

**Agnieszka Kotlińska-Toma, *Hellenistic Tragedy: Texts, Translations and a Critical Survey*, London–New York: Bloomsbury, 2015, XVI + 322 pp., ISBN 978-1-47252-421-8, £ 70.00.**

KOTLIŃSKA-TOMA's [= K.-T.] monograph, based on the author's doctoral dissertation which was first published in Polish in 2006, is the first all-inclusive study of Hellenistic tragedy since F. SCHRAMM's *Tragicorum Graecorum hellenisticae, quae dicitur, aetatis fragmenta* (1929). As such, it is undoubtedly a useful book, if not a particularly groundbreaking, well written or error-free one.

This densely printed tome comprises four chapters, an Appendix, a sizeable bibliography and three indices. Chapter 1 (pp. 1–48) provides general observations on Hellenistic tragedy as a sub-genre, tackling such topics as: the preservation and transmission of the fragments; Hellenistic criticism on tragedy (by this the author is referring to the extensive body of scholarly work on various aspects of the genre, which may have influenced playwriting practice); common themes and motifs in Hellenistic tragic plays (historical, mythical, philosophical, moral, etc.); problems concerning metre and language; the question of the chorus' presence in Hellenistic tragedy; and the changed nature of satyr drama in this period. The chapter is mostly addressed to a non-specialist audience, taking pains to explain, for example, the idiosyncrasies of Athenaeus and Stobaeus as excerpters, etc.

Two points of detail:

(a) In pp. 23–28, the author tends to regard tragedies with historical and political themes as a single category and to overemphasise this category's importance in Hellenistic tragedy. She argues that, in the early Hellenistic period, historical themes became a trend in response to wider socio-political changes. This is, in fact, overstated. It is possible that satyr drama did turn to political themes, occupying the space left vacant by comedy (although even that may have just been a passing phase); but to argue that as a rule the "authors of tragedies now focused on political themes" is an exaggeration. The only *bona fide* political tragedy one can speak of in this period is Lycophron's *Cassandraeans* (of which only the title survives, but whose topical character is very likely). Moschion's *Men of Pherae* may have had a mythological theme after all (it does not *need* to be a rehash of Euripides' *Alcestis*, as K.-T. is convinced, since that was not the only story associated with the House of Pheres). In general, even with the information we have, there seems to be little in common between *Cassandraeans*, the Gyges tragedy (which thematises the history of 6<sup>th</sup>-century BC Lydia along the tracks of Herodotus), and the *Themistocles* plays by Moschion and Philiscus, whose political significance in the Hellenistic context is far from obvious. Given the current state of the evidence, no particular trend can be identified.

(b) In terms of mythological themes, K.-T. notes the Hellenistic tendency for more *recherché* topics. This is certainly right, but the Aeolus myth should not be counted among these. Euripides himself wrote quite an infamous play based on this story. Lycophron's *Aeolus* is actually far from "unique" (p. 31).

Chapters 2 and 3 offer a critical survey of Hellenistic tragedy as we have it. Commendably, not every Hellenistic tragedian or every fragment found in *TrGF* I is included in K.-T.'s presentation, who focuses only on the major poets and texts. Chapter 2 (pp. 49–198) examines first the so-called "Pleiad", that is, the canon of the most important tragic playwrights operating under the patronage of or, at any rate, during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus. It continues with other tragedians mentioned either in literature or in the inscriptional record. K.-T.'s arrangement is advantageous compared to *TrGF* I, which employs purely chronological criteria: it allows the reader to better gauge contemporary Hellenistic perceptions of the genre and the relative significance of its practitioners.

It should be noted that the plays examined in this chapter do *not* include Lycophron's *Alexandra*, which the author, arguably against current scholarly opinion, considers to be a *sui generis* literary work with no place in a survey of tragic drama (this matter is briefly discussed in pp. 86–89).

