

SUBJECT REVIEWS

Greek literature

In 2008 the first annual Go Topless Day was organized in the US. In 2012 the #FreeTheNipple campaign was launched, prefacing Lina Esco's 2014 film of the same name. Bruce Willis' daughter Scout went shopping topless; Jean-Paul Gaultier sent a male and female model down the catwalk with their nipples on show and wearing the Free the Nipple slogan; and Miley Cyrus flashed Jimmy Kimmel. These movements argue, as they say on the tin, that it should be acceptable by legal and cultural norms for women to bare their breasts in public. The question is one of equality and bodily autonomy, and the movement is a way of making women's voices heard. In our current fraught times, these voices are angry. At International Women's Day just this year, women from the FEMEN activist group marched topless in Paris to protest against the 'Fascist Epidemic' (these words painted on their chests). In their mission statement, FEMEN declare that 'Our Mission is Protest! Our Weapon are bare breasts' – and they profess themselves to be a 'modern incarnation of fearless and free Amazons'.

But what do we make of the baring of breasts in a context in which women's voices are *not* heard? When the story is 'constructed wholly by men' (McClure 21), and when the breasts in question may never have existed in the first place? Laura McClure's book *Phryne of Thespiae: Courtesan, Muse, and Myth* is the latest addition to the *Women in Antiquity* series,¹ and it provokes compelling questions about separating fantasy from fact, and the difficulties of excavating women's lived experiences from the male-dominated historical record. It raises important issues for the feminist scholar: 'how do we recuperate a life entangled with, and impossible to differentiate from, a tradition that fantasized and fetishized Phryne without becoming complicit in the narrative?' (27)

The book culminates in the key chapter 5 on the prosecution of Phryne and her trial for *asebeia*, that is disrupted by her disrobing. The sources differ on the details (did she disrobe herself? Did the orator for the defence do it for her?) but, however it unfolded, this story captured the imagination of artists, particularly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on. Indeed McClure's study of the prosecution and the disrobing is particularly fascinating in the way she manages to disentangle the classical context from the French artistic reception. Only in the modern era, McClure argues, did the baring of Phryne's breasts become voyeuristic. Jean-Léon Gérôme in his influential painting *Phryne before the Areopagus* of 1861 was 'sexualising and objectifying the female hetaerae for 19th century male viewers and the lucrative art market that catered to them'. (156) In its ancient setting, by contrast, the disrobing was 'a form of emotional appeal intended to elicit sympathy in the jurors' (124); 'the gesture served as a rhetorical tactic' (149). Whilst I'm not convinced that we can move away from the erotic force here, particularly as the majority of the ancient sources refer to the impact of Phryne's Helen-like beauty or

¹ *Phryne of Thespiae: Courtesan, Muse, and Myth*. By Laura McClure. New York/Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. xii + 201. Paperback £22.99, ISBN: 978-0-19-758085-1.

her lovely body, I do think there's value in recognizing the power in the disrobing act. Whether the jurors felt pity or they were just stunned into submission by some great breasts, the disrobing did disrupt the trial and perhaps then it encapsulated, rather than undermined, Phryne's position as a 'powerful and socially consequential woman whose wealth and connections helped to shape the society in which she lived' (blurb). McClure helps us peel back these layers of reception and interpretation, tracking back to the 'real' Phryne and (perhaps) the power within the act.

Some scholars argue that Phryne is purely a literary construct. McClure, however, believes there is a kernel of historical truth to these stories, and that the prosecution is in fact the most reliable strand of Phryne's biography. This book attempts to 'unsettle contemporary views ... by demonstrating that key aspects of her ancient biography could have plausibly had some basis in reality' (such as Phryne's association with the Cnidian Aphrodite, as well as the trial; 153). The methodological approach McClure offers is one of the 'subjunctive': what could or would have been; what was likely, possible or probable. There are, of course, limitations to this, not least that there is an equal possibility of counter-arguments and refutations. But this doesn't detract from the value of an approach that seeks 'to foreground possible aspects of her agency by considering her self-fashioning, or the ways she could have helped to shape her own reception' (27). We can't, of course, argue that Phryne was baring her breasts in the name of gender equality; that she was making a political protest; or that she was channelling the Amazons. We might, however, find compelling agency in a story and a persona that a marginalized woman who came from poverty had a hand in forming.

