

VAYOS LIAPIS, *A Commentary on the Rhesus Attributed to Euripides*. Oxford / New York: OUP, 2012. LXXVIII + 364 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-959168-8.

When faced with a work that does not appear to meet the highest standards, literary scholars have, broadly speaking, three choices: a) to remain non-judgemental; b) to make a virtue of the deviation from the norm and interpret it as pursuing a different kind of aesthetics; or c) to deplore the poor quality of the work. There have been three recent commentaries on the *Rhesus*, one of each type, by Arne Feickert¹, Almut Fries² and Vayos Liapis. Liapis asserts: “I should be loath to pronounce the author of *Rhesus* a wholly incompetent poetaster” (v), but his commentary suggests that the emphasis must be very much on “wholly”.

The stated aim of the commentary is to answer the question that has dominated scholarship on the *Rhesus*: whether the play was written by Euripides. That answer could not be more resoundingly negative; Liapis’ impressive demonstration of spuriousness will probably stand without serious challenge for a long time. He effectively undoes the work of generations of scholarship defending Euripidean authorship, the pinnacle of which was William Ritchie’s *The Authenticity of the Rhesus by Euripides*³. This study had undertaken to prove that the play was in fact so full of Euripidean elements on all levels that it had to be by Euripides. Not only is this reasoning flawed (the work is to some extent derivative and the author, while not trying to forge, certainly imitated Euripides), Liapis also shows that the “Euripidean” character of the work is inconsistent.

The lemma commentary is a display of assiduity and learnedness, designed not just lavishly to explain *Realien*, but primarily to provide the data for the argument on spuriousness (the synopsis forms an important part of the introduction): it consists to a large part of the analysis of vocabulary and idiom, making this the most thorough and detailed analysis of its kind. The identification of Euripidean *Lieblingswörter* and *voces Euripideae* abounds – though it does not become clear whether Liapis understands as *vox Euripidea* one that occurs only in Euripides (e.g. 372 δόχμιος: 3x in Euripides, not in Sophocles or Aeschylus) or one that Euripides uses particularly frequently (e.g. 895 ἰάλεμος: 7x in Euripides, 2x in Aeschylus) – in places, the significance of such labels is put in doubt by the low figures. The result of the analysis is that, although Euripidean vocabulary is predominant, the influence of Sophocles and Aeschylus as well as the lyric and, above all, epic tradition is clearly detectable; the fourth-century context of the play has also left its mark on the language. Similar conclusions can be drawn from

¹ *Euripidis Rhesus. Einleitung, Übersetzung, Kommentar*, Frankfurt 2004.

² *Pseudo-Euripides*, Rhesus, Berlin 2014.

³ Cambridge 1964.

the metrical analysis: while mostly consistent with Euripidean practice, the songs recurrently exhibit traits alien to the fifth but unexceptional in the fourth century. The commentary is highly effective in its task of proving stylistic inconsistencies, so much so that after 50 lines at most, the case can be considered settled. The author that emerges is one that is well-versed in the texts of Euripides. He exploits and (more or less successfully) remodels the Euripidean tragedies, with a particular penchant for “purple passages”, which he tends to use over and over. However, the playwright’s learning and familiarity with literature goes far beyond one author. He is capable of quite nuanced play with the Homeric intertext, refashions Sophoclean scenes and seems to allude to different versions of the Rhesus and Dolon myths.

The explanation of the language is lucid and helped by the translation that precedes the discussion of each chunk of text. The abundance of parallels and the detailedness of the notes make the linguistic interpretation generally reliable (and where one wishes to consider alternatives, we now have Fries to check against).

Another focus of the commentary, both in the lemmas and in the introduction, is on the staging. Liapis tracks in detail the entrances, exits and movements on stage. The departures from the practice of the rest of the tragic corpus are emphasised and attributed primarily to the author’s desire for making the play sensational and spectacular. To what extent this is an individual characteristic of the author or typical of his time remains open.

One peculiarity of the commentary consists in the matters that are marginal or absent. Textual questions do not receive much attention. The transmission is dealt with dutifully (the scribe of L is called Nicolaus Triclinius); textual criticism has largely been covered in a separate article in the 2011 issue of this journal. For Liapis’ aim of proving the spuriousness of the play this aspect of work on the text may be largely dispensable, but in this way an aspect that is prominent in similar commentaries is missing. Liapis’ constitution of the text is not easy to extract: the printed text and apparatus are those of James Diggle’s OUP, and a separate list of proposed changes is not offered.

The question of the play’s date is also dealt with surprisingly briefly. Liapis does not stop at assigning it to the fourth century but has a rather specific idea: that the play was composed in the middle of that century for a Macedonian audience. This is so far from being run-of-the-mill that one would read rather more than a summary in the introduction and scattered notes pointing to (not entirely compelling) Macedonian influences, in particular in the military terminology. The long version of the argument, though, is prominently published⁴ and easily accessible to any interested academic. Liapis argues in more detail the hypothesis – which he calls speculation – that the play is by the Athenian actor Neoptolemus. And the treatment of the mythical background of the Dolon and Rhesus stories is extensive.

Not very prominent, either, are the literary appreciation and remarks on the interpretation of the play. The introduction to some extent addresses the issue by extended characterisations of the *dramatis personae*, stating in

⁴ “Rhesus Revisited: The Case for a Fourth-Century Macedonian Context”, *JHS* 129, 71-88.

particular an anti-Greek bias. The lemma commentary itself focuses rather on the stage management. The interpretation is thus not developed very far. The reason may lie in the low esteem in which Liapis holds the author. One can gauge from the commentary that Liapis does not regard him as capable of having any intention that goes much deeper than tickling the audience with spectacle and surprise. But even where he does, his negative view of the man behind the play can stand in the way: one interesting idea is that the author undertakes to whitewash the Dolon of the *Iliad* by portraying him as less of a coward. However, this characterisation is inconsistent, so Liapis, because Dolon betrays the watchword to Odysseus and Diomedes (one may add that the moment of Dolon's greatest cowardice, his confrontation with the two Greeks, is not part of the play). But instead of modifying the theory, Liapis takes the frictions in Dolon's character as a sign of the playwright's sad level of skill.

Liapis is probably often right in his critical appraisal of the author and in not attempting to dignify with an elaborate interpretation what does not merit one. On the other hand, he rather annoyingly states the author's incompetence and insipidness at every turn – more benevolent interpretations ought to be refused rather than brushed aside or not even sought. The commentary accomplishes what it wants, and it does so on a very high scholarly level: readers go away with a great amount of information on details and in the all but certain knowledge that they have not been reading a play by Euripides.

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