Chapter 3 (pp. 199–242) turns to Hellenistic tragedy with biblical themes, focusing mostly on Ezekiel's *Exagoge*, the most substantial, and yet problematic, fragment of Hellenistic tragedy at our disposal. The chapter also surveys a number of *pseudepigrapha* assumed to be "Jewish tragedies", as well as a reported play about Susanna (a character from the Book of Daniel), probably by Nicolaus of Damascus.

In chapters 2 and 3, the fragments are accompanied by short critical essays (rather than a commentary proper). The essays mostly recapitulate, often in a somewhat redundant fashion, the current state of research. Given the lamentably fragmentary state of the texts and the significant amount of previous scholarly work on which K.-T. builds, the new insights she provides are inevitably few and far between, but they are not entirely lacking.

Here are some observations I found particularly interesting. Although tentatively posited, the possibility that Sosiphanes *TrGF* I 92 F1 (= fr. 1 K.-T.) may refer to Meleager's wife Cleopatra practicing Thessalian love magic to win her husband back from Atalanta is worth taking seriously, although the connection of Cleopatra with Thessaly is not clear (p. 60). Another attractive suggestion is that Python's *Agen* would have served its purpose as a piece of Alexander's royal propaganda much better in the earlier part of 324 BC (pp. 115–123). Finally, I was engrossed by K.-T.'s analysis of the "internal harmony" in the structure of Moschion *TrGF* I F6 (= fr. 4 K.-T.), as well as of the fragment's way of assimilating elements from Hellenistic philosophy and ethnography (pp. 134–139).

Generally speaking, K.-T. is thorough in her critical analyses, although her general tendency towards prolixity (see also below) is rather bothersome. Not simply itemizing but also analysing at length every single conjecture on a particular fragment may be good academic manners, but since, as is the case here, few of these conjectures are based on anything other than guesswork, the reader is not necessarily any the wiser for the practice.

Regarding K.-T.'s comments on the fragments, I have the following specific qualms:

(a) K.-T. changes the numbering and sometimes the order of the fragments in *TrGF* I, providing her own enumeration. This is an understandable editorial choice, as mentioned above. However, problems arise in some instances. One such case is Sosiphanes *TrGF* I 92 F5? (= fr. 2 K.-T.) and *TrGF* I 92 F7 (= fr. 3 K.-T.). First of all, it is not correct that both these fragments are "found in scholia to Theocritus' *Epithalamium for Helen*" (p. 60). As K.-T. herself notes when citing the text a few lines above, the second fragment derives from the scholia to Eur. *Andr.* 32. Secondly, given that both fragments refer to Menelaus' descendants (the first lists the children of Menelaus and Helen, the second Hermione's son with Neoptolemus), grouping them together may give the impression that they come from the same play (or even the same section of a play), a possibility that nobody can either prove or disprove.

(b) In the same fragment of Sosiphanes (*TrGF* I 92 F5? = fr. 2 K.-T.), there is lack of consistency between ancient text and modern commentary. SNELL–KANNICHT print † Ἰολμος, obelizing the reading of codices UEA. In her text K.-T. accepts WENDEL's emendation Ἰόλαος, but in the discussion she defends the paradosis ("it is significant that Sosiphanes names Nicostratus and Iolmos..."), p. 60). Notice also that SNELL–KANNICHT put a question mark after the fragment's number to alert the reader to the possibility that the source may not actually cite a work by Sosiphanes (the scholium on Theocritus 18, 51 is textually suspect). K.-T. should have retained SNELL–KANNICHT's notation.

(c) The commentary on Lycophron fr. 5 K.-T. is incomplete: if only for the purpose of underlining Lycophron's reuse of *topoi* established in classical tragedy, the author should have noted the parallel of Euripides' *Alcestis* 669–672, which expresses the same general sentiment about people's reactions to death (cf. also Sophocles fr. 66 RADT).

(d) In p. 232 one reads: "Such scenes [*scil.* of fire supposedly seen on stage] are present, for instance, in Euripides' *Bacchae*, where Kapaneus' funeral pyre burns, in the *Suppliants*, where Pentheus' palace burns...". It is, in fact, the other way around.

