

REVERMANN (M.) **Brecht and Tragedy: Radicalism, Traditionalism, Eristics**. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. 474, illus. \$120. 9781108489683. doi:[10.1017/S0075426923000095](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426923000095)

This is an engaging and wide-ranging book. It demonstrates that for most of his career Bertolt Brecht engaged with tragedy as a grand artistic form, thus putting himself in the company of previous masters such as Sophocles, Shakespeare and Schiller. Even as an adolescent, he was not modest and thought of himself as a great writer. In his view, at least in the western world, a master of theatre had to confront the West's most powerful contribution to the evolution of drama: tragedy. And yet, Martin Revermann rightly notes that Brecht's interconnection with tragedy has been under-analysed to date.

Brecht tended to think dialectically and agonistically, and therefore his relationship to tragedy was an agonistic one: he engaged with it primarily in order to overcome it and move beyond it. Revermann notes that Brecht had a good working knowledge of Latin and of Latin literature, particularly Horace, but that he had no Greek and relatively little knowledge of actual Greek tragedies (for instance, he hardly knew the plays of Euripides). Brecht did, however, have detailed knowledge of Aristotle and his *Poetics*, and he imagined his own dramas, as well as the theoretical edifice he constructed around them, to be anti-Aristotelian. Brecht was also impacted by an exciting production of Sophocles' *Oedipus* staged in Berlin in 1929 by Leopold Jessner. Jessner was committed to a view of Greek tragedy as portraying the bitter inevitability of fate, a view that, Revermann argues, is not actually present in Aristotle's *Poetics* (although one might counter that it is there in the surviving Greek tragedies themselves, something that Revermann does not appear to consider). Instead, Revermann suggests that Brecht's conception of Greek tragedy, and of Aristotle, was in many ways a highly productive misconception. The playwright imagined Greek tragedy as staging the inevitability of a barbaric, divinely ordained fate, whereas Brecht, with his 'anti-Aristotelian' theatre, wanted to portray 'fate' as pedestrian, constructed by humans and therefore changeable by humans. It was thus German idealism's misconceptions of Aristotle, and of Greek tragedy, that had the greatest impact on Brecht, rather than Greek tragedy itself, according to Revermann.

The author goes on to show that in some ways Brecht was closer to Aristotle than he seems to have realized: for example, in the presence of *anagnōrisis* (recognition) and *peripeteia* (change of fortune) throughout Brecht's major dramas. Above all, however, Aristotle's conception of *catharsis* (purgation or purification) as a central goal of tragedy may have been close to what Brecht himself wanted to achieve with his own plays. He rejected Aristotle's emphasis on terror and pity, because for him those emotions implied *Einfühlung*: feeling one's way into or completely identifying with a character. Brecht, by contrast, wanted audiences to have a healthy scepticism about what was going on in a drama. Revermann ingeniously argues that Aristotle's actual view of *catharsis* as a healthy purgation of emotions may have been much closer to the effects that Brecht was seeking to achieve than he himself realized. Moreover, both Aristotle and Brecht viewed plot, rather than character, as the central core of drama. In fact, Brecht was notably uninterested in bourgeois psychologizing, a point that differentiates his plays radically from those of Ibsen or Shaw. Both Aristotle and Brecht were, moreover, keenly interested in comedy.

The word 'eristics' in the title of the book is essentially a throw-away, since many readers will have to look it up in a dictionary. Revermann attempts to defend the use of the term by talking about it as a pun on erotics, but I doubt this will help. What is really meant by eristics is contestation, debate and argument: opposition. That clearly makes sense in a Brechtian context, because above all Brecht's thought processes were governed by productive oppositions. Hence Brecht's conception of tragedy, however adequate it may have been to Aristotle's thought or to the reality of Greek tragedy, was helpful to

him in conceiving of, and creating, a form of modern theatre that was radically different from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century bourgeois drama. Even many of his misunderstandings were therefore extraordinarily fruitful.

Revermann uses his own translations from Brecht's German. This is a bit odd, since good translations of most of Brecht's major works do exist in English. In some cases, Revermann's translations are inferior to the existing ones, such as in his rendering of the title of one of Brecht's famous 'learning plays' as *The Measure* (as if it were a yardstick or a ruler). Instead, the existing *The Measures Taken* or *The Decision* are clearly better renderings of the actual German title *Die Maßnahme*. This quibble aside, the book is excellent and thought-provoking. It can be read profitably by anyone interested in modern manifestations of tragedy.

STEPHEN BROCKMANN
Carnegie Mellon University
Email: smb@andrew.cmu.edu

RIEHLE (A.) (ed.) **A Companion to Byzantine Epistolography**. Leiden: Brill, 2020. Pp. xii + 529, illus., facsimiles. €245. 9789004413696.
doi:[10.1017/S0075426923000587](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426923000587)

This substantial edited collection is volume 7 of Brill's Companions to the Byzantine World. Following the Introduction by the editor Alexander Riehle, the volume's 17 chapters are divided into four parts: Part 1: 'Contexts for Byzantine Epistolography'; Part 2: 'Byzantine Letter-Writers in Context'; Part 3: 'Forms and Functions of Byzantine Epistolography'; and Part 4: 'Byzantine Epistolography and (Post-)Modern Theory'. They are followed by a General Bibliography (including primary sources, but only those available in translation, and each chapter has its own bibliography too), a General Index, an Index of Greek Terms and an Index of Manuscripts. There are 15 contributors, three of them contributing twice: Alexander Riehle himself, Floris Bernard and Florin Leonte.

Riehle's introduction provides an historical and historiographical overview of Byzantine epistolography, encompassing fundamental issues, such as what a letter is, but also providing a vital guide to the volume itself. He is honest in admitting that it does not include everything that was planned, such as a chapter on the letters of Theodore the Studite, and declares that it 'should be understood as a companion in the proper sense', not as 'an exhaustive handbook, but rather as an eclectic guide giving orientation, raising questions, and providing inspiration' (21). Another qualification is that it is primarily concerned with letters of middle and late Byzantium, since these periods need more study than early Byzantium; we are pointed to the volume *Late Antique Letter Collections* (Berkeley 2016), edited by Cristiana Sogno, Bradley Storin and Edward Watts.

Part 1 consists of three chapters, providing background and comparative material: Thomas Johann Bauer on 'Letter Writing in Antiquity and Early Christianity', Jack Tannous on 'Syriac Epistolography' and Lena Wahlgren-Smith on 'Letter Collections in the Latin West'. Of these the first is most obviously useful, and it is a shame that there was not comparative material for further east, which Riehle himself had expressed a wish for (20).

Part 2 is constituted of two chapters, the case studies on Michael Psellos (by Bernard) and Demetrios Kydonos (by Leonte). These are two of the most absorbing chapters in the collection; case studies allow for the putting of flesh on the bones and bring the issues of epistolography into sharp and vibrant relief. They also allow for interesting comparison