A book that really does make women's voices heard is Andromache Karanika's *Wedding, Gender, and Performance in Ancient Greece*, that 'uncovers the poetics of nuptial performances and how they shaped ancient Greek literature' (1).² Much as Karanika's 2014 book *Voices at Work* compellingly argued for a backdrop of female-driven work songs that became encoded in literature, so does this latest volume show that there is a tradition of wedding songs that became embedded in poetry from epic to lyric and beyond. This is an important revelation in and of itself, that gives a new perspective on many canonical passages. Take, for instance, Helen and the *teichoskopia* in *Iliad* 3. Karanika uncovers features of wedding language here, including *makarismos* and *eikasia*, and suggests therefore that we are looking at a round-up of Helen's suitors, much like in Cyclic epic and the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* (24). Another interesting observation is that when Telemachus goes to Sparta in *Odyssey* 4 or Odysseus to the court of the Phaeacians in *Odyssey* 7, the image of the high-roofed room shining like the sun and the moon comes from a nuptial context of the groom's entrance (222). Karanika also explores the *Dios apatē* (deception of Zeus) in *Iliad* 14 as an early Greek *Ars Amatoria*. Nuptial elements include the dressing and adorning and Hypnos as a groom-to-be (236), and we might be seeing hints of a didactic genre aimed at a female audience (with other elements thrown in, such as the 'burlesque' in Zeus' catalogue of conquests, 244).

But Karanika's examination takes us beyond wedding language and imagery, to what wedding songs actually *do*. She argues that Greek wedding songs do not fully support the idea of the rite of passage, looking to the happily ever after. On the contrary, they emphasize not the future but the past and, surprisingly, foreground *nostos*: a return to the

² *Wedding, Gender, and Performance in Ancient Greece*. By Andromache Karanika. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. xvi + 287. 13 illustrations. Hardback £99, ISBN: 978-0-19-888457-6.

bride's former home and self. It is the natal ties that are prioritized, above the marital. This theme is central to Chapter 3 which considers elopement, metamorphosis (the story of Mestra who shape-shifts to avoid marriage in the *Catalogue of Women* would have been a good addition here), and marriage dysphoria. This chapter conveys the complexity of female *nostos*. Chryseis in *Iliad* 1 provides a rare example of a woman achieving *nostos* – and yet, her story is problematized in tragedy. The tragic undertones of longing for *nostos* or thwarted return are played out in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, which Karanika reads in terms of projected trauma. The list of Persephone's companion nymphs, for example, is read by Karanika through the lens of trauma theory, as naming people from one's past at a critical moment is a way of giving time to process trauma. In another unexpected turn, Karanika then goes on to link wedding songs with children's songs within the frame of trauma. Just as the nuptial is not about the happily ever after, so the ludic is not as playful as it might seem (just think of 'Ring a Ring o' Roses').

Wedding, Gender, and Performance connects most clearly with *Voices at Work* in Karanika's discussions of weaving and spinning. She explores 'gendered temporality' through weaving and most notably its interruptions, for instance considering Sappho fragment 102 as a wedding song in which the interruption of weaving indicates the separation of mother and daughter (89). And she differentiates weaving from spinning in that the latter 'authorizes female speech in literature' (185). In the *Odyssey*, the spinning women Helen, Arete, and Penelope are all married queens, navigating complex situations in their homes. Their spinning 'authorizes an intersection of motherhood and bridal presence' (191), epitomizing the meeting point between natal and marital ties. Karanika picks up on this in her discussion of Erinna's *Distaff*, where wedding song converges with lament. The distaff is 'a reference to closed networks that had their jargon and could apply their own authoritative speech' (202), and this is where the kind of literary excavation this book offers can uncover women's words and their coded channels of communication. Provokingly, Karanika reads Baucis' death as not literal but as representing marriage. We have moved far away from the happily ever after – and it is arguably at this furthest point that we are compelled to take note of women's lived experience. Karanika traces the dark undertones of ostensibly optimistic genres, showing that, when we listen to women's voices, they are (even more often than we might think) laced with grief, regret, and trauma.

