

R.B. RUTHERFORD, *Greek Tragic Style. Form, Language and Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, XX + 491 pp., ISBN 978-05-218-4890-9 (hb.), £79.99 (hb.) / 22.99 (pb., 2014).

Furnishing a comprehensive overview of tragic poetics, the *Greek Tragic Style* was fathered by a scholar with an eye and appreciation for examples and, perhaps even more importantly, a scholar endowed with a wicked sense of humor. To encounter Douglas Adams' Vogon Poetry Appreciation apparatus right at the beginning of a very serious academic work was both surprising and simultaneously strikingly appropriate – the Classicists are, after all, prone to perceiving poetics through the critical lense of scholarship and literary theory rather than on a purely aesthetic level, thus only rarely opening themselves to pure aesthetic enjoyment.

The work opens with several reservations concerning the subject: having started with three illustrative examples of authors manipulating their language and poetic expression in a manner intended to evoke some *a priori* defined response from the audience (the examples being drawn from the *Choephorae*, *Oedipus Coloneus* and *Bacchae*, and thus illustrating the choices of three great Athenian tragedians) Richard B. RUTHERFORD (= R.) rightly stresses the difficulties involved in the definition of style, particularly when one is dealing with works far removed from our *Fachwort* imbued and (literary) theory-wise reality. He then moves into a discussion of the tragic genre itself, the discussion being of necessity general and synchronic (for his purposes it is important to have a more or less stable concept of tragedy as a form – this certainly does not imply that R. is blind to the fluidity and openness of the genre: however, he needs a framework against which to operate). In this introductory chapter, he pays considerable attention to the idea of tragic diction predominant in the real world Aeschylus and Euripides inhabited, illustrating his point with references to Aristophanes' *Acharneis*, Aristotle's *Poetics* and Pseudo-Longinus *On the Sublime*.

The first foray into the actual style of Classical tragedy is conducted in Chapter Three, and consists of a discussion of the stylistic devices employed to create the predominant mood of a given play; here, R. considers tragedians' use of names and of the forms of address they tend to favour – all in all, he focuses on the lexical aspects of the style. The discussion abounds in examples drawn principally from the Orestes plays: after all, the hero is notoriously reticent about his name, and the act of withholding the name plays an important part in the plot of all three "return" plays. Next comes the Euripidean *Heracles*, where the illustrious name of the hero, the name denoting the slayer of many a beast, clashes violently with the grisly actuality of murder and pollution. Finally, R. discusses Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, a play displaying particular subtlety in its employment of personal names and quite clearly exploring the intricacies of the name vs. name-bearer relationship. The chapter ends with an overview of the existing bibliography – it was with considerable satisfaction that I found a mention of SMEREKA's often forgotten *opus magnum*, the *Studia Euripidea* there.

The chapter on imagery (pp. 119–162) covers the crucial problems related to the tragic use of *similia* and metaphors – why, after all, is Orestes likened to a serpent, while the tragedy itself abounds in frequent mentions of the forthcoming dawn? Are the *similia* intended to be straightforward or is there a complexity, or even a contradiction between the images that are evoked – these are the questions facing anyone attempting to consider the subject. And while R.'s brief treatment is no match for more detailed approaches exemplified e.g. by BARLOW's magisterial work¹, it serves

¹ S. BARLOW, *The Imagery of Euripides*, London 1971.

to illuminate the individual idiosyncrasies of the three great tragedians, providing the reader with a valuable introduction to the matter and, perhaps even more importantly, making him aware of the dangers intrinsic in overinterpretation. R. outlines the possible meaning of recurrence and uniqueness when applied to tragic imagery, highlighting the many possibilities open to the tragedian; he also pays some attention to visions: images absent from the stage and existing solely in the fevered mind of a hero (the Aeschylean Cassandra being possibly the most persuasive example).

