

Mary Lefkowitz, *Euripides & the Gods*. Oxford University Press: 2016; pp. 294 + 8 with 5 illustrations. ISBN 9780199752058.

The book is well and appropriately organized for its intended readership of non-specialists: An introduction asks “Greek Drama without the Gods?” and a second preliminary chapter discusses Euripides, Socrates, and Other Sophists; these are followed by chapters on the tragedies themselves, beginning with Euripides’ *Heracles*, and individual chapters on Athena, Apollo, other gods, and gods behind the scenes in various plays. There is a brief conclusion, nearly fifty pages of notes (mostly citations), a selected bibliography, a subject index, and an *index locorum*.

The work is written for a general audience and lives up to its promise to be theory- and jargon-free. To make it accessible to the reader who is less than familiar with the works of Euripides, much space is devoted to telling the plots of the plays.

On p. xii Lefkowitz states her purpose in writing this book: “to suggest that we should take the action of the gods in Euripides’ dramas literally and seriously.” I agree at the outset with “seriously.” I do not like to see gods on the tragic stage satirized or, even worse, omitted. Well, in cinema, maybe. For example, one might think of the all-seeing camera as taking the place of the gods in Cacoyannis’ *Electra*. In a local stage production of that play (on the University of Idaho campus, spring 1998, directed by Tom Glynn, then a professor in the theatre department) two things struck me most, the powerful connection to the land emphasized at the beginning and the awesomeness of the gods who appear *ex machina* at the end: huge puppets who made us feel both the distance of these beings and their grandeur. I cannot, however, get my mind around the “literally” part. Euripides’ gods are presented as integral to the denouement and, therefore, a serious part of the play. But what exactly would “literally” mean in such a context? When gods appear in plays they are characters in those plays, literary creations of the playwright, part of a drama that is enacted, and that is also known to be *not* the only way the particular legend could be or has been presented. To be fair, Lefkowitz is dealing with a long line of critics from Verrall through Nestle, Norwood, Greenwood, Vellacott, to Helene Foley, Harvey Yunis, Daniel Mendelsohn, and Matthew Wright, among many other contemporary critics, who to a greater or lesser degree, view the actions of the gods ironically. I must admit that I find the work of these critics stimulating; their skepticism has contributed to continued interest in Euripides. I am reluctant to see them dismissed.

Expanding on earlier work, including the article “Was Euripides an Atheist?” (1987) and her seminal work on the lives of the ancient poets (1981, 2012), Lefkowitz is most cogent in her explanation of the sources of Euripides’ alleged skepticism or even atheism, that is, in the parodies of him in the comic poets and in passages gleaned from his own work, as if every thought expressed by a character in a play had to be the poet’s own opinion. Biographical material for the Greek poets, as Lefkowitz has shown us, is unreliable and worse: it is very hard to root out.

A major problem with *Euripides & the Gods* for me is the constant reference to monotheism and the God of Scripture, as if what Lefkowitz calls the “Judeo-Christian God” (61, 67) were the norm or were the same to all sects of the Jewish and Christian faiths and individuals who practice them. I wonder if the “problems” inherent in polytheism (for example, what is pleasing to one god may be the opposite to another and vice versa) would be as manifest to persons who had not been brought up to believe in one almighty, omniscient, creator God. Not to further belabor the obvious, but L’s book makes the contrast between polytheism and “modern religions” (p. 8) over and over again. As is the usual practice she avoids using the term “myth” of the theological narratives “collected in the Bible” as she acknowledges (p. 8). But much of what she says in her conclusion of the gods of Greek tragedy (p. 193) could equally be said of the jealous, vengeful, God of the Bible:

Gods who come to us when they are inclined to, and not when we choose to call on them; gods who respond to perceived slights with the greatest cruelty; gods who demand that parents offer their children to them in sacrifice; gods who destroy a city for the crimes of an individual; gods who punish another god by harming their favorite human beings—all these we have seen in the preceding chapters

Since she brings up the story of Job (p. 75, not listed in the *index locorum*), let it suffice to say that Job’s first family did not benefit from the benevolence of his God. It strikes me, furthermore, as unlikely that many modern readers would equate Zeus with their transcendent God. It once happened that one of my students suggested something of the sort and he was immediately and vigorously refuted by his fellow monotheists. I wonder too if “the gods play more prominent roles in Euripides’ dramas than those of Aeschylus and Sophocles” (p. xi). It is true that there are more gods on stage in Euripidean tragedies, but I cannot imagine plays in which the divine presence is felt from beginning to end more than in *Agamemnon* or *Oedipus the King*.

Euripides’ *Heracles* is chosen to begin the discussion of the plays because it shows the gods at their worst (49). In the play, Heracles says some controversial things about the gods. He refuses to believe stories about the gods’ illicit affairs, and chooses Amphitryon over Zeus as his father because Amphitryon, though unable to save him, cares about his son and loves him. Though this is consonant with her conclusion (204), Lefkowitz firmly denies that Heracles “has suddenly turned into a philosopher proclaiming a new theology” (54). She is doubtless right, but a play is not just the sum of its lines. In the chapters on the gods, the main problem I have with the approach is taking the gods literally. This leads to a failure to take other ideas about how the gods work in the dramas into account. Just to take one example, the chapter on Apollo would have been enlightened by reference to Hartigan’s *Ambiguity and Self-Deception: The Apollo and Artemis Plays of Euripides* (1991) which successfully argues for a common theme in the character of Apollo throughout the Euripidean plays in which he appears.

In sum *Euripides & the Gods* may be a needed corrective to the opinion that Euripides scorned the gods, attacked the religion of the state, or advocated “religious reform” (p. 67). It would be enriched by a companion volume in which aspects of Euripides’ gods other than the literal are treated: the dramatic, literary, compositional, metaphorical. We cannot tell what the playwright believed about the nature of the gods, but we can see how he used them to reify the *mythos* and *ethos* of his plays, which are, after all, about human beings and the deeds and fates that make them tragic. The gods we are reminded, by Lefkowitz and Artemis among others, do not experience tragedy.

The book has rather a lot of minor typos, repeated words, words left out, ambiguous writing. Gods who appear in the plays are not always brought in by the *mēchanē* (p 10); sometimes they just walk on and off (as Apollo does in *Alcestis* and probably the gods in *Trojan Women*) or just stand up to reveal themselves on the rooftop (like Artemis in *Hippolytus* and probably Athena in *Suppliants*). The illustrations are perfunctory, being poorly reproduced and not clear enough to really add to the text, with the exception of figure 4.2, also the cover illustration, which does not represent an incident from the Euripidean corpus, but an attitude of Apollo.

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