In *Teaching Classics Worldwide: Successes, Challenges and Developments*, Steven Hunt and John Bulwer have put together an immensely illuminating volume.³ With a whopping sixty-eight chapters covering five continents, this was a monumental task. It cannot, of course, be exhaustive, but it is fantastic to see so many countries represented ('and if there are some missing it is not for want of trying', 1). For each country, an author presents topics such as the educational framework, teacher training, methodological or pedagogical approaches to Classics, historical issues, and current trends. I found it incredibly helpful to see these diverse school systems set out clearly and Classics set within these contexts. All too often we misunderstand the discipline and misrepresent international colleagues simply because we don't know enough about others' frameworks. I even harbour a secret hope that colleagues in Scottish universities

³ *Teaching Classics Worldwide: Successes, Challenges and Developments*. Edited by Steven Hunt and John Bulwer. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. Pp. xii + 468. 30 black and white illustrations. Paperback £26.99, ISBN: 978-1-350-42763-1.

will take Alex Imrie's detailed chapter on Classics in Scotland as their cue to stop referring only to English A-levels, rather than their Scottish equivalent.

The introduction by the editors raises a set of persistent issues, despite the obvious difficulties of summarizing this sprawling volume. Challenges include: difficulty in recruitment and retention of pupils; the dogged pressure to justify the subject; the double-edged sword that is the curriculum; and of course the elitism and classism with which Classics is entangled. The volume is concerned with Classics teaching in both schools and universities, with a useful final chapter by Stephen Hunt on 'Informal and Online Learning' that extends the scope to extramural contexts. And it is the relationship between these settings that the editors are particularly insightful in capturing. They write:

'The chapters show that where there is cooperation, collaboration and understanding between the two sectors [- universities and schools -] there seems to be more success in promoting Classical Studies and in recruiting and retaining students. If universities regard Classics teaching at school primarily as a preparation for university studies, such collaboration is likely to be difficult to achieve. If the universities recognize that not all the young people following Classics courses at school will go on to be specialists, then collaboration to ensure that all those young people take away a positive memory of their studies is more likely to occur, and then perhaps a good number of them will pursue their studies further.' (3)

Conveying a passion for the subject should be the priority for all university outreach activities, rather than just trying to get students in the door. And true two-way collaboration is paramount. The UK Class in Classics Report 2024 recommended more outreach (and particularly in state schools) but also 'Greater communication between schools and universities. Universities should work directly with schools, finding out what they need.'⁴ As this volume shows, this kind of cooperation is not UK-specific but at the heart of the successful promotion of Classics. And despite the challenges, this book often sounds notes of optimism. Aisha Khan-Evans ends her England chapter with 'reasons to be cheerful' (241), highlighting, for instance, work being done to push for a more diverse and inclusive Classics by groups such as the Network for Working-Class Classicists and the neurodiversity network Asterion.⁵ Sometimes these hopeful moments come through officially sanctioned channels in the form of curriculum reform or political movements. More often, however, they are down to individuals or groups of individuals who push to change the tide. Engagement with Classics is global and multifaceted. It is also tenacious, questioning, and self-aware. Many of the chapters in this book speak of tradition. But just as many, if not more, attest to Classics as innovative and adaptable. Classics isn't always about the Catholic church, or traditional values, or right-wing politics, racial distinction, colonial oppression (though the volume touches on all of these factors). It can also be a vehicle of change and challenge. At least, it should be.

⁴ <https://www.workingclassclassics.uk/2024/02/25/uk-class-in-classics-report-2024/>

⁵ Full disclosure: the former was set up by me and my husband, the latter by my sister. I like that our family constitute a reason to be cheerful, though I'm not sure our parents would always agree!

