Mayer with no space for a more general survey of modern scholarly interpretations of the play to guide the novice reader.

The final chapter on translations is disappointing. True, Mayer does here what he does not in chapter 7: he presents an overview of modern contributions. However, his assessment of them is superficial. The last two pages (pp. 109-11) of the chapter are the most interesting. Mayer considers the nature of Seneca’s poetic diction, drawing attention to the ‘constant echoic buzz of earlier verse’ and pointing to the difficulties involved in translating his plays into English. If this section has been placed at the beginning of the chapter, it would have provided a framework for a more focused discussion of the translations.

Chapter 1 does not read smoothly, but thereafter matters improve, although I am not sure that the attempts at chatty informality that crop up from time to time work very well. The frequency of Mayer’s inclusion of parenthetic material can be annoying (see, e.g., the last lines on p. 28 and the first few lines of p. 29). There is some awkwardness of expression, particularly in chapter 1, e.g., ‘But whatever man gets up to for good or ill, overall is the benevolent will of god, which takes the form of providence’ (p. 11). On the positive side there are delightful flashes of dry wit, especially in the later chapters, such as on p. 86, where Mayer, recounting the story of Kane’s play, Phaedra’s Love, refers to Hippolytus blowing his nose into one sock and then ‘with nice discrimination’ masturbating into its companion. I found very few typographical errors: the verb is missing in the last sentence of the first paragraph on p. 94; ‘to’ is omitted before ‘talk’ in the second-last sentence on p. 110; and there is the misspelling of ‘Presss’ on p. 112 (n. 9). Mayer’s book is a useful introduction to Seneca’s Phaedra and to Senecan drama in general. It fills a real gap in the area. If one might have wished for more in the latter chapters, it is in part because the earlier ones set such a high standard.

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Why should twenty-first century classicists be interested in a short essay (twenty-six pages in this edition) on the Iliad published in French in 1941 and written by a woman who was not a professional scholar? The reason quite simply is that this brief essay is a work of deep and startling originality, one of those rare pieces of criticism that makes one look with fresh eyes at the work it treats. Its author, Simone Weil (1909-43), was an extraordinary individual, revered by some as a saint, regarded by others as an extremist of doubtful sanity. At the least one would have to say that
Weil was a paradoxical person. Born of non-observant Jewish parents, she became a fervent Christian without joining any church or believing that God existed in any conventional sense. In her youth, Weil embraced Marxism, but later turned away from it. After graduating brilliantly from France’s elite École Normale Supérieure, Weil taught in a high school, spent several long spells as a factory worker, joined the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War, and ended her short life as a clerical worker for the Free French in London during the Second World War. Having forced herself to live only on the rations allowed to people in occupied France, Weil ‘died of heart failure caused by pulmonary tuberculosis and self-starvation’ (p. 3); the coroner indicated that she had committed suicide ‘whilst the balance of her mind was disturbed’ (p. 12 n. 13).

Weil’s reading of the Iliad seems at first sight simple and straightforward; yet as it proceeds one realises that she is saying things about the poem that have never been put in this way, many of which are profoundly true. She is above all concerned with the manifestations of ‘force’ in the poem Weil uses this word in a number of ways, meaning by it ‘violence’, such as we see in the many battle scenes of the Iliad; ‘oppression and humiliation’, as of Thersites by Odysseus in Iliad 2.266-70; ‘power’, such as the strong always wield over the weak, as Agamemnon exerts over Achilles in Iliad 1, and as the gods exercise over humans; ‘force of Nature’, as exemplified by the lions, wild boars, raging fires and hurricanes of the Iliad’s similes; and ‘inescapable constraint’, the kind of force that fate and death represent for all mortals.

Since Weil’s essay is so brief and condensed and her style so lapidary, extended citation is perhaps the easiest way to give a sense of the work. Much of the essay consists of powerful generalisation, which is then illustrated by quotation from the text of the Iliad. ‘The true hero, the true subject matter, the centre of the Iliad is force. The force that men wield, the force that subdues men, in the face of which human flesh shrinks back’ (p. 45). ‘From the power to change a human being into a thing by making him die there comes another power, in its way more momentous, that of making a still living human being into a thing. He is living, he has a soul; he is nonetheless a thing’ (p. 46). ‘As pitilessly as force annihilates, equally without pity it intoxicates those who possess or believe they possess it. In reality, no one possesses it’ (p. 51). ‘Though all are destined from birth to endure violence, the realm of circumstances closes their minds to this truth. The strong is never perfectly strong nor the weak perfectly weak, but neither knows this’ (p. 53). ‘Thus violence overwhelsm those it touches. In the end, it seems as external to the one who wields it as to the one who endures it. Here is born the notion of a destiny under which executioners and their victims are similarly innocent; conquerors and conquered are brothers in the same misery’ (p. 57). ‘Thus war expunges every concept of a goal, even the goals of war. It expunges the idea of an end of war. The possibility of a situation so violent is unthinkable outside that situation; an end to it unthinkable within it’ (p. 59). ‘When the beaten man begs to be allowed to see another day, what response can this meek

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1 See the critical but fair assessment of G. Steiner, ‘Sainte Simone, the Jewish Bases of Simone Weil’s Via Negativa to the Philosophic Peaks’, TLS June 4 (1993) 3f.
wish for life find...? The very possession of arms on one side and their lack on the other divest the imperiled life of nearly all its significance’ (p. 60).