(e) Finally, two corrections on points made in the Preface and in Chapter 1 concerning playwrights of the fifth and fourth centuries respectively. First, Cratinus' *Dionysalexandros* did not

simply “resemble a comedy” (p. 45); it was actually a comic play. Despite the fact that it featured a chorus of satyrs, it was *not* a satyr drama, as K.-T. believes. Second, regarding Chaereon, in pp. XV f., n. 6, K.-T. rejects the idea that Aristotle’s description of this playwright as ἀναγνωστικός may point to the possibility that he also wrote *Lesedramen*. This may well be correct: Chaereon had a lively presence on stage. But at least one of his surviving fragments (*TrGF* I 71 F14b, from an unknown play, probably the *Centaur*) included an acrostic, which could only have been appreciated by a reading public. This is after all a period of change and adjustment, albeit obscured by the dearth of evidence: conclusions that are too neat and certainties that are too solid should be avoided.

K.-T.’s translations are generally accurate, though in some cases more caution was required. The sample list that follows is not exhaustive:

(a) Sosiphanes, *TrGF* I 92 F6 (= fr. 7 K.-T.): καὶ οὐ μόνον γε ἠὲδοκίμησεν [*scil.* the orator Aristodemus], ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐτιμήθη ὡς εὖσεβῆ τρηήσας τὸν ἥρωα. K.-T. renders this as “and not only did he appreciate this but even honoured him as the reverent hero”. The correct translation would be “and he was not only highly esteemed but also honoured for the fact that he took care to present the hero [*scil.* Phoenix] as a reverent man” (*scil.* by changing Homer’s τῆ πιθόμην to τῆ οὐ πιθόμην).

(b) Philiscus T2, lines 5 f.: rather than “entwining with noble gifts among the living and dead” (which is more ponderous than incorrect), ἐσθλὰ / δῶρα καὶ ἐν ζωοῖς κάμφθιμένοισι τίτων would be better rendered as “honouring you with gifts considered noble among both the living and the dead”.

(c) Lycophron, fr. 2 K.-T.: ἀλλὰ κυλίκιον / ὕδαρες ὁ παῖς περιῆγε τοῦ πεντωβόλου is inaccurately translated as “the boy / passed around a cup of diluted wine”. It should rather be: “and the boy passed around a cup of wine of the five-obol variety, mixed with too much water” (the point being not that the wine is diluted, which is not particularly noteworthy, but that the addition of excessive water spoiled an otherwise fine and expensive drink).

(d) p. 65: Translating Diogenes Laertius IX 113, μετεδίδου δὲ τῶν τραγωδιῶν Ἀλεξάνδρῳ καὶ Ὀμήρῳ, as “he [*scil.* Timon of Phlius] wrote his tragedies together with...” is potentially misleading. The Loeb translates “he used to give the dramatists Alexander and Homer materials for their tragedies” and glosses as follows: “he collaborated with them partly by furnishing them with plots...”.

(e) p. 202: καὶ θέατρον ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις ᾠκοδόμησεν, αὐτὸς τ’ ἐν τῷ πεδίῳ μέγιστον ἀμφιθέατρον, περίοπτα μὲν ἄμφω τῇ πολυτελείᾳ. The last phrase is wrongly rendered as “visible from all sides and built at a great cost”. It should rather be: “both conspicuous/standing out in their lavishness” (or, with the Loeb, “both being spectacularly lavish”).

Finally, Chapter 4 (pp. 243–280) turns to “the staging of Hellenistic tragedies”. Although the title gives the impression that the chapter will expound on theatrical performance, its content is wider. Before turning to actual issues of staging (namely, the revamped Hellenistic theatre building and the new kind of mask and costume), the chapter summarises the current scholarly consensus on the issues of *chorēgia* and *agōnothesia* as well as on the production of “old” and “new” plays. The chapter closes with a section titled, rather vaguely, “Aspects of Hellenistic tragedy beyond the stage”. The section collects information on the variety of Hellenistic festivals that included theatrical performances and on the crucial factor of the *Dionysiakoi Technitai*. Chapter 4, like Chapter 1, which would have been best placed immediately before it, does not particularly enhance our understanding of the matters it deals with. Still the compilation of the relevant material under the light of recent bibliography remains helpful, especially for the non-specialist.