A ‘fascinatingly complex’ challenge (2) is central to Alexandra Hardwick’s debut monograph *Off-Stage Groups in Athenian Drama*.⁶ Literary characters are always encountered through a lens of representation: that of the author. But what happens when we multiply that lens? What happens when we encounter characters not at one remove, but at two? Off-stage groups, such as assemblies, armies or juries, are portrayed by an author *and* portrayed by characters. As such, their depiction showcases a wide array of different perspectives.

Hardwick doesn’t come at this topic through modern theory, but rather from ancient sources. The sources used to establish the methodological framework in Chapter 1 are prose texts, contemporary or near contemporary with surviving Athenian drama: Herodotus, Thucydides, the Attic orators, Plato, the Old Oligarch, the Sophists. So whilst the analysis of drama takes its cue from outside the genre, it remains an emic approach as Hardwick is interested in ‘how prose texts *imagine* groups’ (19). This doesn’t mean that studies in modern group psychology are entirely neglected, however, as ‘At times, the phenomena depicted in ancient Greek texts can best be described using modern psychological vocabulary’ (6), from contagion to compliance and conformity. From fifth-century Greek prose, Hardwick finds that groups are often presented as collective psychological units, thinking and making decisions together. That there is a belief that individuals think differently when they are in a group. That groups are frequently depicted as ill-suited to making decisions, particularly because they are driven by emotion (anger, fear). That groups appear vulnerable to being controlled or swayed.

Hardwick also explores the ‘soundscape’ of off-stage groups, through the idea of *thorubos*, noise or uproar. Whilst in political thought and historiography *thorubos* is negative, the orators see it as a double-edged or neutral phenomenon. *Thorubos* is set alongside rumour as collective common knowledge, the two forces having a parallel power for group thinking and decision-making. In chapter 3 Hardwick explores Aristophanes’ soundscapes, which go beyond *thorubos* by extending the vocabulary of the off-stage voice, creating ‘a unique soundscape which simultaneously implies stupidity and animalistic incoherence’ (120), especially in *Knights* in which the orators and the *demos* are both presented as questionable. In *Knights*, of course, *Demos* is actually personified, distorting the divide between individual and group and bringing the off-stage group into the on-stage action. Yet Aristophanes’ plays are compelling not only for the way in which they ‘highlight contrasts between individual and collective decision-making’, but also for their capacity to ‘anatomize democratic politics in a way that exposes it to consideration from under-represented viewpoints’ (121).

These under-represented viewpoints crop up at various points in the book. In chapter 4, Hardwick moves away from formalized, off-stage group decision-making and surveys the more amorphous groups whose role is not clearly defined: the ‘populations’. The plays ‘exploit the difficulty of verifying claims made about a population we cannot see’ (16). The views of these populations may be misrepresented or unreliably reported, their amorphous nature emphasizing the fundamental problem with accessing characters at two removes. But their force is felt. They are at times a

⁶ *Off-Stage Groups in Athenian Drama*. By Alexandra Hardwick. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. viii + 253. Hardback £76, ISBN: 978-0-19-888722-5.

‘watchful presence’ (as in *Oedipus Tyrannus*), holding characters accountable; at other times indicative of political dysfunction in which the elites are *not* held accountable (as in *Persians* or *Agamemnon*, 16). They might convey issues against or relevant to democracy (like Sophocles’ Theban plays); they might be a local population that is powerless, as in the chapter’s Aeschylean examples.

In chapter 6, Hardwick gives voice to the female off-stage groups that are cast as marginal by default. We see stereotypes of female transgression, from bacchant revellers to man-killing foreign women, military gatherings to democratic assemblies – but at the same time these stereotypes are frequently defied or undercut. This uncertainty arguably makes the female groups all the more threatening and incomprehensible. In this chapter, Hardwick avoids the obvious examples (of Danaids, Lemnian women, Amazons), choosing instead to explore the complexities of female groups that ‘are made weird, counter-intuitive, and transgressive by ensuring that no preconceived label or category can properly fit them, even labels that stereotypically fit female transgressors’ (213). And this is where drama diverges from prose. The latter is often more binary in its portrayal of groups, their power dynamics and decision-making processes, whereas the former can use a variety of characters and voices, in addition to that of the author, to both articulate *and* question stereotypes.

