

**Ruth Scodel, *An Introduction to Greek Tragedy*.** Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. 216. ISBN 9780521705608. \$24.99 (pb).

Ruth Scodel's *Introduction to Greek Tragedy* admirably succeeds as an entry-level textbook on Greek tragedy: it is engaging and clear, it gives a sense of the scholarly debates, it debunks the stranglehold that an old-fashioned Aristotelian approach still has—all without sacrificing the complexity and power of Greek tragedy. Rather than structuring her account as a comprehensive encyclopedia of tragic themes, authors and plays<sup>1</sup> or thematically<sup>2</sup>, Scodel offers a general overview of tragedy (Chapters 1–4) with short essays on ten plays (Chapters 5–12; *Persians* and *The Oresteia* of Aeschylus, Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, and Euripides' *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *Helen* and *Orestes*). Chapter 13 rounds out the book with a comparison of the three “Electra” plays (*Libation Bearers*, and the *Electras* of Sophocles and Euripides) and a short look at the legacy of tragedy.

The first four chapters summarize the essential aspects of Greek tragedy and reveal Scodel's approach to tragedy. The first chapter discusses the formal and performance aspects that defined the genre of tragedy and the genre's relationship to the concept “the tragic.” “The tragic,” Scodel argues, is important historically but leads to a very distorted view of the ancient plays. Equally capable of distorting our view is Aristotle's theory of tragedy. This theory has been the central model for teaching and interpreting tragedy for centuries because Aristotle is treated most frequently not as a theorist (which he is), but as an authority (which he is not). On Aristotle's statements on *hamartia* at *Poetics* 13, Scodel writes, “these few sentences have probably done more harm to the appreciation of Greek tragedies than any other” (9). Aristotle, she concludes, is not a reliable guide to understanding tragedy, an idea that is a leitmotiv throughout the book.

Having knocked Aristotle off his pedestal, in Chapter 2, Scodel outlines alternative approaches to tragedy. Beginning with the view, from Aristophanes' *Frogs*, of tragedy as useful to the city and educational, Scodel addresses a number of prominent modern approaches, such as ritual and psychoanalytic. She says we should resist the false and unhelpful narrative of development for tragedy—what she calls “the Story”—where a primitive Aeschylus leads to the pinnacle of Sophocles only to degrade with Euripides (17f.). Also to be resisted are unitary theories since they restrict interpretation (19) as well as enjoyment, which Scodel sees as the first priority of ancient audiences (21f.). Although Scodel does mention a number of other approaches (structuralism, deconstruction, New Historicism and narratology all get a mention without discussion), the focus of this chapter is an explication of her own approach to tragedy, an approach that focuses on the emotive power of tragedy. She emphasizes the staying power and universalism of tragedy, but leaves open different approaches:

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<sup>1</sup> For example, I. Storey and A. Allen, *A Guide to Greek Drama* (Malden, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Such as N. Rabinowitz, *Greek Tragedy* (Malden, 2008). E. Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering Under the Sun* (New York, 2010) is a combination of both approaches in that it offers readings of each play but under the primary theme of tragedy as defined by engagement with suffering.

“No approach is inappropriate as long as it does not exclude the possibility that the plays can continue to be powerful and meaningful” (30).

Chapter 3 covers, in a welcomingly clear and concise manner, much ground on the origins, performance and venues for tragedy. Subdivided into sections on origins and development, associated festivals, financing, stage conventions, major figures and the composition of the audience, the chapter makes this deluge of information manageable by good writing and organization. Her outline of “reliable” information on tragedy’s origins (38) is especially useful. There is an unfortunate typo on p. 37 that gives the dates of Cleisthenes’ reforms as 308–307 BCE. The date is listed correctly elsewhere in the book.

Chapter 4 expertly summarizes tragedy’s key historical and intellectual contexts. Scodel presents just enough history to make it clear that historical context, especially the prevalent democratic and imperial ideologies of the period (57), impacted tragedy without overwhelming the reader with a litany of dates and event. Her discussion of the relationship between tragedy and intellectual controversies of the century is one of the best explications I have read. She introduces the influences from the sophistic movements as well as developments in scientific thought. Overall, a very helpful and engaging chapter.

In the chapters (5–12) on individual plays, Scodel continues her interest in the emotive qualities of the plays and focuses heavily on the language and imagery of the plays. Her approach is even-handed and, with one exception, helps to open up a variety of discussion of the plays while clarifying some of the more dense and difficult aspects of tragic language. An excellent example is her chapter on *The Oresteia* (Chapter 6). Her readings serve as ideal compliments to the plays themselves: not only do they illuminate both the major issues frequently debated by scholars and the lesser talked about aspects of plays but they also serve as good examples of close reading for students.

Although a pre-selected group of plays may seem to some a limitation (we all like to teach our favorite plays), the chapters of individual plays are self-contained and need not be read in order or *in toto*. Scodel has selected plays that represent the variety of Greek “tragedy” including the historical, tragic, melodramatic and nearly comic. She selects plays that are well trodden and those that are less often read in the classroom. Certain of the plays, like *Oedipus the King* and *Hippolytus* fit with her aim of trying to undo the damage inflicted upon tragedy through adherence to an Aristotelian model. How better to undercut the model as model than to take two of Aristotle’s paradigms and re-read them without Aristotle? The choice of *Orestes* may strike some as odd, but it is a popular play with theater scholars and has many modern adaptations and stagings to its credit. Such an addition may tap into the interests of reader engaged with tragedy from a theater perspective. *Helen* and *Orestes* provide examples as well of the less common versions of myths that were a lifeblood of the tragic stage. We often fail to remember that what is now the standard version of a story because of a famous tragedy was not necessarily the traditional tale in its own time.

In Chapter 5 on Aeschylus' *Persians*—alone of those on individual plays—I find that Scodel's interpretation did more to shut down than to open up certain avenues of discussion because it was premised on attributing to Aeschylus' play and the Athenians of his time the Greek/barbarian polarization of the late 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE and, more importantly, the Orientalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries emphasized in the works of Edith Hall and, through her, Edward Said. It is unfortunate that Gruen's reassessment of the Greek/barbarian dichotomy in *Persians* came out too late to be considered as an alternative to the view followed here.<sup>3</sup>

There are a handful of issues with the editing of the book. In addition to the misdating of Cleisthenes' reforms noted above, there are moments when either words are left out or an incorrect word is used thus obscuring the meaning of the sentence (e.g. "helpful" instead of "helpless" on p.16 and "and happiness" instead of "of happiness" on p.95). There are about half a dozen, but these are errors that can easily be fixed in a second edition.

Scodel has provided a well-written and enjoyable introduction to Greek tragedy. I will likely use it in my own courses in the future and recommend it to others both for teaching and for their own enrichment.

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<sup>3</sup> E. Gruen *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton, 2011) 9–21. See also A.F. Garvie *Aeschylus: Persae with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford, 2009) xx–xxi and xxi, n.40 for a discussion of alternate views of the polarization and B. Isaac *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, 2004) 257–283.