Carried out in two separate chapters, the discussion of actual tragic style understood as tragic diction is divided between “spoken” and “lyric” passages – the division which results is particularly appropriate given the many conceptual differences separating the two. For each of these, R. conducts more detailed analyses of particular techniques employed in a number of passages taken from all three dramatists. One notes a preference for Aeschylus and, most importantly, Sophocles – nevertheless, several Euripidean passages emerge in the course of discussion. To provide a glimpse of his preferred method of exposition: when discussing the *stichomythia*, R. uses the famous recognition scenes of the *Choephorae* and the two *Electras* as his example of relevant poetic technique, with the immediate effect of highlighting the relative complexity of Sophocles’ and Euripides’ passages, with their employment of *antilabe* and *disticha* when contrasted with the stark simplicity of Aeschylus’ exchanges. Similarly, he employs the Oedipus–Teiresias exchange in the *OR* for the importance and dynamics of stichomythic exchange as a vehicle of emotionally laden or otherwise pregnant scenes. Then the *Orestes* is employed as an example illustrating the varied prologue techniques (pp. 186–190), while several pages are devoted to various opportunities offered by the introduction of the formal *agon* (as exemplified by the *Hippolytus* and *Ajas*, pp. 190–200), or of messenger speeches (Aeschylus’ *Persae* and *Supplices*, Euripides’ *Orestes*, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus Coloneus*, pp. 100–116). R. carefully highlights the most noticeable features of each of these forms, signalling the preferred place of interaction with the Athenian reality, the usual location of gnomic remarks, and the overall importance of the position of the passage within the larger framework of the section.

Chapter Seven (pp. 283–322) focuses on the art of characterisation: R. pays considerable attention to the manner in which language was deployed by the tragedians in order to provide their audiences with some insight into the inner mechanics of decision making, bringing them closer to some understanding of a character portrayed onstage. Here, the chosen case studies include the Watchman of the *Agamemnon*’s prologue, the Aeschylean Clytemnestra (contrasted with another treacherous wife, Deianeira), Neoptolemus, Hippolytus and, last but not least, Medea. One immediately notes the prominent presence of Sophoclean heroes: in contrast with scholars sharing Tycho von WILLAMOWITZ’S low opinion of Sophocles’ psychology, R. makes a convincing case for the dramatist’s insightful portrayal of complex and deeply humane individuals.

When studying language, one is inevitably confronted with issues of irony – R. deals with this particular aspect of tragic language in Chapter Eight (pp. 323–364): as before, his overview is general yet hardly generalizing. In carefully distinguishing between various forms of irony as it appears in tragic literature, he pays particular attention to that masterpiece of divine vengefulness (or malice), Dionysus of the *Bacchae*. He also highlights the usages stemming from the more general understanding of irony (i.e. the situation when words spoken by a character acquire a meaning hidden from the speaker or his immediate audience). The chapter is supplemented by a valuable appendix outlining the possibilities offered by metatextual irony.

Finally, the last chapter deals with the many aspects of wisdom as present in tragedy (pp. 365–398) – here, R. tackles issues of paramount importance in scholarship on tragedy: the issue of gods and divinity, the interference of new philosophical ideas, and finally, possible metatheatrical elements. Issues of considerable complexity are discussed here, such as the use and possible meaning of the *deus ex machina* solution, the introduction of personified abstract concepts such as Justice, Equality, etc. (the most famous instance being the Polyneices–Eteocles *agon* in the *Phoenissae*), but also the possible impact wrought by the inclusion of (para)philosophical elements in the tragic context.

To conclude, this is a wonderful book. While not a monographic study of an individual author or feature, it manages to steer clear of the dangers of oversimplification and excessive generalizing that remain a threat to any comprehensive approach to a genre – at no time is the reader in doubt that this is only a sketch, an outline of principal, predominant preferences, that many more problems remain to be investigated and considered should we want to have a detailed image of a tragic messenger speech or, indeed, an individual drama. Indeed, if I had to choose an introductory work for an aspiring student of Greek tragedy, I would choose R.'s monograph. It is comprehensive yet avoids generalizations, portraying a relatively flexible, living genre. In carefully balancing detailed analyses and a synthetic approach, it provides the reader with a lucid, persuasive and erudite introduction to one of the most fascinating fields within the realm of Classical studies.

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