

**Tanya Pollard. *Greek Tragic Women on Shakespearean Stages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp 331. Hardback £60.00. ISBN: 9780198793113.**

CARLA SUTHREN

University of Cambridge

The critical consensus has traditionally assumed that the influence of Greek tragedy on English drama of Shakespeare's age was negligible, particularly in contrast to the more obvious claims of Seneca. A growing body of evidence, however, indicates that scholars have underestimated early modern playwrights' engagement with Greek, suggesting that the time is ripe to re-evaluate this view. Tanya Pollard's book, with its appealing focus on the heroines of Greek tragic drama, promises to do just that. Aside from the arguments of the main chapters, the volume contains sixty pages of appendices, listing sixteenth-century editions of Greek plays in Greek (Appendix 1), Latin, and bilingual Greek-Latin (both in Appendix 2); vernacular translations of Greek (Appendix 3) and Senecan plays (Appendix 5); and performances of plays by or based on Greek playwrights (Appendix 4) and Seneca (Appendix 6). These appendices make no claim to be definitive, and no doubt subsequent research will offer corrections and supplements. They are nevertheless an invaluable resource, and resoundingly lay to rest the misconception, expressed by Adrian Poole as late as 2010, that it was not 'until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century' that the works of Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus 'became available to the Greekless reader in their entirety'.<sup>1</sup>

The newly assembled data presented in the appendices provide a powerful backdrop to Pollard's work. Her key observation is that the Greek tragedies which attracted most attention in the period overwhelmingly featured female protagonists. There was, essentially, an early modern Greek tragic canon which largely neglected Oedipus, and instead concentrated on Euripides's *Hecuba*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Medea*, and *Alcestis* (*Hecuba* and *Iphigenia in Aulis* came to popularity in Erasmus's Latin translations, first printed in 1506, while *Medea* and *Alcestis* appeared in the translations of George Buchanan in the 1540s). Pollard argues that early modern writers paid particular attention to the 'mother-daughter dyad' of grieving mothers and sacrificial daughters in these plays, adding that Sophocles's *Antigone*, which was translated into Latin by Thomas Watson (printed in 1581), also fits this pattern. In her first chapter, after establishing this context, Pollard focuses on two neglected translations of Euripides into English — Jane Lumley's *Iphigenia* (ca 1557) and George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmersh's

*Jocasta* (performed in 1566) — which offer the paradigmatic pairings of Clytemnestra/Iphigenia and Jocasta/Antigone to support her thesis.

In Pollard's view, the influence of female tragic figures such as these reaches far beyond translated works. She aims to explore 'complex processes of literary transmission' which 'suggest uncanny and capacious forms of literary influence, challenging traditional intertextual models' (3). The precise nature of Greek influence is hard to pin down in this period, even when writers are known to be using Greek sources; the relative linguistic remoteness of Greek in comparison to Latin at the time is no doubt partially responsible. Traditional approaches to intertextuality have struggled to accommodate this difficulty, so the rewards of Pollard's more capacious strategy are clear. She identifies Hecuba as 'the period's reigning symbol of Greek tragedy', thanks in part to the striking popularity of Erasmus's translation (89). Since, Pollard contends, English dramatic genres were consistently framed through and against Greek ones, thinking about tragedy often meant thinking about Hecuba, and vice versa. Chapters two and three persuasively map the interest in Hecuba's ability to evoke a response in her audiences onto explorations of tragic affect in *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Hamlet*.

As a means of articulating the elusive nature of the reception of Greek tragedy in Renaissance texts, Pollard employs the recurrent image of the Shakespearean stage being 'haunted' by the 'ghosts' of Greek tragic women. This works particularly well in chapter five, which analyzes Shakespeare's interest in 'Reviving apparently dead women' (171). She examines the resurrections of Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Thaisa in *Pericles*, and Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, as 'reanimat[ing] a Euripidean motif transmitted through multiple authors and forms' (194). Pollard's flexible approach moves beyond traditional source study to encompass more diffuse models of transmission. In chapter four, she suggests that in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare was responsive to the heroines of his Greek prose romance sources, which in turn drew on Euripides. One consequence of Pollard's approach, however, is to elide the differences between these textual encounters: reading Euripidean drama is a different experience to reading prose romance (however Euripidean the latter may be) in ways that warrant further exploration.

Pursuing the ghosts of Greek tragic women across generic boundaries, in comedy and tragicomedy as well as tragedy, proves to be very fruitful. Pollard's final chapter performs a deft move, arguing that in *Bartholomew Fair* Ben Jonson positions himself as the Aristophanes to Shakespeare's Euripides through comic parody of his contemporary's works. Aristophanes parodies Euripidean tragedy extensively, notably in *Frogs* and *Thesmophoriazousae*; in *Bartholomew Fair*, 'the

multiple exposures of puppets and wives, by drawing back skirts and veils ... specifically recall the unveilings of lost wives that end Shakespeare's tragicomic romances' (220). Sceptics who remain unconvinced by Shakespeare's engagement with Greek tragedy should have no trouble accepting the probability of such a manoeuvre on Jonson's part. While not requiring Shakespeare to have had any first-hand knowledge of Greek tragedy, the fact that the classically minded Jonson produced Aristophanic parodies of the climactic reunions of Shakespeare's tragicomedies, which have most claim to be identified as Euripidean, is certainly very suggestive.

One question which Pollard's work explicitly raises is never fully answered: 'why did English playwrights reimagine a genre widely identified with female grief as increasingly focused on male suffering?' (89). If we accept, as I think we must, that Greek tragedy was more widely disseminated in this period than has often been assumed, with a strong emphasis on works with female protagonists, then this question clearly demands further attention. It would be interesting to see how Greek tragedy's male characters might fit into Pollard's framework, including the hero of Sophocles's *Ajax*, which also seems to have enjoyed some popularity in the period. Pollard's presentation of the affective impact of the grieving mother/sacrificial daughter pairing as the key inheritance of Greek tragedy for Renaissance writers, however, is powerful and compelling. The book represents an important contribution to ongoing debates over the significance of Greek to English literature in the period, and will undoubtedly serve to open up the field still further.

## Notes

---

- 1 Adrian Poole, 'Euripides', in *The Classical Tradition*, ed. Antony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, and Salvatore Settis (Cambridge, 2010), 347.

