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Greek Tragic Women on Shakespearean Stages by Tanya Pollard (review)

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Greek Tragic Women on Shakespearean Stages by Tanya Pollard (review)

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, here is the review's first paragraph:

In this clearly written and thoroughly researched book, Pollard argues that ancient Greek tragedies influenced sixteenth-century theater significantly more than previously thought. Pollard offers evidence of their availability and popularity during the early modern period and includes several useful appendices listing sixteenth-century editions of Greek plays in Greek, Latin and vernacular languages as well as performances of plays by or based on Greek playwrights. Pollard finds additional proof in the echoes of Greek tragic icons in a variety of sixteenth-century plays, which she analyzes to better understand the “complex process of literary transmission” and “an explicitly theatrical model for intertextual engagement” (3).

Disciplines

English Language and Literature

Comments

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Tanya Pollard. *Greek Tragic Women on Shakespearean Stages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. vii, 331. \$70.00. ISBN 978-0-19-879311-3.

In this clearly written and thoroughly researched book, Pollard argues that ancient Greek tragedies influenced sixteenth-century theater significantly more than previously thought. Pollard offers evidence of their availability and popularity during the early modern period and includes several useful appendices listing sixteenth-century editions of Greek plays in Greek, Latin and vernacular languages as well as performances of plays by or based on Greek playwrights. Pollard finds additional proof in the echoes of Greek tragic icons in a variety of sixteenth-century plays, which she analyzes to better understand the “complex process of literary transmission” and “an explicitly theatrical model for intertextual engagement” (3).

Given the prominence of female protagonists in the Greek plays produced in the sixteenth century, Pollard characterizes the early modern understanding of the origins of drama as directly linked to Euripides’ eloquent women whose theatrical power stems from their ability to evoke sympathy from their internal and external audiences. While Hecuba remains the most prominent example, Pollard also examines figures such as Clytemnestra, Iphigenia, Jocasta and Alcestis, highlighting the centrality of the mother-daughter dyad and uncovering the links between rhetorical power and women’s status as grieving mothers and sacrificial daughters. Pollard puts Shakespeare at the center of this book, framing the four chapters devoted to Shakespeare with an examination of early modern translations of Greek plays and a lively reading of Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair*. Chapter 1 focuses on Jane Lumley’s *Iphigeneia* and George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmersh’s *Jocasta*. Noting the ways in which translators diverged from the source materials, Pollard finds that the plays display “a surprisingly consistent interest in the heroic powers of eloquent sacrificial virgins mobilized by the affective intensity of their grieving mothers” (71). Although English tragedy shifted to focus on male suffering, Pollard contends that Greek women haunt Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* as well as *Titus Andronicus*, which, Pollard suggests, Shakespeare co-wrote with George Peele, who was more familiar with Greek sources. She also speculates that this collaboration may have “left a Euripidean imprint” on Shakespeare’s tragic imagination (121), leading to the preoccupation with Hecuba that surfaces in *Hamlet*. Despite its shift to a mourning son who monopolizes the stage, *Hamlet*’s fascination with Hecuba suggests an acknowledgment of her affective power that Shakespeare hopes to achieve in his own work.

The chapters devoted to Shakespeare feature some of Pollard’s most attentive and compelling close reading. For instance, in addressing Shakespeare’s appropriation of Greek tragic women for comic aims, Pollard offers a dazzling explanation of *The Comedy of Error*’s frequent use of the word “burden” and other etymologically related terms to evoke the tragic potential of paternity that belies the play’s title and tone. Pollard reads

The Comedy of Errors alongside *Twelfth Night* as Shakespeare's unique form of hybrid comedy, a form that engages with elements of Greek tragedy and highlights women's ability to elicit sympathy.

Next, Pollard groups together *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Pericles*, and *The Winter's Tale*, which all stage a woman's seeming return from death and can be linked to Euripides' *Alcestis*, whose titular heroine represents "the hybrid possibilities of tragicomic redemption" associated particularly with maternity (173). This chapter is particularly thought-provoking, presenting *Alcestis* as a model of virtue not linked to vengeance and interpreting *The Winter's Tale*'s oracle as "a model for a distinctively female embodied, and poetic form of creative reproduction" (191). Pollard reads Shakespeare's revived heroines as bold and eloquent in contrast to the silenced *Alcestis*, offering a perhaps overly optimistic interpretation of each woman's agency while underplaying the plays' acts of patriarchal violence. Nevertheless, her understanding of the value of female suffering offers useful insight into these dark and often troubling plays.

Arguing that Shakespeare's plays are a "bridge between the theater's Greek origins and new approaches for engaging audiences' sympathies" (221), Pollard concludes with a delightfully layered analysis of *Bartholomew Fair*. She reads the play as a parody of Shakespeare in which Jonson imitates Aristophanes' parodies of Euripides—a "paratragic" strategy that gave Jonson the opportunity to enjoy "the pleasurable redemptions of his model while maintaining his wry skepticism towards their miraculous resolutions" (206). Pollard's book offers similar pleasures to its readers while contributing significant insights to early modern dramatic studies.

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