This book is impressively detailed and nuanced, and therefore I do it an injustice by schematizing its conclusions. However, one point that emerges from the accumulation of examples is that the playwrights may have used the *location* of off-stage groups to navigate certain political realities. Thebes is a place of these amorphous populations, through which democratic issues can be debated. Argos, most notably, provides ‘a space for developing alternative perspectives on Athenian-style democracy’ (88). Further, chapter 5 examines the army as a group – a group that is often like a *polis*, or (because of its dislocated nature) depicted as political without being a straightforward single *polis*. And this group, Hardwick argues, can provide a space for exploring the darker sides of group politics. Distanced from the Athenian *demos*, much like a setting in Argos, the Achaean army can ‘explore the idea of the *demos* as a potentially violent or dangerous body’ (185).

Though Hardwick’s book takes its methodological cue from prose, and some of its case studies from comedy, the core of its analysis centres on tragedy. It is to a cluster of recent publications on Greek tragedy that I now briefly turn. New to the Hackett Classics Series is Deborah Roberts’ neat volume of Aeschylus’ *Persians* (following other Aeschylean volumes, such as Peter Meineck and Helene Foley’s *Oresteia*, 1998, and Roberts’ own *Prometheus Bound*, 2012).⁷ It provides a verse translation of the play, accompanied by an efficient introduction, helpful notes, and additional translations of passages from Herodotus relevant to the events of the play. At eighty pages and £15, this is a handy book for teachers and students, and the translation’s impressive set pieces are well suited to performance.

⁷ *Aeschylus Persians*. By Deborah H. Roberts. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2024. Pp. xl + 80. Paperback \$15, ISBN: 978-1-64792-180-4.

New to Aris and Phillips Classical Texts is the much-anticipated edition, translation, introduction, and commentary of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* by Edith Hall.⁸ Whereas Fraenkel's 1950 edition of the play runs to three volumes with its wealth of textual comment, Hall necessarily gives only brief information about variants and emendations. But her editorial choices are incisive, as the examples she gives in her Editorial show: 'I have preferred to let Clytemnestra (a) wonder publicly about Geryon's nether regions [l. 870] and (b) envisage Cassandra rubbing/rubbed by the sailors 'masts' [ll. 1442–3]. There are other arguments, of more linguistic kinds, for and against these readings. But the central question is whether Clytemnestra is explicit about the bottoms of both Geryon and Cassandra. It is crucial to bear in mind that textual criticism is sometimes an ideological process.'⁹

The introduction covers the key areas a reader would expect and need: political and historical context, plot and structure, style and language. Still other sections jump out as going beyond standard coverage. A section on Sensory Theatre (57–62), for instance, responds to the sensory turn in literary studies more broadly. It includes a translation of the ancient 'hypothesis' note prefixed to papyrus copies of *Agamemnon* that conveys the visual impact of the tragedy and how it elicits *ekplexis* (terrified amazement). Hall explores this visual impact in terms of a move from a vertical to a horizontal axis over the course of the play, as well as the role that eyes play in the emotional communication between characters. This is combined with references to taste (including 'a cluster of disturbing images about bodily ingestion', 59) and smell ('most references to smell are sinister', 60), heightening the audience's sensory experience of the tragedy. Hall recognizes too that physicality is key to drama, noting the 'abundance of references to hands', as well as the significance of 'Feet, kicking and trampling' – Nancy Worman's book *Tragic Bodies* would have been a valuable addition to the bibliography here.¹⁰ The aural is then picked up in the section Soundscapes, Voices, Vocality (70–1), which resonates with Hardwick's study in terms of the 'secondary soundscape of quoted voices, individual and collective', where 'Rumour and expressions of resentment swirl in this city-state' (70).

