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Review of Agnieszka Kotlińska-Toma, Hellenistic Tragedy

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Agnieszka Kotlińska-Toma, *Hellenistic Tragedy: Texts, Translations and a Critical Survey. Bloomsbury Classical Studies Monographs*. London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015. Pp. xvi, 322. ISBN 9781472524218. \$120.00.

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Preview

Although poorly preserved, Greek tragedy of the Hellenistic period (323–31 BC) served an important role in culturally unifying the Hellenistic kingdoms and transmitting Greek theater to the Roman world. Kotlińska-Toma makes this literature available to a broader audience by collecting and translating the testimonia and fragments of Hellenistic tragedy and satyr drama, and by placing the fragments in their contexts as literature, as tools of royal, civic, and religious promotion, and as scripts for the stage. Her work is descriptive, relating what is known, and, often, not known about the tragedians, plays, and trends; this is an appropriate approach for a work primarily focused on presenting the texts themselves and providing background necessary to understand them. Occasionally, Kotlińska-Toma's attention to adjudicating carefully between the evidence of the fragments and later critical assumptions leaves one wanting her to provide her own judgment on an issue, especially since, when she does, it is well-considered. Part of the issue here is the underdeveloped state of critical thought on the topic generally, a state which the book aims to provide the tools to improve. One also misses an attempt to set Hellenistic tragedy within the broader critical tradition of Hellenistic poetry, which has developed rapidly in the last 20 years. Despite these missed opportunities the study delivers what it promises, a careful collection of the relevant texts, a descriptive overview of the nature of Hellenistic tragedy, and a summary of the stage conventions of the Hellenistic period, especially their differences from the Classical period.

Kotlińska-Toma organizes the study into four sections. First, an overview of tragedy in the Hellenistic period discusses main themes and problems:

transmission of the fragments, the witness of Hellenistic literary criticism, topics portrayed in the tragedies, meter and language, the role of the chorus, and the development of satyr drama. The second section presents the texts and translations of the fragments and testimonia. Kotlińska-Toma includes discussions of major fragments, and synopses of the individual tragedians and their contexts, contingent on sufficient evidence. Next is a section on Hellenistic tragedy with Biblical themes, primarily dealing with the *Exagoge* of Ezekiel, but also a few further fragments of presumably Jewish tragedies. The final section looks at evidence for the staging of Hellenistic tragedies, particularly developments from Classical conventions, including the funding of tragic performances, the convention of producing new and Classical (i.e., of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides) tragedies side by side, theater buildings, costumes, the proliferation of dramatic festivals, and the development of *technitai* associations. An appendix of Hellenistic theaters, a bibliography, and indexes of Hellenistic tragedians, historical figures, and plays complete the volume.

The first chapter outlines some important discussions surrounding Hellenistic tragedy. First Kotlińska-Toma explores the role of tragedy in the Hellenistic world: now not a specifically Athenian form, as in the Classical period, it became a way for communities throughout the Mediterranean to communicate their sense of Greek identity, a function also served by the cosmopolitan status of tragedians and the widespread construction of theaters. She also describes the sources of the fragments and testimonia and the problems they present for reconstructing the history of Hellenistic tragedy, especially that many of our book fragments come from Stobaeus, collected as aphorisms of universal wisdom, so that it is usually impossible to infer anything further about their sources. Similarly, information garnered from papyrus fragments, the *Suda* and inscriptions can be difficult to interpret, unreliable, or unrepresentative. Next Kotlińska-Toma surveys Hellenistic critical writing on tragedy, and compares it, particularly Horace's *Ars Poetica*, to what may be learned from the fragments. Given the paucity of the remains of Hellenistic tragedy, most points of comparison remain controversial, though she notes that our evidence rarely contravenes the critical strictures. A third subsection looks at tragic themes, that is, subject matter as represented by titles. Mythical themes, especially the Trojan and Theban sagas, dominate as they do for the Classical period, but Hellenistic tragedians tend to be more eclectic in their choices of myths, with titles such as *Adonis*, *Aeolus*, and *Aethlius* reflecting novel subjects.¹ Hellenistic tragedians were also more apt to treat historical subjects, both from earlier periods, e.g., a *Themistocles*, and contemporary, e.g., a *Cassandreians*. A section on language and meter discusses the metrical purity of the *Pleiad* tragedians and the relation of the tragedians' use of language to authors such as Callimachus and Apollonius (i.e., hapax legomena, linguistic inventiveness, and intertextual references). The chapter finishes with examinations of the evidence for the chorus in Hellenistic tragedy and the

nature of Hellenistic satyr plays. Each of the topics is meticulously documented, often collecting widely scattered evidence.

