A REDEFINITION OF TRAGEDY

O. TAXIDOU: *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning*. Pp. vi + 215. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004. Cased, £45. ISBN: 0-7486-1987-9.

Taxidou has written an exceptionally challenging and thought-provoking book. Her scope is extensive, questioning the very meaning of tragedy itself. T. aims at a redefinition of Attic tragedy, which challenges long-cherished notions of tragedy as metaphysical and transcendental, and argues instead for a reading of tragedy as specific to the founding of Athenian democratic society, but also as a critique of that same society (p. 2). Central to her concept of Attic tragedy are performance, mourning, and gender, which feature heavily in the detailed discussions of plays throughout the book.

The book is divided into seven chapters, some of which deal with detailed readings of ancient tragedies. Chapter 1 focuses on Sophocles' *Antigone*, Chapter 2 on his *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Chapter 5 is devoted to Euripides' *Hercules Furens* and *Helen*. Aeschylus' *Persae* and Euripides' *Bacchae* are also much discussed in Chapters 3 and 6. The book also offers extensive discussions of ancient and modern theories of tragedy and the tragic (including those of Plato, Aristotle, Brecht, Beckett, and Müller).

T. makes several compelling arguments in the book. I am most persuaded by her gendered reading of tragedy where men-playing-women express the anxieties of female reproduction, while *philia* between males is espoused as the ideal relationship for a male Athenian. These two interesting and interconnected ideas are well exemplified in T.'s discussion of the plays. For example, Antigone's relationship with her brother is akin to the male-male relationship of *philia*. But at the same time the performative aspect through which Antigone is represented by a male actor is mirrored in the fact that her character occupies a male position (pp. 25–6). Here T.'s argument is that cross-dressing is not an accident or coincidence but is 'endemic to the form' (p. 37), that the problems of barren, unreproductive women are central to tragic plots. Likewise T. clearly demonstrates the centrality to the plays of the male–male *philia* relationship between Theseus and the protagonists of Sophocles' *OC* and Euripides' *HF*. The relationship has a political dimension—in Athens male actors and male audience are participants in a system of male–male *philia* where all men in the *polis* share the bond of quasi-kinship (p. 122). T. further suggests that in Euripides' play the implication is that men must rely on other men (as Hercules relies on Theseus), not on the gods (p. 136) or indeed on women. Moreover, in both plays the reliance on male–male *philia* with the idealized Athenian Theseus has implications for the male protagonist's kinship ties. T. argues that in *OC* Oedipus' *philia* with Theseus is promoted while the female members of his family are issued with a ban on mourning (p. 126). She says 'The inability to mourn is itself seen as something that strengthens the power and the political impact of the male-to-male relationship' (p. 146).

Mourning is the key theme of the book and is closely related to the themes of gender and performance. T. explains this interconnectedness through a definition of *mimesis* as theatrical and feminine. Hence to act is to behave like a woman, just as mourning is to behave like a woman (p. 175). The presence of both women and mourning at the hearts of so many Attic tragedies is, for T., a demonstration of the essence of the tragic. T.'s thoughts on mourning follow on well from the views of

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Alexiou, Holst-Warhaft, Loraux, and Seaford regarding the banning of lamentation and its appearance in tragedy.[1] T. does not see tragedy as simply appropriating lament, but as filtering it. This is a view with which I am much in sympathy (I have recently argued that male authors of tragedy tend to distort and exaggerate female-composed laments).[2] T.'s exciting new readings provide an excellent basis for scholars to further exploit this interesting research area.

T. also makes her case for a more Euripidean view of the tragic. She sees Euripides as a 'poet outsider' (p. 106) critical of Athenian society and of tragedy, and the most metatheatrical of the tragic poets. In her reading of the *Bacchae*, T. sees Pentheus' cross-dressing as signalling the shortcomings of this dramatic convention (p. 102). Similarly in *Helen* T. argues that Euripides plays with the difficulties of the tragic form. She suggests that his Helen takes a public and masculine rôle—the rôle of an Athenian chorus director who manipulates and directs the plot to allow herself and Menelaus to escape (p. 153). While T.'s arguments for a more metatheatrical Euripides are persuasive, I am less inclined to see Euripides as more critical of Athens than the other playwrights. In particular, the parallelism that can be found in T.'s readings of Sophocles' *OC* and of Euripides' *HF* tends away from this view. Nevertheless, the case for a reading of tragedy which is not so dependent on Aristotle's theories in the *Poetics* is well made.

This leads to T.'s discussion of Sophocles' *OT*, a necessary play for this book to examine in its attempt to move away from Aristotelean ideas of tragedy. However, in my opinion the reading of this play is not as compelling as the others. T. is still able to make a gendered reading of the play—in particular, her arguments for Oedipus as a 'hysteric' (p. 63), and hence a feminized character, are worthy of note. (This reading is also applied to Hercules on p. 143.) However, sentences such as 'Having, in a sense, given birth to himself, turning into his own mother, [Oedipus] also embodies those very qualities he so yearns to be rid of: falseness, femininity, artificiality' (p. 57) seem unnecessarily convoluted. Indeed, readers may find that the language and terminology employed throughout this book obscures some of T.'s truly interesting and compelling arguments.

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THE DEATH OF THERSITES

G. MORELLI: *Teatro attico e pittura vascolare. Una tragedia di Cheremone nella ceramica italiota.* (Spudasmata 84.) Pp. 179, pls, figs. Hildesheim, Zurich, and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2001. Paper, €32.80. ISBN: 3-487-11494-1.

Amongst the sparse testimonia for fourth-century tragedy none is more tantalizing than the Apulian crater (Boston 03.804) which Carl Robert identified with Chaeremon's *Achilles Thersitoktonos*. Since the surviving text of this play comprises

[1]M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge, 1974); G. Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices* (Routledge, 1992); N. Loraux, *The Invention of Athens* (Harvard, 1986); R. Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual* (Oxford, 1994).

[2]F. McHardy, 'Women's Influence on Revenge in Ancient Greece', in *Women's Influence on Classical Civilization* (Routledge, 2004), pp. 92–114.

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