
New additions to the Aris and Phillips series are always welcome, and the *Electra* of Jenny March is no exception. Clear and straightforward, and adopting a sensible ‘no-nonsense’ approach, it represents in particular a very good first point of entry into the Sophoclean play for the target audience, i.e. readers with little or a moderate amount of Greek, and readers with no Greek at all. As usual, an introduction is followed by the Greek text with facing English translation and a Commentary based on the translation.

The introduction begins with a most usefully concise summary of the pre-Sophoclean myth in literature. This is followed by a brief look at the characters and plot, and then ‘A Reading of the Play’. There will be no joy at all here for those who favour the ‘dark’ interpretation of this Sophoclean play, since March takes a hard-line ‘optimistic’ view. Thus Orestes is said not to feel ‘the slightest misgiving’ (12), Clytemnestra is ‘almost totally villainous’ (12), and so on, points of detail being further addressed in the Commentary. This reviewer actually favours March’s basic approach, and has little time for the excesses of the ‘dark’ reading. However, March’s own reading, in turn, seems excessively one-dimensional. It is all very well to say, for example, that ‘repaying evil for evil as well as good for good was accepted Greek morality’ (19), but in the case of Sophocles alone there are factors such as Odysseus’ attitude towards Ajax in the *Ajax* which would seem to require us to modify the picture.

The rest of the introduction contains March’s arguments for the earlier dating of the Euripidean *Electra* (an issue about which, of course, there can be no final judgement), after which the aims of the edition are outlined. I have some sympathy for March’s decision to omit analyses of lyric metres (she points readers elsewhere), but I wonder at the lack of any integrated discussion of staging or the uses of performance space: the brief comments scattered throughout the commentary are not really adequate. The select Bibliography is sound and representative. I just wonder about the inclusion of the author’s own *Cassell Dictionary of Classical Mythology*.
The translation, in accordance with the aims of the series, follows the Greek text closely and has no stylistic pretensions. In general, it seems more than satisfactory. Where it is a little ‘free’, a useful explanation and literal version is generally given in the Commentary. I do have some reservations, however, about some points of detail, especially where the author seems to be caught between fifth century BC and modern modes of expression. Thus the expression πρὸς Θεῶν while rendered in one place ‘for the gods’ sake’ (line 889), also appears as ‘for god’s sake’ (line 369) and then ‘I beg you’ (lines 1119, 1206, 1346, 1484). On the other hand, πρὸς γενεῖον is given literally as ‘by your beard’ (line 1208). It also seems somewhat bizarre to find βροτοὶ and ἀνθρώποι consistently translated as ‘men’, especially in the light of March’s pointed criticism (162) of the failings of certain male scholars in their articulation of a response to female characters. And while March is quite right to note in the Commentary (183) that ‘woe is me’ is now problematic as a translation, her own ‘I can’t bear it’ is ludicrously banal.

There are a number of other infelicities or inaccuracies in connection with the text and translation, a selection of which I offer here (these should not, however, be seen as detracting from the general high standard). Line 21: references such as ‘Raper ap. Kidd’ in the apparatus criticus will be meaningless to most readers of the book. Line 113: ‘those who are killed’ is better than March’s ‘those who die’ for τοὺς θνήσκοντας. Line 129: I’m not sure that ‘noble-hearted women’ is right for γενέθλα γενναίων. Line 226: ‘word of consolation’ is not adequate for πρόσφορον ἔπος (March gets the right sense in the literal translation in the Commentary). Line 288: ‘insults’ rather than the weaker ‘taunts’ is better. Line 479: Θάρσος is wrongly accented. Line 489: ‘with great swiftness and great might’ doesn’t capture the force of the Greek (again March brings the right sense out in the Commentary). Line 501: φάσμα may imply ‘omen’, but that’s not what it means. Line 521: ‘cruel’ isn’t quite right for θρασεία. Line 525: ‘holding forth about’ gives the wrong slant on πρόσχημα(α). Line 527: ‘I have no wish to’ isn’t right for οὐκ ἔνεστι. Line 553: ‘(before) I heard (such things from you)’ is weak for ἔξεκοντας(α). Line 598: ‘just as much as’ is needed rather than ‘more than’. Line 690: accent is left off βραβής. Line 830: despite Jebb and Kamerbeek, whom March follows, ‘do not cry out imprudently’ doesn’t seem right for ἀπεὶ μεγάλον μέγας αὐστης. After all, the chorus have only just themselves raised questions about divine justice (line 825).
'him in his sorrow' isn’t accurate for τον εν πένθει. Line 909: 'had that duty' should be 'has that duty'. Line 1061: ‘found’ should be 'find'. Line 1095: a more active word such as ‘enjoying’ is better than March’s ‘placed’ for βεβώσαν. Line 1184: should ‘whyever’ really be one word? Line 1403: the force of έσω isn’t brought out. Line 1419: ‘those who live’ isn’t adequate for οι κείμενοι. Line 1424: ‘how goes it’ sounds much too offhand in this tense context. Line 1429: ‘I am certain (I see)’ doesn’t capture ἐξ προδήλου, which means ‘in full view’.

