

LITERATURE

BOWEN (A.J.) *Ed. Aeschylus. Suppliant Women*. Oxford: Aris and Phillips, 2013. Pp. 374. £50. 9781908343789.

There has long been a gap in the market for a fresh new edition, with English-language translation, of Aeschylus' strange tragedy *Suppliant Women*, in which 50 exotic Egyptian maidens plead for asylum at a seaside sanctuary near Argos and narrowly escape being abducted by their Egyptian cousins. As Bowen writes in his foreword, it will never be the first Greek play to which anyone is introduced, 'but it surely deserves more attention'. [add page reference] Indeed, its highly topical theme – the arrival in Europe of refugees from North Africa – has resulted in an international revival of the play in the professional performance repertoire recently, a development that is likely to continue.

The reader interested in *Suppliant Women* has hitherto depended on the unwieldy three-volume Copenhagen edition by H. Friis Johansen and E.W. Whittle (1980). But much has subsequently happened in classical studies of profound relevance to *Suppliant Women* – not only the 'performance turn' in classical drama studies, of which Bowen does take some heed, but fast-paced developments in our understanding of ethnicity, gender, Presocratic thought and civic ideology and ritual, which fare rather less well at his hands. But of more concern than his minimal academic engagement with current scholarship in such closely-allied fields is the apparent confusion about the educational status, needs and intentions of the assumed reader. This edition is pitched at far too high a level for undergraduates unless they have arrived with A-Level Greek at university; on the other hand, its translation is so stodgy, unnatural and cacophonous that it would repel anyone interested in staging the play today or just in researching Aeschylus' cultural significance. This is a shame, because there are some superb volumes amongst the Aris and Phillips library of Greek tragedy, including Judith Mossman's *Medea* (2011), A.J. Podlecki's *Prometheus Bound* (2005), Alex Garvie's *Ajax* (1998) and Martin Cropp's *Iphigenia in Tauris* (2000): it is telling how little Bowen's commentary cross-refers to such distinguished predecessors in the very series to which he is contributing. It is also paradoxical, because Bowen is by no means unaware of the power of ancient Greek drama in performance and

in inspiring young scholars; he tells us that he first conceived the idea of writing this commentary when directing *Suppliant Women* for the JACT Summer School in Ancient Greek at Bryanston in 2005.

He has chosen, however, to turn the volume into a vehicle for a brand new Greek text. He has clearly spent a great deal of time devising it himself after studying the text of the play in a facsimile of Mediceus Laurentianus 32.9 and comparing it with Martin West's revised Teubner Aeschylus of 1998, with which he is often in agreement. But the text-critical emphasis means that more than a third of each page of the Greek consists of his substantial *apparatus criticus*, which is simply not appropriate to the ethos of the Aris and Phillips series. He occasionally prints his own suggestions, for example in attributing lines 204–05 to a KORYPHAIOS (a speaking entity unattested in the manuscripts of tragedy and arguably an invention of post-Renaissance scholars uncomfortable with the very idea of the ancient mass *Sprechchor*).

The introduction contains some useful aids to approaching and understanding the play, including a detailed synopsis, an account of the sources of the myth and sections on the props, costumes and characters. But there is far more space, proportionately, devoted to discussion of the dating of the play, from several angles, in dense, technical prose, clearly aimed at advanced Aeschylean scholars rather than the classroom or theatre director. An Aris and Phillips edition is simply not the place for an in-depth discussion of the gaps in *POxy. 2256.3* or of stylistic statistics, especially since it takes Bowen 15 pages to conclude that about 463 BC, for decades now the generally accepted date of the play, is in fact probably correct. There are also several pages of jargon-rich discussion of metre. The problem of what happened in the other plays of Aeschylus' Danaid tetralogy also takes up more room than it needs, since almost all the questions are unanswerable; much of that space would usefully be replaced by the sort of discussion of themes, images and socio-logical issues in the text which *does* survive and which interest students and theatre practitioners today. The absence of any discussion of the reception of the play, even in performance, is another problem which some reflection on the contents of the more successful previous volumes in the series might have encouraged Bowen to correct.

The stilted prose translation itself is strongly

reminiscent of 19th-century cribs, with few concessions made either to Aeschylus' sinuous poetry or to the idioms of contemporary English. Part of the Suppliants' opening anapaests reads: 'In leaving that land of Zeus, which marches with Syria, we are in flight, not because of any civic banishment for exile by vote of the citizens, but in self-created husband-flight'. An important speech by Pelasgus begins: 'And I have pondered, but there's a vessel coming aground here – starting a big war with the one lot or the other is totally inevitable – and it's a vessel well pegged, drawn tight as it were by its ship's twisters'. I don't want to labour the point: both Aeschylus and modern students simply deserve much better than this.

The best part of the volume is the lemmatized commentary, which contains useful introductions to individual sections and is lexicographically informative. The aesthetic, religious and psychological dimensions are rather over-shadowed by the linguistic emphasis, but the parallels with passages in Homer and Apollonius in particular are helpful and illuminating. But even the commentary falls between stools. It does not enrich our appreciation of the play as a literary and theatrical artefact, in a mysterious and distinctive poetic register, which can be interpreted in multifarious ways. But neither does it contain enough that is new in terms of traditional philology to make it compulsory reading for specialists. The Aris and Phillips format has much to offer a world in which people learn ancient languages later and faster than they used to, and in which ancient plays are attracting unprecedented interest amongst theatregoing communities with no ancient Greek language whatsoever. Let us hope future volumes make a better job of exploiting that distinctive and popular format than Bowen's.

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