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Agamemnon in Performance: 458 BC to AD 2004 (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS



FIONA MACINTOSH, PANTELIS MICHELAKIS, EDITH HALL, and OLIVER TAPLIN, eds. *Agamemnon in Performance: 458 BC to AD 2004*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. xvi + 484 pp. 36 black-and-white ills. Cloth, \$125.

This is a remarkable moment in the history of ancient Mediterranean drama. As Edith Hall points out, more Greek tragedy has been performed in the last thirty years than at any point in history since Greco-Roman antiquity. Since the publication of Oliver Taplin's *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* in 1977, performance studies of ancient drama in both ancient and later performance contexts have proliferated. These developments parallel, and are influenced by, significant movements in the humanities during the same period, such as cultural anthropology, Saussurian linguistics, and constructivist ideas about the body, gender, and other identities and behaviors. In the volume under review Anton Bierl identifies a "performative turn" that "focuses less on the reference and fixed significance of texts and other artefacts than on the process of a synaesthetic performance" and "an effect of intense transformation" in which "the meaning is not prestabilized and fixed, but *emergent* in the actualization" (292).

The Archive of Performance of Greek and Roman Drama, founded at the University of Oxford in 1996, has become a crucial resource for performance studies of ancient drama, especially in the English-speaking world. APGRD's astoundingly ambitious goal is to collect as much material as possible on stagings of ancient drama around the world, from the earliest to the most recent productions. In 1998 APGRD organized the first of a series of triennial conferences from which came the volume *Medea in Performance 1500–2000* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000; reviewed in *AJP* 123.2). The present volume originated in an APGRD conference held in 2001, and another on Aristophanes in performance is in the works (full disclosure: an essay of mine will appear in this volume).

Despite—or because of—the volume of artistic and scholarly work going on, performance studies of ancient drama is a developing field whose parameters and methodologies are still being formulated, and the discipline confronts a number of problems. A fundamental difficulty is the lack of evidence for ancient productions. Performance is a complex phenomenon, too, involving space, visual elements, sound, and movement as well as words. Few classicists are familiar with the methodologies of performance studies, and few theater scholars and practitioners with those of classical studies. Discussions of performance need to balance description (because most readers will not have seen the performances discussed) with analysis. Analyzing performance from an individual rather than a collective point of view, in the medium of print, is inevitably reductive; still and

moving images are helpful illustrations, but that “emergent meaning” will always remain elusive. *Agamemnon in Performance* demonstrates both the strengths and the problems of ancient performance studies in its current state.

Like APGRD’s overall project, this volume of essays by an array of international scholars is ambitious. It discusses Seneca’s as well as Aeschylus’ text; productions in a variety of languages; translations, adaptations, and parodies; and drama, film, opera, and dance productions. Moreover, Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* is inextricably connected to the other two plays in the *Oresteia* trilogy, and many of the productions discussed in this volume involved the whole *Oresteia*. The eighteen essays are organized into four areas that focus on “sources,” “modernity,” “translation,” and “the international [i.e., non-British] view.” Some of the essays complement each other (e.g., Hall and Macintosh, Judet de la Combe and Bierl, Walton and Hardwick), and there are some efforts at internal cross-referencing, but overall the essays stand on their own. Another APGRD publication, *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (Oxford 2004), deals with a variety of plays but gains greater coherence as a volume by concentrating primarily on English-language productions within a much shorter time period.

Questions that reappear in this collection concern gender (especially the portrayal of Clytemnestra as wife and mother), politics (the justice of the Trojan War and the leadership of Argos, the political stance of particular productions), and translation (from Greek to another language, from page to stage); a focus on Cassandra also links several of the contributions. Three especially substantial essays stand out because of their in-depth research and powerful critical analysis. In “Clytemnestra versus her Senecan Tradition,” Edith Hall compares the patriarchy-challenging Clytemnestra in Aeschylus with the “rehabilitated,” non-political, eroticized figure in Roman texts, especially those by Seneca. She adeptly locates productions in their historical contexts, including republican and imperial Rome and neoclassical England, arguing effectively that “reaction against an archetype can reflect an even stronger form of influence than direct imitation” and that Aeschylus’ dangerous Clytemnestra could only be tolerated when “women’s rights as both political agents and as parents finally began to be discussed with gravity” (74). Fiona Macintosh’s “Viewing *Agamemnon* in Nineteenth-Century Britain” provides a detailed historical and intellectual context for the rediscovery of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, showing the influence of the Romantic poets’ Hellenism, of increased tourism to Greece, of archaeological discoveries, of demands for women’s emancipation, of ideas about progress, and of increased availability of translations. Highlights of this essay are the discussion of Aeschylean influences on Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* and of various productions late in the century that led to challenges to nineteenth-century critical readings of the plays (above all, that Aeschylus’s text was “lyric” rather than “dramatic”). In “The Millennium Project: *Agamemnon* in the United States,” Helene P. Foley surveys a remarkably wide range of twentieth-century American productions, judiciously focusing on productions which represent clear historical and cultural trends. She notes the importance of radical adaptations of the Greek text, and

