



Title	Review: Hall, E. Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris: A Cultural History of Euripides' Black Sea Tragedy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013
Authors(s)	Lloyd, Michael (Michael A.)
Publication date	2014
Publication information	Lloyd, Michael (Michael A.). "Review: Hall, E. Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris: A Cultural History of Euripides' Black Tragedy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013." Cambridge University Press, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X13002217 .
Publisher	Cambridge University Press
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/7923
Publisher's version (DOI)	10.1017/S0009840X13002217

Downloaded 2026-05-01 23:46:51

The UCD community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters! (@ucd_oa)



© Some rights reserved. For more information

Hall (E.) *Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris. A Cultural History of Euripides' Black Sea Tragedy*. Pp. xxxii + 378, ills, maps. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Cased, £40, US\$65. ISBN: 978-0-19-539289-0.

Review by Michael Lloyd (University College Dublin)

Edith Hall argues that Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* (*IT*) is 'one of the most culturally influential of all ancient Greek texts' (297). She devotes almost half the book to the play's reception in antiquity, showing how 'studies that focus primarily on the post-Renaissance reception of an individual Greek tragedy too often ignore the variant readings and intertexts that emanated from antiquity' (3). She gives an imaginative account of why the story was popular in 4th-C. vase painting, looks at its impact on popular escape narratives, and offers a wide-ranging discussion of Greek mime in 2nd-C. A.D. Egypt. She follows Fritz Graf in discussing how 'the myth which Euripides had popularized' (136) accounted for cults of Artemis in various places, including the sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis near Aricia.

H. stresses the importance of Pacuvius' version for Roman ideas of *amicitia*, and its possible influence on a scene of Orestes and Pylades competing before Thoas for the right to be sacrificed which was popular in Roman wall paintings. She comments on the 'the upstaging of Iphigenia by Pylades and Orestes and their passionate friendship' (92) in Roman versions, but may underestimate Greek admiration of Pylades (e.g. in Euripides' *Orestes*, another play which supplies fresh adventures for the faithful friends). She suggests (105–6) that the tradition of the 'admiring barbarian', which appears in Ovid's version of the story (*Ex Ponto* 3.2.39–102), might also have been derived from Pacuvius, although her discussion of Lucian's *Toxaris* does not entirely do justice to the way in which the Scythian's praise of Orestes and Pylades highlights the superior appreciation of friendship by his own people.

H. believes that Iphigenia 'has a great deal to offer a feminist theatre' (257), but playwrights and directors have regrettably failed to rise to the challenge since the intriguing 'dramatic scene' by the early 20th-C. Ukrainian poet Lesya Ukrainka. H.'s [end of p. 33] interpretation of *IT* itself is distorted by a rather naïve brand of feminism (e.g. 'Iphigenia's brains, piety, clear sense of priorities, and courage made her unique as a female protagonist in ancient theatre', 44), and her attempt to portray Iphigenia as a 'quest heroine' is a red herring. She is at her best tracing links between 'H.D.' (Hilda Doolittle) seeing Ezra Pound in the chorus of a student production (1903), the influence of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) on the sacrifice trope in Modernism, the 'avant-garde primitivism' (250) of Harley Granville-Barker's staging of Gilbert Murray's translation (1912), and the adventure film *Trader Horn* (1931).

H. is always alert to cultural issues in modern versions of *IT*, and shows how it was interpreted in terms of Christian self-definition against Islam between the first printed edition (1503) and the end of the 18th C. A recurrent theme in the book is that it is an inherently colonialist play (e.g. 274–5), although H. occasionally recognizes that 'barbarism is not a barbarian prerogative' (68) and shows how Thoas could evoke an *ancien régime* monarch in the 18th C. (196). She arbitrarily interprets John Adams-Acton's statue group of Orestes and Pylades carrying away the statue of Artemis (1858) as 'a symbol of the specific looting of artefacts from the soil of Tauric Chersonese' (20) in the Crimean War, while stressing 'the quasi-fraternal loyalty of Orestes and Pylades' (92) in Carl Johann Steinhauser's group in Philadelphia (1884) and overlooking the choice of *IT* 307–14 as the subject for the 1822 Prix de Rome.

H.'s discussion of Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris* is influenced by the *Klassikschelte* which became fashionable in Germany in the 1960s. Her question

whether the play is ‘a miracle of cosmopolitan humanism or a sinister crypto-colonial fantasy of domination’ (208) receives a decisive answer, especially when she considers ‘[t]he intensity with which Goethe’s Iphigenie spoke to the Nazis’ (217). She backtracks to some extent at the end of the chapter, and gives Goethe some credit for ‘straining at the very limits of the Eurocentric ideologies of race and nation taken for granted by most of his contemporaries’ (227). In her account of the reception of *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, she could perhaps have distinguished a little more clearly between its actual content and its status as an icon of German high culture. It is also a pity that she did not look more closely at Goethe’s reception of Euripides, and especially how his Enlightenment ideas are somewhat at odds with the structure and content of *IT*.

The main theme of the book’s last chapter (‘Decolonizing Thoas’) is that *IT* ‘can serve as an inspirational vehicle for thinking about the violence of colonialism’ (294), but H.’s undoubtedly interesting material does not fit easily into this straitjacket. She gives an eloquent account of the Mexican writer Alfonso Reyes’s *Ifigenia cruel* (1924), but overstates the anticolonial elements in this complex play. Reyes’s Iphigenia does indeed refuse to return to Greece, but in order to achieve redemption from the cycle of violence in her family, paradoxically by continuing as the priestess of a bloodthirsty cult. H.’s misreading is summed up by her paraphrase of the final lines of the play: ‘The drama ends at sunset, with the chorus celebrating the departure of the Greeks, of whom their venerated Taurian space and landscape are finally free again’ (280). The freedom in question is of a different kind: ‘¡Oh mar que bebiste la tarde / hasta descubrir sus estrellas: / no lo sabías, y ya sabes / que los hombres se libran de ellas!’. For an illuminating discussion, see now F. Barrenechea, ‘At the feet of the gods: myth, tragedy, and redemption in Alfonso Reyes’s *Ifigenia cruel*’, *Romance Quarterly* 59 (2012), 6–18.

In conclusion, this wide-ranging and well-illustrated book is an excellent example of how reception studies can invigorate our appreciation of an underestimated play.