

Donald J. MASTRONARDE, *The Art of Euripides: Dramatic Technique and Social Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, XIV, 361 pp., ISBN 978-0-521-76839-9, £ 63.00.

Originally published in 1982, Thomas ROSENMEYER's *The Art of Aeschylus* remains one of the most important books produced by the tragic scholarship in the past century. Acclaimed as erudite and sophisticated, the book deals with what may be considered constitutive elements of Aeschylean drama (poetry, chorus, human and divine agents, etc.) and presents its reader with a vast panorama of motifs, tendencies and features that contribute to the unique nature of the phenomenon, bearing witness to the extraordinary sensitivity and imagination of the American scholar. It is to this very book that Donald MASTRONARDE [= M.] alludes in the preface to his recent work on Euripides when acknowledging his desire to do for Euripides what his predecessor did for Aeschylus.

The structure of M.'s *Art* displays a notable similarity to that employed in its model: instead of discussing single dramas, the scholar follows thematic pattern, considering the subjects of particular importance for the modern Euripidean scholarship (yet, for his reader's benefit M. summarizes the plots of surviving works in the opening chapter). Starting with the necessary caveats (after all, it is incumbent upon us to keep in mind that the surviving dramas represent but a fraction of the overall output of the ancient tragedians), M. begins with the generic issues (what is a "true" tragedy? or: is a given Euripidean drama a tragedy?), and passes through the problems related to structure (e.g. the celebrated issue of unity as absent from some plays of Euripides), to the use and the authority of choral voice, to Euripides' portrayal of the divine, and to the new-fangled discoveries and notions of rhetorical art, to finish with the discussion of gender issues, such as Euripidean characterization of the sexes, their status, the nature of their agency, and the efficacy of their actions.

Strongly influenced by the theories of GUILLÉN, the discussion of genre portrays fifth century tragedy as "work in progress", vastly changeable and fluctuant phenomenon far from the rigid form postulated by Renaissance theorists working their way from the Aristotelian definition. The approach, resulting in somewhat critical assessment of the Aristophanic testimony (at least where the alleged inferiority of Euripidean art is concerned) seems particularly attractive, as it highlights the possibilities of the ever-developing form, the roads which were ultimately not to be taken by Euripides' posteriors. Moreover, such an interpretative attitude seems consistent with M.'s refusal to adhere to any radical or decisive assessment of Euripides as a playwright: be it the ever competing labels of misogyny versus profound interest in female psychology, of atheism versus deep piety, of admiration or deep distrust of sophistic findings, M. highlights the primacy of the dramatic, the complexities that are inherent in the staging or in the plot itself and seem to belie any superficial reading.

Should one wish for a brief summary of M.'s interpretation, it would probably come summed up in a principal caveat: beware of stereotypes. For the scholar, there is no easy or simple answer to any of the questions so frequently (and with such supreme absoluteness) asked with reference to the Euripidean drama. Any positive, generalizing answer we attempt results in a loss or suppression of some important and troubling detail, in an omission of some little scene or nuance that may point us toward a more careful, more sophisticated (and possibly, more troubling) interpretation. Even worse, such generalization may lead us to overlook the scarcity of surviving body of tragic literature: and drawing definite conclusions on basis of what we possess is a highly risky endeavour. Significantly, many of thus formulated caveats apply to much more than Euripidean tragedy: for example, M.'s renunciation of romantic interpretation (pp. 67 f.) will of necessity have a profound bearing on the reading of Sophocles.

What is particularly striking in the work is M.'s uncanny ability to unravel and highlight the most troubling (and fascinating) traits of Euripidean poetics. Endowed with a perceptiveness that is almost alarming, M. provides his reader with a balanced yet challenging reading of Euripides that

brings to mind an insightful remarks of Martin CROPP¹ made with reference to the M.'s interpretation of the *Phoenissae* – we may not agree with some details of his observations, yet we cannot refute their principles nor deny their worth: indeed, it is possible that our refutation shall ultimately benefit from M.'s own work.

To outline the most important traits of *The Art of Euripides*: when dealing with the problems related to structure, M. draws the reader's attention to the impossibility of comprehensive generic definition, pointing out the unstable, evolving form of tragedy as the genre was practiced in the fifth century, but also stressing Euripides' possible innovativeness, his interest in the evolution and development of the form. Invoking the concept of open structure, he persuasively argues for the presence of the idea in ancient Greece: as a result, he renounces the widespread and deeply entrenched notion of the "Classical", with its demand for consistency, rigidity and tightness of composition in favour of a more liquid, wider and more nuanced concept, allowing for more active participation of the public. Indeed, the three opening chapters of the book ("Approaching Euripides", "Problems of Genre" and "Dramatic Structures") may be regarded not only as an analysis of a given set of issues considered highly controversial by Euripides' scholars, but rather as a comprehensive introduction to intellectual and literary culture of the fifth century.

As for the strictly "Euripidean" part of the study, it is filled with extremely useful insights and observations, both of which often challenge the "official" image of Euripides as either the rationalist, or the rebel, or, conversely, the traditionalist. Thus, when discussing the authority and authoritativeness of the choral voice (pp. 106–114), M. highlights the effects of the Euripidean strategy that has the choral perception of events challenged by the prologue or, for that matter, by the internal logic of myth (after all, constitutive, constant elements of the latter, such as Clytaemnestra's treachery or Orestes' acquittal would be known to the audience). As a result, the Euripidean chorus seems to lose much of its authority – indeed, in some of the plays even its moral stature results diminished or questioned. In turn, when analyzing the issue of individual agency – for both men and women – he delves into the often complex issues of motivation, decision making, resolve and efficacy of human action as set against the implacable mythical facts, divine will, social norms, etc. In uncovering the often complex tissue of human agency he brings out the intrinsic complexity of divine nature as well as the limitations of human cognition. For the gender issue (pp. 246–279), he makes a beautiful and persuasive argument for the importance of agonistic element – Polyxene's heroic death, death carefully styled (by the princess herself) to challenge the limitations imposed by her status as a female, a slave and a sacrificial victim, and the proud assertions made in their last moments by both Alcestis and Eudne are invoked as examples of endeavours of essentially competitive character, endeavours undertaken with an implicit desire to set an example of excellence (symptomatically, for both Alcestis and Eudne, the excellence concerns the female virtue of loyalty, while the drive to excel in itself marks them at best as untypical females, the point made – quite perversely given the gist of the play – by Admetus, who sees his wife's demise as desertion). When discussing the issue of rhetoric he stresses the intrinsic irony of fate met by many Euripidean rationalists, the frequent collapse of the belief that a human can understand the workings of divinely ruled universe, the plays' highly ambivalent portrayal of the word and its powers, as well as the often contradictory use of many mythical examples (this latter becomes particularly striking when M. compares the respective cases of the *Hippolytus* and *Hercules Furens*, with the Nurse and Theseus invoking analogous examples with highly differing purpose, pp. 214 f.).

The book is condensed, nuanced, and detailed, highly demanding on the reader, even though M. suppressed the use of Greek, invoking the original texts only when absolute necessity arose. It is also extremely rewarding, very much in the fashion of ROSENMEYER's work, as it awakens the

¹ M. CROPP, (review of:) D.J. MASTRONARDE, *Euripides: Phoenissae*, Cambridge 1994, BMCR 1995.08.03 (<http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/1995/95.08.03.html>).

reader to the complexity of the texts discussed, to the beauty of the interpretative art, and, ultimately, to charms and pleasures of the classical scholarship.

Joanna Komorowska
Cardinal Stephan Wyszyński University, Warsaw