Chapter Two presents the fragments and testimonia of the Hellenistic tragedians. The tragedians are divided in four sections: the Pleiad, other tragedians mentioned in literature, other tragedians mentioned in inscriptions, and unassigned fragments. Within these sections, tragedians are arranged chronologically, as far as possible; the ordering of the poets of the Pleiad follows that of Schramm whose edition this work updates.² Kotlińska-Toma prints the Greek text of the *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (TrGF), where this is available, otherwise that of the original publication (e.g., of papyrus fragments and inscriptions), or other appropriate source. The numbering of the fragments in TrGF is helpfully cross-referenced. Kotlińska-Toma provides her own translations of all testimonia and fragments, omitting the portions of inscriptions or papyrus fragments where no continuous sense can be reconstructed. She also includes descriptive summaries of individual tragedies and tragedians; given the state of the evidence, these often restate what is known from the testimonia, which is still useful for non-specialists needing to orient themselves. Some discussions venture further contexts, e.g., known versions of the myth treated by the tragedy prior to the Hellenistic period, and inferences about how the tragedy's treatment may be innovative. Brief discussions of other relevant topics, such as the membership and chronology of the Pleiad, and the relationship of Lycophron's *Alexandra* to Hellenistic tragedy appear here also.

The third chapter collects the evidence for Hellenistic tragedy with Biblical themes in a similar fashion. The context, origin, and purpose of Ezekiel's *Exagoge* are subjects of considerable controversy among both classical and religious scholars; Kotlińska-Toma does not engage this scholarship in detail but outlines some of the main themes: the place of Jewish tragedies within the multi-cultural milieu of Hellenistic literature, the diversity of attitudes toward Hellenizing literature within Hellenistic Judaism, and, consequently, the difficulty of gauging contemporary reactions to the *Exagoge*, the likelihood of an Alexandrian context, and the problem of dating. The chapter also includes the testimonia and fragments of the *Exagoge* (all from Eusebius, with a single fragment also quoted in Clement, text from TrGF), and Kotlińska-Toma's translations. A substantial part of the chapter looks at the literary features of the tragedy, especially noting formal continuities and discontinuities with Classical tragedy, for example, the possible division into five acts, the violations of the unities of time and place, whether a chorus was used, and the question of staging. Kotlińska-Toma argues against a strong division between the *Exagoge* and "ordinary" Hellenistic tragedy, especially in view of our limited knowledge of the genre and the diversity observed in the extant fragments. The chapter concludes with three fragments and the testimony of a fourth play of presumed Jewish provenance. Although the first two fragments are attributed to Aeschylus and Sophocles respectively, their

language, meter, and subject matter suggest they are by Hellenistic Jewish writers similar to Ezekiel; the third fragment is unattributed, but assigned by some scholars to Ezekiel and similar to the *Exagoge* in style. Altogether the chapter helps incorporate the scholarship on Ezekiel and other Hellenistic Jewish tragedians with the broader context of Hellenistic tragedy.

In chapter four, Kotlińska-Toma examines the evidence for the staging of tragedies in the Hellenistic period. First she reviews how the financing of dramatic festivals changed from the *choregia*, the Athenian institution of liturgies, to *agonothesia*, where festivals were funded at public expense, or funded by the Hellenistic rulers who could use the dramatic productions for self-promotion. Next the practice of restaging fifth-century tragedies next to new tragedies appears for scrutiny. Especially noteworthy is the evidence that old tragedies may have been staged with considerable reduction of the cast, with a reduced or no chorus, or a single actor playing select scenes. Further Kotlińska-Toma examines the theater building, focusing on changes from the Classical stage; this serves as an overview of the subject, relying heavily on Vitruvius, but noting diversity of construction in actual theaters. The section on costumes follows a similar format. A final section on aspects of Hellenistic tragedy beyond the stage surveys the evidence for dramatic festivals in the Hellenistic period and for *technitai* associations.