We move now to the Commentary which is, in general, excellent. There are helpful references to other works of Greek literature, and a most judicious use of modern scholarship. March also engages intelligently from time to time with controversial textual points, but never gets bogged down in these. There are many helpful comments on particular subject matter issues, for example the topographical references at the start of the prologue, the sunlight (lines 17-19), Agamemnon’s tomb (lines 51-3), the urn (line 54), Orestes’ fictive death (lines 59-61), the competitors in the reported chariot race (lines 701-8), and Orestes’ statement straight after the matricide (line 1425). In the note on lines 62-6, March usefully links to Odysseus the idea of clever men being falsely reported dead. Her discussion of the urn scene is also illuminating. Now for the quibbles!

Lines 3-4: ‘Od. 344ff. should read Od. 13.344ff.’ Line 9: ‘φάσκειν, infinitive as imperative’ is not a helpful comment. At least a brief elaboration is required, as is given for the ethic dative (lines 17-19). More could be said too about the possible implications of φάσκειν, and the parallel at Philoctetes 1411 might be noted. Line 10: no sources are given for the various details of the myth (there is a similar lack in the note on lines 44-6). This contrasts markedly with the good sourcing for the information given on lines 5, 6-7, 7-8 and 9. Line 26-7: some explanation of the gnomic aorist is required. Lines 33-4: given that reference is made by March from time to time to German scholarship, a reference would have been useful (for the discussion of the oracle) to Sabine Vogt, in Orchestra (eds. Anton Bierl et al., Stuttgart, 1994), 97-104. Lines 36-7: further reference to the Odysseus paradigm in the ‘revenge by guile’ discussion would have been useful. Line 54: when mentioning a suggestion by Dunn, March doesn’t say whether or not she accepts it. The same applies, for example, to the suggestion of Seaford mentioned in the note on lines
The implication is that March is favourably disposed to such suggestions (because where she disagrees with a viewpoint, e.g. Segal’s on several occasions, she makes this clear in no uncertain terms). However, she needs to say whether she accepts them whole-heartedly, finds them plausible, or just finds them possible. Lines 86-120: a θρήνος από σκηνήν is not a ‘lament from the stage building’. Line 388: this seems to be March’s first acknowledgement of the ‘instantaneous aorist’ (there’s a brief elaboration in the note on line 668). This raises the question of why March does not consider ἔδοξα (line 79) and εἶπ ας (line 407), for example, in the same category. She needs to clarify the distinction she appears to be making. In general too, account might have been taken of Michael Lloyd’s thought-provoking article, ‘The Tragic Aorist’, Classical Quarterly 49 (1999), 24-45, although this may have appeared too late for March to consider.

Lines 836-8: the note on Amphiaraus would have been even more useful if March had explained exactly how it was that Eriphyle could ‘persuade’ her husband to join the expedition against Thebes when he knew the consequences of going. Moreover, the final sentence of the note (which borrows conspicuously from a sentence in Jebb’s note) is expressed rather oddly for a modern reader. We need something like ‘where, according to the locals, the earth had opened’ or ‘where the earth had supposedly opened’. Lines 1098-1287: it is, of course, notoriously difficult to give a satisfactory paraphrase of key sections of Aristotle’s Poetics, and March might have been better advised to leave well alone. As it is, there are a number of misleading statements in her note. Recognition and reversal are not exactly ingredients of a ‘satisfactory’ tragedy. Reversal of the situation is not exactly ‘demanded’ by Aristotle. Moreover, ‘a huge reversal for Electra from the deepest grief to the highest joy’ doesn’t, as an example, capture the focus of Aristotle’s point about reversal. In general, if March felt it necessary to refer to Aristotle in this context at all, it wouldn’t have taken many additional words to introduce the notions of ‘simple’ and ‘complex’ as his plot categories. Line 1164: something at least slightly more substantial on the periphrastic construction is required. Line 1216: it is decidedly unhelpful to quote Buxton’s eulogistic pronouncement on this use of γε, let alone without any supporting discussion (the quoting of another piece of highly subjective eulogising, this time by Walton, in the note on lines 1464-5, is also ill-advised). Line 1333: wrong accent on σώματα. Lines 1391-2: the note on δολιόπους should make the link with πολύπους, χαλικόπους...
etc. Lines 1413-14: I don’t think it is ‘preferable’ to take γενεά τά ιανα as referring to Electra, but that is, of course, a matter of opinion. Lines 1464-5: the Clytemnestra actor is now said to be playing the part of Aegisthus, whereas in the note on lines 1410-11 and in the Introduction (13) he was said to be the actor who also played Orestes.

Finally, mention must be made of the comments offered throughout the commentary in support of the ‘optimistic’ interpretation of the play. As already mentioned, March’s approach, even if basically justifiable, seems excessively hard-line. Thus, in the note on lines 580-3, the problem of a possible ongoing application of the retaliation law is glossed over. On line 807, Electra’s version of the tone of Clytemnestra’s departure is accepted without question. In line 1498, Aegisthus does not necessarily imply that the future evils of the house are dependent on his own death. The importance placed on Orestes’ final words (lines 1505-7) and the Chorus’ following comment seems excessive. Few people, I imagine, would argue that similar comments at the end of other Sophoclean plays in any way capture the complexities of the actions preceding them. In any case, the response of one particular modern audience (as described by March in the note on lines 1505-7) is an unreliable guide to fifth century concerns. Moreover, if everything is as cut and dried and as black and white as March would have it, this play would be virtually unique for Greek tragedy as a whole, let alone Sophocles in particular.

To conclude, this is, in general, a thoroughly level-headed, and attractively presented account of the Sophoclean Electra which will be helpful for students and which will have to be taken into serious consideration in further critical work on the play.

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