have illustrations. The series' editor, Thomas Harrison, is to be commended for achieving a high degree of both stylistic and formal consistency across the series, even as each author presents his or her position on important critical issues and interpretive questions.

There are fourteen books in the series to date, published between 2002 and 2007. It is pleasing that both Greek and Roman tragedies are included, and that the less 'popular' tragedies (however defined) like *Seven Against Thebes*, *Heracles* and *Iphigenia at Aulis* have received attention, as well as mainstays of the curriculum like *Agamemnon*, *Medea* and *Bacchae*. In general, I found the volumes on the more 'difficult' or less 'popular' tragedies to be somewhat less successful than their counterparts; of course, one could argue that an accessible, student-friendly introduction to, for example, *Seven Against Thebes* is much harder to produce than one for *Medea*.

Every scholar (and teacher) of ancient drama will have his or her view of how a companion textbook to a tragedy should be written, so it seems only fair that I state my own view. The volumes in the series that I found the most successful were those that give the reader a sense, at the beginning of the volume, of the major issues presented by the play (revenge, the relationship of gods to mortals, reason vs passion). They provide a general overview of the history of scholarship on the play, especially if there are any major textual, staging, or other 'problems', without overwhelming the reader with minutiae. They might or might not embrace a particular reading or position in a critical debate (Ajax's 'deception speech', Iphigenia's abrupt decision to embrace her own sacrifice), but they give the reader a sense of what the stakes are in choosing one interpretation or solution over another, and provide the reader with enough detail to be able to make up his or her own mind. They avoid line-by-line analysis, for the most part. They are written so as to engage the interest of a reader coming to the play for the first time, while presenting sophisticated ideas.

Since space does not permit me to discuss each volume, I will concentrate on the volumes I found the most successful, and enjoyed the most: Goward's *Agamemnon*, Hesk's *Ajax*, Mills's *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*, and Michelakis's *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Each of these makes a succinct presentation of the play's context and major issues and lays out the critical debates in a clear, lively, engaging way. Each one also discusses aspects of the play that are problematic for one reason or another without resorting to defensiveness, glossing over the issue, overly technical analysis, or critical *aporia*. I felt my students would gain a great deal from reading these books, as I did.

Goward makes the sensible decision to present the most important issues of *Agamemnon* and then to provide analyses of representative details, rather than trying to say everything there is to say about every line of the play. For example, in her section on imagery, she focuses on trampling imagery and net imagery, including explaining the play of words in the Greek text, but she does not attempt to analyse eagle imagery, lion imagery and all other imagery as well; she mentions the other important images, and leaves the reader with the tools to perform his or her own analysis. Each chapter in her

volume achieves this balance between overview and detailed discussion, from the treatment of the myth before Aeschylus to the chapter on the play's reception, enabling the reader to gain a much deeper understanding of the play without being overwhelmed.

Hesk's discussion of *Ajax* engages the reader in the debate over Ajax's heroism in a sophisticated but accessible discussion. In his chapter on the Prologue, Hesk lays out different interpretations of Athena's and Odysseus' behaviour, explains (without fully supporting) a meta-theatrical reading, discusses the Chorus' identity, status and attitude towards Ajax, and explains how this scene highlights themes (vision/knowledge/madness; reciprocity; bigness vs smallness; being too late; the nature of *sôphrosunê*) that will recur throughout the play. Other highlights include a fine analysis of Ajax's relationship to spoken language and readings of both Tecmessa and Teucer as interesting characters in their own right. Hesk's chapter on the deception speech is absolutely first rate: it steers the reader through the intractable staging problems, the ambiguous, riddling language of the speech, and the tortuous scholarly debates with admirable clarity and good sense. The chapter on the play's ending makes a compelling case for its coherence with what went before, for its interest, relevance and quality, while emphasizing its lack of a final single answer on Ajax's heroism.

Mills has an engaging writing style and a way of conveying the larger issues at stake in scholarly debates with grace and clarity. Her treatment of *Hippolytus* provides a clear discussion of the evidence for the two different *Hippolytus* plays by Euripides, as well as detailed chapters on critical views of the play and on the afterlife of the play. She elucidates the ethical/moral/sophistic dilemmas of the play's plot and language, highlighting many scenarios and characters where the sophistic 'making the worse argument the better' applies, with explanations of wordplay in Greek (e.g. *sôphrosunê*). Mills's treatment of *Bacchae* devotes a crucial chapter to critical views of the play, which she handles adroitly: she breaks down critical perspectives from the last century into four basic camps and takes the reader through each camp's arguments, noting strengths and weaknesses. Then she provides a section on scholars' reductivist tendency to make Dionysus into a symbol because they are uncomfortable with treating him in this play as an incarnate, real god. Following that, she discusses various schools of interpretation used on this play (structuralist, political, psychoanalytic, meta-theatrical). One thing I missed in this volume was a discussion of the 'palace miracle'.

Michelakis's treatment of *IA* is fascinating for an advanced reader, clear and engrossing for a beginning reader. His discussion of Iphigenia's character, and scholarly reactions to her abrupt change of heart, is a highlight of the volume. Another highlight is his final chapter on the play's reception. He begins it, interestingly enough, with *IA*'s textual history, then discusses the (probably) interpolated prologue and epilogue, and

uses the debate over the authenticity of the epilogue as a brilliant transition into the play's reception: what can this tacked-on *dea ex machina* tell us about ancient, post-fifth-century readers and audiences of this play? The only reservation I have about this volume is that it might be somewhat advanced for introductory students, since it presents some rather sophisticated ideas, although very clearly. For example, one of its recurring theses is that *IA* is set in a self-conscious, post-heroic world where characters cannot control their lives or the myths they inhabit, where the gods are remote and human institutions are unreliable. This is such an interesting approach to a difficult play, however, that I think, if anything, it might persuade students to give *IA* a second chance.

The Duckworth 'Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy' is an excellent set of textbooks for those who teach Greek and/or Roman tragedies, in the original or in translation. Classicists specializing in drama, as well as scholars of later periods of drama, will find much in these volumes that is useful, stimulating and challenging as well.

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