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The Plays of Euripides

James Morwood, *The plays of Euripides. Classical world series*. London: Bristol Classical Press, 2002. vii, 99 pages : illustrations ; 22 cm.. ISBN 1853996149 \$15.00.

Review by

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It is rare to find a guide to Greek drama that stems from the author's unabashed ardor for its subject, and James Morwood's slender introduction to the dramas of Euripides wears its heart on its sleeve on every page. Since Morwood's intended audience is students, novice teachers and the general public, such enthusiasm is certainly not out of place, and it is indeed welcome as it allows Morwood to provide brief introductions to all 19 extant dramas (including the disputed *Rhesus*) without prejudice or quibbles about inadequate plot construction; each text is taken on its own terms. I am not certain that "each and every one of them is a masterpiece" (1), but I appreciate Morwood not criticizing one drama for not being like another one, or Euripides himself for not being sufficiently Sophoclean. Generalist guides to Homer and Sophocles, even to Aeschylus, are relatively common, and the reader of Euripides has until now lacked a guide to reading through all of the dramas. Taken on its own terms, Morwood's book is a successful introduction.

This is a literary book for readers of literature. Morwood richly sprinkles his analyses with reference to modern writers, drawing connections between *The Merchant of Venice* and *Medea* (a surprising, yet productive comparison), alluding to Sartre, Chaucer, Coleridge, and Sheridan. Shakespeare's frequent appearances come as no surprise. While it is refreshing to see Euripides returned to the broader context of European literature, some basic attention to staging practice and potential problems would have been productive and welcome. Dramaturgy very rarely enters into Morwood's scope.

The attempt to cover nineteen dramas, plus opening and closing remarks, in 99 pages means that Morwood must paint with a rather broad brush, and from his own particular perspective, which itself means that some scholarly controversies and finer points of interpretation are somewhat papered over. I am not so sure, for example, that the chorus' approval of Medea's first plan of revenge is expected because "like all ancient Greeks, and thus like Euripides' audience, they accept the revenge ethic" (13). I am also not so sure that the dying Hippolytus and his father simply "communicate in words of love" (24). In Morwood's discussion of *Electra*, we learn that Homer's failure to explore fully the implications of Orestes' matricide means that it "apparently meets with Homer's full approval" (41).

Given Morwood's premise of uniform virtuosity throughout the Euripidean corpus, it is not surprising that the most number of pages, six, is given to defending the least accessible text, *The Children of Heracles*, and the arguably most complex, *Orestes*. With the former, Morwood refers to important scholarship, but, frustratingly, even when quoting it, does not provide page references to allow an interested student to pursue leads. Many chapters, however, show a remarkably deft touch with getting to a key point of interpretation quickly; the discussion of the absence of a messenger speech in *The Trojan Women* is a particularly fine example.

Now for various and sundry quibbles. Morwood closes his discussion of *Cyclops* with a remark that Odysseus "walks out of the theatre for the last time in any of the plays that have come down to us" (73) positing that Euripides is somehow rehabilitating Odysseus from his increasingly cynical portrait in tragedy. Yet this climactic assertion ignores the deep uncertainty surrounding the date of production, with most scholars placing *Cyclops* earlier than 408 and thus before *Philoctetes*. And while the commentaries by Dodds and Seaford have done wonders for our understanding of *The Bacchae*, I would not go so far as to suggest (74) that those two great scholars have necessarily contributed to its popularity! The annotated bibliography lacks some of the most important work on Euripides in recent decades by Charles Segal and Helene Foley, whose names are completely absent from the volume, and Froma Zeitlin, who only appears as the co-editor of *Nothing to Do with Dionysus* (sic) and the author of one its essays. Morwood recommends his own translations of Euripides published in Oxford World Classics and fails to mention the other OUP series, the fine Focus editions and the widely used University of Chicago Press editions. Strangely enough, a target audience of Morwood's volume should be classes using the Chicago translations, since the introductions to those translations are now dated and often inadequate. Last, as noted earlier, references to the works in the bibliography lack specific citations, which inhibits further reading by students.

Despite these concerns, Morwood's book is informative and a very lively read. All told, it is a fine introduction to the dramas of Euripides, and we should commend Bristol Classical Press and Duckworth for continuing to provide affordable introductions to important authors and issues from classical antiquity.