Introduction: The Reception of Aeschylus

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In recent years, there have been a number of books either focused on or including discussions of various receptions of Aeschylus on stage. Given the rich modern production history of Aeschylus’ Oresteia, especially, but also Persians, this should be no surprise. But Aeschylus’ reception is much broader than its re-performance on the stage and this volume seeks to explore some of those spaces that have not been as widely discussed, such as Aeschylus’ reception in political philosophy, film, literature, in translation, and as school texts. This is not a comprehensive volume—such a thing would fill thousands of pages—nor is it structured to give an overview of the reception of individual plays—there are only seven, if Prometheus Bound is included (as it is here). Instead, this volume offers a combination of explorations of receptions and acts of reception. The idea behind it is to provide some insights into the myriad ways that Aeschylus has been received into the world since his first productions in the early 5th century BCE. Ideally, the chapters here included will inspire thoughts of other receptions of Aeschylus and perhaps even further acts.

One of the key elements to understanding the reception of Aeschylus is to understand that it is not just his plays that have a reception—the figure of Aeschylus himself does as well. Thus, this introduction does not include a “life of Aeschylus” section as might be expected in such a volume. Rather, various

1 See, for example, Macintosh, Michelakis, Hall, and Taplin 2005, as well as chapters by Hall and Van Steen in Bridges, Hall, and Rhodes 2007, and various chapters in Hall, Macintosh, and Wrigley 2004. Books in the Duckworth Companions series on individual plays also contain chapters on the reception of those plays.

2 The Oxford Archive of Performance of Greek and Roman Drama Database (http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/) is an invaluable catalog for reception on the stage.

3 Aeschylus features or appears in numerous chapters in Vance and Wallace, most prominently in Chapters 11 (Macintosh on re-performance), 13 (Mays on Coleridge), 15 (Webb on Byron), 17 (Hurst on Barrett Browning) 20 (Prins on R. Browning), and 24 (Pite on Hardy).

4 There is an excellent recent special issue of Aevum Antiquium NS 12–13 (2012–2013) edited by Maria Pia Pattoni on Prometheus (Prometeo) that includes essays on [Aeschylus’] Prometheus’ reception from Roman to contemporary periods that includes reception in literature and philosophy. Also, Constantinidis 2016 focuses not only on stage productions, but translation. The chapters by Hanink and Uhlig gives an overview of material that serves as the subject for the first half of this book.
chapters, particularly those that deal with Aeschylus in antiquity, address the constructedness of Aeschylus the poet and person as part of his reception.

The contributions to the volume are divided into two parts, Pre-Modern and Modern, and in general chronological order within each section. Part I, Pre-Modern Receptions, begins with Aeschylus in Sicily (David Smith), a reception that began in his own lifetime, and then returns to Athens to meet Aeschylus as he appeared on the comic stage (David Rosenbloom). Dana Munteanu next takes up the issue of Aristotle’s reception of Aeschylus and contests the often assumed position that he did not care much for the playwright. The fourth chapter takes us into the Hellenistic period (Sebastiana Nervegna), while George Harrison argues in the fifth chapter that Aeschylus was not present in Rome until the imperial period and was predominantly so in the eastern half of the empire. This section ends with Christos Simelidis’ examination of Aeschylus as a Byzantine school text.

Part II of the book examines a variety of receptions in the modern period, starting, roughly, at the end of the 18th century. This is not to say that Aeschylus was not read in the period between the fall of Byzantium and then, just that we see a steep increase in interest in Aeschylus beginning around 1800. Michael Ewans begins this section with a look at the adaptation of Aeschylus in opera starting in 1744. We then travel to Germany, where Theodore Ziolkowski explores the rich reception of Aeschylus beginning at the end of the Enlightenment as the Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress) movement takes hold in the 1770s. Gonda Van Steen next explores one of the earliest reception of Aeschylus’ Persians in Ottoman Greece.

The next three chapters examine receptions of Aeschylus by the the British, first of Prometheus Bound by the Shelleys—Percy Bysshe Shelley (Fabien Desset) and Mary Shelley (Ana González-Rivas Fernández)—and then by Thackery of the Oresteia in the satirical Vanity Fair (Barbara Witucki). A very different reception of Aeschylus’ Oresteia emerges in Richard Seaford’s examination of Wagner’s Ring, while satire and comedy reign once again in Patrick Murphy and Fred Porcheddu’s discussion of two Eumenides parodies titled The Newmenides, student productions at Cambridge University produced in 1906–7 coinciding with the competition for the Regius Professorship in Greek of that year. This last essay moves us into the twentieth century, where Aeschylus’ reception becomes more prevalent.

Beginning with Chapter 16, the volume spreads out into more variable receptions. Stratos Constantinidis’ chapter stands apart from many of the others in examining the choices translators make to reduce Aeschylus’ word repetitions and the impact this has on an audience’s and performers’ understanding of Aeschylus’ dramaturgy when working only in English transition. He starts