like Hall and Macintosh connects particular productions to their historical and political context. She offers thorough discussions of the productions based on interviews with the artists involved, reviews and other documentation, and an extremely full bibliography. At times the amount of detail makes it hard to distinguish between the productions, especially since Foley ranges freely across different time periods and refrains from making personal judgments, but overall this essay is a crucial resource for scholars working on American productions of Greek drama. Susanna Philippo's thoughtful discussion of the Aeschylean legacy in Gluck's *Iphigenia* operas also belongs in this category, but for the likely readers of this volume an introduction to the conventions of eighteenth-century opera would have been helpful.

Many of the shorter essays are also effective. In only fourteen pages ("Agamemnon for the Ancients"), Pat Easterling discusses the reception of *Agamemnon* in Greek during its first eight-hundred years, thoughtfully interpreting (despite the absence of any record of a specific revival!) documentary/literary, intertextual, and visual evidence. As the academic advisor to Ariane Mnouchkine on *Les Atrides*, Pierre Judet de La Combe is in a unique position to offer special insights into this landmark production. His essay has a split focus, first describing the artistic and intellectual tradition of the *Oresteia* in France (277–83) and then arguing, with many concrete examples from the production, that Mnouchkine's enterprise differs fundamentally from this tradition (283–89). Anton Bierl discusses the role of the chorus in a number of important modern European productions, describing how the presentation of the chorus coheres with intellectual trends of specific epochs; he, too, makes excellent use of concrete examples. In "Agamemnon and the English Renaissance Stage," Inga-Stina Ewbank argues that Shakespeare provided to lesser Elizabethan/Jacobean playwrights a "live connection with the Greeks" (52), demonstrating remarkable knowledge of and sensitivity to the dramas she discusses. Michael Ewans makes a convincing case for the profound influence of Aeschylus on Wagner and hears echoes of the *Oresteia* in the *Ring*. Massimo Fusillo analyzes Pier Paolo Pasolini's theatrical and film versions of the *Oresteia* in light of the Italian writer's complex political and artistic ideology. In "The Harrison Version," Oliver Taplin argues that Tony Harrison's much-discussed (and much-criticized) 1981 translation of *Agamemnon* is appropriate, effective, and powerful, with particular praise for its musicality, insisting that "Greek tragedy is musopoeic" and thus that "music and dynamic should be at the top of the translator's agenda" (251).

Some essays are less successful. Dmitry Trubotckin's discussion of the *Oresteia* in twentieth-century Russia offers extensive details on productions but insufficient information on the historical context. In "OTOTOTOI: Virginia Woolf and 'The Naked Cry' of Cassandra," Yopie Prins scrutinizes the notebook Virginia Woolf created while studying *Agamemnon* in Greek. Her carefully researched argument that this notebook is "an imaginative restaging," "a theatrical spectacle in its own right" is ingenious, but baffling statements (e.g., "What is left unspoken . . . is better understood . . . as something embedded in language that can't be grasped