And new to the 'Green and Yellows' is William Allan and Laura Swift's commentary on Euripides' *Bacchae* (complementing Richard Seaford's 1996 edition for Aris and Phillips).¹¹ Given that 'textual criticism is sometimes an ideological process', as Hall puts it, and commentary is necessarily selective and therefore subjective, it follows that even landmark editions might be revised or superseded. As with Fraenkel, so with Dodds (1944). Allan and Swift in their Preface note that scholarly thinking on central themes in the play, such as gender and sexuality or Greek religion, has changed substantially since Dodds' 1944 edition and indeed the 1960 revised edition – arguably,

⁸ *Aeschylus Agamemnon*. By Edith Hall. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2024. Pp. x + 548. Hardback £95, ISBN: 978-1-80085-628-8.

⁹ E. Hall, 'How Low Will Clytemnestra Go? On Editing Aeschylus', *The Edithorial*, 26 October 2024, <https://edithorial.blogspot.com/2024/10/>

¹⁰ N. Worman, *Tragic Bodies: Edges of the Human in Greek Drama* (Bloomsbury, New York: 2020).

¹¹ *Euripides Bacchae*. Edited by William Allan and Laura Swift. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. xiii + 349. Paperback £24.99, ISBN: 978-1-108-94838-8.

and particularly in terms of gender studies, also since Seaford 1996. The introduction is therefore rich in recent scholarship, reflecting current thinking – for instance, ‘The study of Greek religion has in recent years seen the return of belief as a fundamental category, and with it a questioning of the assumption that in Greek (and Roman) religion ritual always came first and belief second’ (25–6) – Discuss! This is another immensely teachable book, which can bring the *Bacchae* into the classroom in one accessible, thorough, balanced, and timely treatment.

Reaching beyond the plays themselves, Matthew Wright in *Euripides and Quotation Culture* explores the ways in which Euripidean tragedy was received and quoted in antiquity.¹² Crucially, Wright treats reception from the point of creation, in arguing that Euripides deliberately built quotability into his plays, actively participating in ‘quotation culture’. Quotation, quotability, and ancient reception were addressed in Homeric and Hesiodic studies in a set of books around a decade ago, including Hugo Koning’s *Hesiod: the Other Poet*, Richard Hunter’s *Hesiodic Voices* and *The Measure of Homer*, Helen Van Noorden’s *Playing Hesiod*, and my own *Hesiod’s Works and Days: How to Teach Self-Sufficiency* (indeed Wright invited me to speak at a fantastic conference on ‘Classical Literature and Quotation Culture’ he organized in Exeter in 2016). Wright’s work is pivotal in showing how these mechanisms operate in the case of Euripides: the second most-quoted Greek author after Homer and, he argues, one of the most readily (and intentionally) quotable.

This book offers case studies from a wide range of contexts in which Euripides was quoted, from the fifth century BC to the third century AD: from social settings such as symposia, classrooms, and lawcourts, to literary genres such as drama, oratory, philosophy, and letters. It shows that ‘Euripides’ plays were subject to endless transformation’ (4), and that ancient readers were ‘eclectic’ (14), cherry-picking excerpts, detaching them from their context, and reimagining them in diverse ways. From its first chapter it also neatly shows, as Hesiod’s *Works and Days: How to Teach Self-Sufficiency* also strives to do, that maxims operate on a continuum of quotation, in that often ‘The tragedian has packaged an old truism in an attractive, memorable format’. I refer to this as the ‘Hesiod stamp’, lending traditional wisdom the authority of the poet – Wright shows that the Euripides’ stamp had weight behind it, too.

LILAH GRACE CANEVARO

University of Edinburgh, UK

l.g.canevaro@ed.ac.uk

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¹² *Euripides and Quotation Culture*. By Matthew Wright. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. Pp. vi + 213. Hardback £85, ISBN: 978-1-350-44117-0.