But, particularly in the latter part of the essay, Weil also discusses the nature of the Iliad more specifically. ‘Battles are not determined among men who calculate, devise, take resolutions and act on them but among men stripped of these abilities, transformed, fallen to the level either of purely passive inert matter or of the blind forces of sheer impetus. This is the ultimate secret of war, which the Iliad expresses in its similes’ (p. 61). ‘This is what makes the Iliad unique, this bitterness emerging from tenderness and enveloping all men equally. . . . The tone always is imbued with bitterness but never descends to lamentation. . . . Nothing of value, whether doomed to die or not, is slighted; the misery of all is revealed without dissimulation or condescension; no man is set above or below the common human condition; all that is destroyed is regretted. Victors and victims are equally close to us, and thereby akin to both poet and listener’ (p. 64). ‘The exceptional impartiality that pervades the Iliad may have parallels unknown to us, but it has had no imitators. It is difficult to detect that the poet is Greek and not Trojan’ (p. 66). ‘[N]othing the peoples of Europe have produced matches their first known poem. They will perhaps rediscover epic genius when they learn to believe nothing is protected from fate, learn never to admire force, not to hate the enemy nor to scorn the unfortunate. It is doubtful whether this will soon occur’ (p. 69).

No one, not even a genius, can state the whole truth about the Iliad in the space of twenty-six pages. And not everyone is convinced by Weil’s reading of the poem. George Steiner, for example, writes of her ‘deeply felt but bizarre interpretation of the Iliad as a poem of suffering—a reading almost blind to the wild joy and ferocity of archaic warfare which makes the epic blaze’.2 (On this point, though, I think Weil is more right than Steiner.) But what, I believe, lends Weil’s writing on the Iliad such power is the stringent underlying moral sense of which one is constantly aware. Although she writes about the Iliad often at a high level of abstraction and generality, it is this moral sense that creates a bridge to the wider contemporary world. As one reads one constantly feels moving behind her words the conflicts and tragedies of the last one hundred years: Nazi aggression, the death camps, World War 2 (and indeed the war in Iraq and all other wars), the struggles between capital and labour, between the powerful and the powerless.

Although Weil’s essay on the Iliad has been translated into English before, it has not been easily accessible. Holoka deserves our gratitude for having provided this exemplary edition, which supplies all the help necessary for the non-classical reader to understand and appreciate the essay, but which also contains much that is of interest to the classicist. The edition consists of four parts. Part 1, ‘Introduction’ (pp. 1-17), provides a brief but balanced and fair account of Weil’s life and of the essay and how it reflects Weil’s views on ethics, Christianity and the classics. Part 2, ‘L’Iliade ou le poème de la force’ (pp. 19-44), supplies the French text ‘based on the definitive 1989 Oeuvres complètes’ (p. ix) and part 3 (pp. 45-69) a lucid, accurate translation into

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English. Part 4 (pp. 71-105) provides a paragraph-by-paragraph commentary on the entire essay summarising its argument and illustrating Weil’s points by frequent quotation from more recent Homeric scholarship, from other writings by Weil, and from war literature. An appendix helpfully gives in full the Greek text of all Weil’s quotations from the Iliad (she quotes only in French). All scholars interested in Homer and all libraries of universities where literature is taught should buy this book.3

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This collection of ten papers records a conference held in Oslo in 2000, itself the end product of a three-year research project. It is hard to discern much of a common theme among the individual contributions other than scholarly attention focused primarily, though not exclusively, on the Poetics. The title of the collection is accurately modest. Sense is indeed made of the work, as the volume’s sub-title promises. That was bound to be the case because these writers are scholars of proven competence. In most cases they have already made signal contributions to the commentary on Aristotle’s work and here they address themselves with clarity and circumspection to discrete topics that can be handled in the space of a brief essay. Some pieces concentrate on the Aristotelian treatment of an issue, even where there is caution as to whether the Aristotelian approach is actually Aristotle’s. Others cast their literary net wider, using Aristotle as a touchstone for a more comparative approach. Both approaches can help illuminate Aristotle’s Poetics.

The topics related to the Poetics that readers should seek to quarry from this collection are the role of aesthetic pleasure in the good life (Heath, pp. 7-23), the time-scale of tragic material and experience (Belfiore, pp. 25-49), the significance of universals in the theory of mimesis (Halliwell, pp. 87-107), and the ethical significance of the same key concept (Fossheim, pp. 73-86). Moving further afield but still within the compass of Aristotle, there are discussions of his almost vanished work on comedy (Janko, pp. 51-71). Some of the essays seek to illuminate Aristotle’s work by considering its influence on subsequent theorists and artists. Here we have a discussion of Aristotle’s influence on early Roman tragedy (Feltham, pp. 109-25), his reception in the theories of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century poets, particularly Giraldi and Shakespeare (Javitch, pp. 127-44; Minsaas, pp. 145-71), reflections of Aristotle in the theories of Rapin and Brecht (Silk, pp. 173-95), and likewise of Goethe (Cave, pp. 197-214). The last essay helpfully constructs a hermeneutic map of the different

3 I found the following minor misprints: for ‘Sons’ (p. 25 sec. 24) read ‘Sous’; for ‘tremblemint’ (p. 30 sec. 44) read ‘tremblement’; for ‘out’ (p. 34 sec. 54) read ‘ont’; for ‘wretch’ (p. 51 sec. 24) read ‘Wretch’; for ‘recovered’ (p. 55 sec. 39) read ‘covered’ (?) for Greek ‘te’ (p. 117 sec. 77) read ‘t’.