as meaning, but giving us the sense of a lack of sound as well as the sound of what is lacking in sense" [181]), and elusive quotations from Woolf make the positions of both seem far-fetched. Rush Rehm thinks the dramatic challenge of *Agamemnon* is "how to bring Cassandra fully to life" (358) and, in "Cassandra—The Prophet Unveiled," criticizes contemporary productions that increase emphasis on Iphigenia, even bringing her onstage. He rightly points out that Cassandra's murder at Clytemnestra's hands echoes Iphigenia's at Agamemnon's. Yet when Cassandra calls her abductor and rapist, the destroyer of her city and family, a "noble lion" (*Agamemnon* 1259) and indicts his female murderer at length (1228–38), it is clear that Aeschylus has constructed Cassandra to be "more palatable than the other female role in *Agamemnon*" (Hall, 56). It is especially strange, given Rehm's political commitment, that he does not see Aeschylus' masculinist ideology at work here. Margaret Reynolds' overblown essay "*Agamemnon*: Speaking the Unspeakable" is the low point of the volume. The essay wanders from Aeschylus (in Hughes' version) to various operas, dropping in fragments from Barthes and Lacan, and is punctuated by melodramatic texts evoking child abuse ("It started when I was seven," etc.). Its main point seems to be that "in order to commit, to take up a moral perspective, we have to feel" (138). No doubt, but we also need to think—about the author's simplistic treatment of the complex issue of witness, or about whether we agree that Clytemnestra "is portrayed as the very essence of transgression" (121) or that "Orestes should be let off . . . because what he did with Clytemnestra was between consenting adults" (136).

Despite the volume's focus on performance, many of the essays rely primarily on textual evidence. Two of them, however, are especially informed by and informative about performance. In "Translation or Transubstantiation," J. Michael Walton writes eloquently about English translations of *Agamemnon* (see also his important new book *Found in Translation* [Cambridge 2006]) and also about the transformations that occur when a script is performed. Lorna Hardwick offers a detailed discussion of two recent British productions in terms of their different translations, staging methods, and audiences. These essays share Bierl's stress on actualization, as well as a welcome openness to different styles of performance, a recognition that Greek plays can and should be experienced by a wide variety of audiences, and an awareness of the elusiveness and risk inherent in live performance. There is also some lively writing, as when Walton says that all generations seem to have had recourse to the Greeks "as some kind of universal washing-line on which to hang their socks and underwear" (198).

The essays are framed by Pantelis Michelakis' excellent Introduction and Amanda Wrigley's Appendix, "*Agamemnon*s on the APGRD Database." The former is not, thank Dionysos, the usual dull list but a critical essay that identifies crucial aspects of the topic under discussion while helpfully emphasizing the "plural and provisional nature of the micro-narratives from which the larger pictures of the subject that we paint are inevitably made" (20). The latter, like the similar final chapter on *Medeas* in *Medea in Performance*, is an invaluable tool for researchers on the reception of ancient drama in performance.

Like many essay collections, this one is a patchwork. But as Michael Walton says about *The Home Guard*, Katie Mitchell's 1999 production of *Oresteia*, it has "superb moments, single flashes of scarlet which, when linked, make a patchwork more telling than the sum of the parts" (205). Despite—or because of—its patchwork, its assortment of approaches, its combination of successes and failures, I hope that *Agamemnon in Performance* will inspire classicists and theater scholars and practitioners to valuable work in both the theory and practice of ancient Mediterranean drama in performance.

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SANDER M. GOLDBERG. *Constructing Literature in the Roman Republic: Poetry and Its Reception*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xii + 249 pp. Cloth, \$70.

Just what forces in the earlier centuries of the Roman Republic gave shape to the literature of the late Republic and early Principate is an old question that has received new interest in recent years. Sander Goldberg suggests that to put the question as I just have is to put things backwards. In this book he argues that it is not so much a matter of how earlier literature shaped later literature but rather of how scholars and readers in the late Republic converted the poetic remains of earlier centuries into "literature." For Goldberg, literature in the fullest sense did not exist at Rome before a sufficiently large and critically sophisticated reading public had emerged, and until the available texts had been collected, studied, and canonized; and this process, he believes, did not happen or at any rate was not complete until the time of Cicero and, especially, Varro. The latter, one of the heroes of Goldberg's story (and rightly so), was instrumental in (for instance) turning the scores of plays that traveled in his day under the name of Plautus into an authenticated oeuvre of the sort that defines literature: a corpus that can be owned, read and reread, studied, commented upon, argued over, and shared by a community of more or less like-minded, cultivated individuals. *Literati*, in fact.

The idea is developed over a series of six chapters, plus an introduction and "Retrospective." The chapters are advertised as framing a continuous argument but also as capable of being read independently. They are arranged chronologically and bracketed thematically or imagistically by two arrivals: that of the Muse under the aegis of Rome's earliest poets and that of the one desired by Ovid, if not for himself back into Rome then for his works into the state-sponsored collection in the Palatine library. To my mind chapters 2 ("Constructing Literature") and 3 ("Comedy at Work") are the core of the book, as I have hinted