

Mary Lefkowitz

Euripides and the Gods. Onassis Series in Hellenic Culture. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xviii + 294 pp. \$45.00. ISBN 9780199752058 (hbk).

Some legends die hard, and those legends about Euripides seem to die harder than most. I still get students majoring in theater who tell me they have been told that Euripides died torn apart by a pack of dogs on a mountain – a scenario lifted from allusions to the death of Actaeon in Euripides' *Bacchae*, in which Actaeon's cousin, the young king Pentheus, pays the price for his refusal to worship Dionysus by being similarly dismembered, but by his female relatives. Now, one would think that plays such as the *Bacchae* might have played a greater role in disproving the alleged atheism of Euripides, but that has never been the case. Mary Lefkowitz, now Andrew W. Mellon Professor, emerita, at Wellesley College, has spent almost thirty years, attacking the (literally) ancient perception that Euripides was an atheist.¹ Not satisfied with having persuaded specialists in Greek literature to her cause, she has now written this book, which anyone interested in Greek tragedy will find interesting and useful, even taking into account some cautions I shall flag later in this review.

Professor Lefkowitz does not break much new ground compared to her previous work on this subject, and specialists who know the earlier studies will find little that is new or surprising. Much of the original blame for Euripides' reputation – not just with respect to belief in the gods but in many other areas – lies at the feet of Aristophanes, who found in Euripides' tragic dramas much of the Athenian intellectual ferment that provided easy pickings for a comic poet whose bread and butter was ridicule of the new and the fashionable. Euripides was for him much like Socrates, a representative of a segment of culture on to whom he could load all kinds of ridiculous stereotypes. And just as Socrates' genuine eccentricities allowed the comic poet to paint with a very broad brush, so too did Aristophanes leap at Euripides' tendency to indulge in what often seems to be the most shocking versions of myth possible, with characters – even slaves – talking like sophists and demagogues in the Assembly, and articulating the kind of religious skepticism that could be heard almost any day in the Agora. Aristophanes even made Euripides a character in three of his plays. In the two centuries after the death of Euripides, these Aristophanic moments began to take on a life of their own and were combined

1 Lefkowitz first exposed the fallacies in the ancient accounts of Euripidean atheism in 'The Euripides Vita', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, 20 (1979), pp. 187-210, and then (but not for the last time) in *The Lives of the Greek Poets* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

with overly active imaginations that sought biographical 'facts' from the plays themselves. 2,000 years later, Euripides' atheism is still a staple of handbooks.

In the Introduction, Lefkowitz surveys the modern reception of Euripidean theology (though, almost bizarrely, completely omitting Nietzsche), with its chief villain Cacoyannis' 1971 film of *Trojan Women*, which manages to do without the play's original prologue in which Poseidon and Athena make it very clear that the mistreatment of the eponymous characters (and their city) will be punished as soon as the play is over, which is an extremely different scenario than the modern film's godless universe. Lefkowitz's main point here remains compelling, that the gods in Euripides' dramas are no different than in Homeric epic or the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles. While they often seem vicious and capricious, still they are no more so than in the *Iliad*. The seeming greater frequency of divine appearances in Euripidean drama does not indicate the poet's disbelief in them, and, in any case, is likely an accident of history; far more plays by Euripides survive (eighteen, excluding the spurious *Rhesus*) than by Sophocles (seven) and Aeschylus (six, excluding the almost certainly spurious *Prometheus*).

Subsequent chapters flesh out this central thesis. Chapter 1, the strongest in the book, depicts in great detail the descent of Aristophanic commentary through the ages to twentieth-century critics who believe that the portrayal of the gods must be ironic. This chapter is the work of incisive scholarship, with years of study of ancient, medieval and modern texts brilliantly and clearly displayed. Chapter 2 presents a case study in the form of Euripides' *Heracles*, the tragic drama that has supplied the most material for those seeking an atheistic Euripides, especially because its title character articulates the most aggressively anti-Olympian thoughts of any figure in the surviving plays. After completing his twelve labors, Heracles is driven mad by Hera – still furious at Zeus' infidelity – and her lackey Lyssa and murders his family. When he awakens from his insanity, he wonders who could worship such a goddess and doubts stories that gods would sleep with mortals. Here is a true irony, because Heracles himself is a product of such a liaison. Lefkowitz is right that the leap from Heracleian despair to Euripidean autobiography is sloppy, if not lazy. Such ideas were certainly circulating in Athens due to the Sophists, and Euripides, who seems to have been an intellectual sponge, was certainly more interested in incorporating them openly into his plays than was Sophocles (whose dramas still engaged them, though more subtly), but to attribute those ideas to the poet's own beliefs is the most basic form of the autobiographical fallacy. One of the most terrifying, and, in the end, most moving of all ancient dramas, *Heracles* closes with its hero saved by the love of his foster father Amphitryon and the friendship of his cousin Theseus, suggesting not that the gods fail to