The volume includes an appendix listing surviving and attested theaters of the Hellenistic period by location, including date of construction (when known), diameters of the orchestra and *cavea*, seating capacity, and other salient details (e.g., current state of preservation). A thorough bibliography is subdivided into editions of the texts of the Hellenistic tragedians, other editions of ancient texts, and general works. Short indexes of the Hellenistic tragedians, historical figures, and plays conclude the study.

Kotlińska-Toma's work makes a valuable contribution to a generally underserved segment of Greek literature by collecting the fragments and testimonia of Hellenistic tragedy in a single volume, including recent publications of papyri and inscriptions, and the fragments of Ezekiel's *Exagoge*, sometimes separated from the corpus as being of primarily religious interest. Her translations of the fragments and testimonia, and her summaries of critical trends promise to make this period of ancient drama accessible to a wider audience. The study does have its limitations, which are perhaps imposed by the state of the scholarship on Hellenistic tragedy generally. Most conspicuous is Kotlińska-Toma's reluctance to suggest connections with the comparatively well-developed critical discussion of other Hellenistic poets' engagement with their extra-literary contexts. She compares the metrical and linguistic practices of the Pleiad with that of Callimachus and Apollonius but does not extend this to suggesting further parallels with Alexandrian poets' roles as court poets or how they mediate between the Classical traditions and their Hellenistic contexts. Similarly,

Kotlińska-Toma is sometimes content to catalog opinions on cruxes without attempting to adjudicate or advance the discussion (e.g., on the dates, spelling, etc., of Philiscus, pp. 69–74). This is a matter of consistency, as Kotlińska-Toma elsewhere provides important insights that advance our understanding of the fragments (e.g., appealing to Hellenistic tastes for bourgeois and Herodotean themes to support a late date for the *Gyges* fragment, pp. 184–5).

Errors in the typesetting of the Greek text distract more than obscure understanding. I observed: missing spaces in δ' ἐν, p. 19, after γράψας, p. 111; iota adscript should be subscript in οὐδεμία, p. 41, in τῆ τραγικῆ, p. 50 (the press' practice is not consistent, it usually prints subscript throughout except for inscriptions and papyri, but with inconsistencies); πλεοῶς is printed for Πλειῶς, p. 49; there are inconsistent uses of quotation marks in the Greek text, pp. 42–3, 62; angle brackets misapplied, p. 92; square brackets misapplied, p. 147; stray angle bracket, p. 195; apostrophe misprinted as end-quotation mark (i.e., ›) after τεκοῦσ, p. 95, and after ἄπ, p. 136, before παύριον and πιστάτην, p. 205; after τ, p. 239; πνεῦμ' is marked with a breve not a circumflex, p. 125; κείνος is printed as κε, p. 134; ἱεροῖς is printed with a medial instead of a final sigma, p. 161; numbers γ' and δ' are inconsistently rendered, p. 168; intrusive open-quotation mark in μέχρῖς, p. 207; and a stray 8 before ἄντικρυς, p. 236. None of these pose a serious hindrance to understanding, but special diligence might be expected in a work focused on the Greek texts.

Notes:

1. Kotlińska-Toma overlooks the *Aeolus* of Euripides (TrGF F 13a-41) in claiming Lycophron's title is unique (p. 31). Similarly she omits mention of the *Adonis* of Dionysius of Syracuse (TrGF 76 F 1) (early 4th cent.) in discussing the importance of the theme in Hellenistic Tragedy (p. 31). She associates the *Adonis* and *Themistocles* of Philiscus of Aegina (TrGF 89 T 5) with Philiscus of Corcyra (pp. 27, 31, 67, 69-71).

2. Schramm, F. 1929. *Tragicorum Graecorum hellenisticae, quae dicitur, aetatis fragmenta [praeter Ezechielem] eorumque de vita atque poesi testimonia collecta et illustrate*. Diss., Monasterii Westfalorum.

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