The book concludes with a useful appendix (pp. 281–288) cataloguing the great number of theatres constructed in the Hellenistic period and their individual characteristics (region, dating, orchestra diameter, *cavea* diameter, and audience capacity). The three indices (of Hellenistic tragedians, of historical figures and of plays) are also quite handy.

The synopsis above should suffice to show that K.-T.’s book, despite some significant drawbacks, may well go on to become a work of reference for the study of Hellenistic tragedy, at least

for the lay readership. Apart from the errors and shortcomings noted in the previous pages, the book's heavy-handed assertions of originality (a possible relic of its origins as a PhD thesis) provide the unsuspecting reader with a distorted image of the *status quaestionis*. Specifically, the author claims that her book comes to correct the misconception that tragedy in the Hellenistic period was in decline, and that it fills "a rather conspicuous gap" in scholarship (p. XIII). Nevertheless, by no means is this the prevailing opinion today; in fact, since the early 1990s hardly anybody believes anymore "that Greek drama ended as it began, in the fifth century" (p. XI). As for the bibliographical gap, this is in reality smaller than K.-T. makes it out to be. There are indeed not many comprehensive studies of Hellenistic tragedy; there is, however, a wealth of studies on individual authors and fragments. K.-T. makes ample use of these, and the fact alone that her discussions are often little more than a compendium of earlier opinions makes the bibliographical gap appear less wide. There are even some serious omissions in K.-T.'s bibliography, for example Theodoros STEPHANOPOULOS' seminal study of Moschion (*Archaïognosia* IX 1995/1996, pp. 137–153; X 1997, pp. 51–63), and Paolo CIPOLLA's exhaustive commentary on the "minor" satyrographers, which also covers Python, Sosithous and Lycophron (Amsterdam 2003). Even Pierluigi LANFRANCHI's definitive commentary on Ezekiel's *Exagogē* (2006) is acknowledged only sparsely (mostly in footnotes) and often not at all. It is somewhat disconcerting to see K.-T. emphasize her own originality in placing the *Exagoge* "against the background of other Hellenistic dramas" (p. XIII), when in fact LANFRANCHI had already done as much (and more).

Language and style is this book's biggest flaw: unfortunately, the English is sloppy and unidiomatic<sup>1</sup> and the discussions longwinded and often forced. One wonders, for example, whether protracted argumentation on self-evident or ultimately unprovable points is indeed necessary or profitable: see, for instance, K.-T.'s remarks on the Pleiad playwrights being highly educated and familiar with each other's work, or her assertion that "theoretical knowledge of stage performances would have *certainly* [my emphasis] affected the way [they] wrote their tragedies" (p. 15). One also wonders whether a longish digression on Aristotle's *Poetics* has a place in a section on Hellenistic theories of poetry. All in all, better editing, both on the part of the author and of Bloomsbury Academic, would have significantly increased the value of a book that remains, for all its shortcomings, a worthwhile contribution to scholarship.

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<sup>1</sup> A few random examples: p. XIV: "such papers are usually of only a contributory nature with regard to general research"; p. 7: "Hence drama was understood, more popular and thus more influential in society"; p. 83: "a heart-trending description"; p. 86: "the sentence was commented by the entrance of John Tzetzes himself"; p. 86: "date the premiere to have occurred"; p. 132 (and elsewhere): "the choir" instead of "the chorus"; p. 223: "Even if this is an original title, one nevertheless has conceded that scholars were right to have doubts"; p. 227: "...did not attract the attention of any of the excerptators [*sic*]".