Visvardi’s (henceforth V.) principal concern in this book is with ‘a vital preoccupation of 5th c. Athenian culture: how to engage (with) collective emotion in order to direct its motivational power into action that is conducive to social cohesion and collective prosperity in the polis’ (p.1). She describes Classical Athens as ‘a culture of passions’, meaning a culture whose public discourse welcomes, rather than tries to eradicate, the involvement of emotions in decision-making. From the explicit assertion ‘that tragedy plays a role in shaping ways of thinking and feeling within Athenian culture’ (p.4), she argues that by exploring ‘tragic emotions’ – i.e. pity and fear, per Aristotle (Poet. 6, 1449b27) – onstage, she can elucidate their effect offstage on fifth-century Athenian life.

V. applies Aristotle’s definitions (in Rh. 2.5 and 2.8) of fear and pity to drama – between named characters, characters and chorus, and actors and audience – as well as rhetoric, particularly when plays include ‘agonistic discourses [that] aim to persuade through … the explicit evocation of the emotions’ (p.11). Although Aristotle does not discuss the chorus in detail in Poetics, V. draws on recent scholarship to argue that in its emotional and thence practical responses, the chorus onstage acts as a proxy for, and a stimulus to, habituation in moral virtue in the audience – i.e. the wider community – offstage. Choruses thus ‘offer indispensable insights into the interrelationships between emotion, decision and action, reveal connections between individual and collective psychology, and (re)define the role of emotion in the life of the polis and its institutions’ (p.18).

Discussion of the ‘choral voice’ follows, again drawing on recent scholarship. V. argues that the chorus frequently reacts emotionally to what happens on stage, sometimes in turn affecting the action and – despite often having marginal (or Other) roles in society – ‘influenc[ing] the (characters’ and the audience’s) perception of the dramatic events and the issues that they raise’ (p.22). Chorus members emotionally influence audience members individually and collectively – and this is paradigmatic of various types of collective emotional response in Athenian society, which tend to occur because such empathic feeling is pleasurable. V. is particularly interested in choruses that are ‘active’ participants and ‘move the plot … forward, but also, intentionally or unintentionally, instigate fear and pity and offer an extensive discourse about the tragic emotions’ (p.31).

As a comparandum to tragedy, chapter 2 considers Thucydides’ History. There too citizens frequently exhibit emotional responses to events that are collective in their ‘nature, characteristics, and effects’ (p.35). Those emotions also frequently influence actions – though V. notes Thucydides works with a broader emotional palette than tragedy, ‘such as anger, erôs, hope’ (p.6). She cites recent social scientific research that suggests that societies offer a myriad ways – ranging from private conversations to public deliberation – in which citizens can interact sympathetically, thus developing moral
judgments that are collectively rather than individually held. Since Athens is a ‘culture of passions’, emotion is an important element in its civic decision-making.

Thucydides regularly depicts speakers that ‘both manipulate and often directly address the emotions of the dêmos’ (p.45), and comments in his own voice on this manipulation. V. asserts that there is not so much a dichotomy between rational and emotional persuasion, as a spectrum in which decisions informed by only one lie at the extreme ends – rather, the History shows a range of ways in which emotion and reason can, and should, appropriately interact. When reason is abandoned, the dêmos is not criticised for acting emotionally, but for being impelled only by emotion, or by the wrong emotion. She particularly notes Thucydidean dêmoi being impelled by pleasure in participating in shared emotions and actions.

She explores a number of intra- and inter-city examples of collective emotion, almost all within or relating to Athens. Intra-city cases include Pericles’ depiction of the citizen as erastês, emotions aroused by the plague, Pericles’ manipulation of emotions, the oligarchic coup, and (the sole external example) the Corcyran stasis; the inter-city cases are the Mytilenean revolt, and the Sicilian expedition. It will not surprise the reader that Thucydides shows emotions affecting decisions in all these examples (and indeed elsewhere), but V. does a good job of delineating the interplay of aroused emotions and collective decisions, and the occasions when collectivity breaks down under stresses. In concluding her reading of the Mytilenean debate (p. 82), V. describes how the collective is particularly swayed by collective imagination, stimulated by erôs and hope.

These two introductory chapters take up slightly under two fifths of the volume. Of the remainder, around two thirds is devoted to three Aeschylus plays (Eumenides, Supplices, Seven against Thebes), while the final chapter focuses on one play each by Sophocles (Philoctetes) and Euripides (Bacchae). In all cases the chorus is ‘active’, i.e. involved in the plot (the plot would not make sense in their absence).

In Eumenides, V. draws attention to the roles of anger and fear, both of which change over the play: the Furies initially embody the rage of tit-for-tat vengeance and induce irrational terror in their victims; their taming as Semnai Theai gives measured anger its new role in civic justice, and instils in citizens a rational fear and reverence of the law and the Areopagite jurors. Their initial fearsomeness creates ‘Strong aversion caused by disgust, bound up … with fear’ (p.102), disgust – aimed at avoiding contamination – being another emotion with a role in dissuading crime and marginalising criminals. V. traces how the Furies induce these emotions in Orestes, almost overwhelming his sanity, but also draws attention to how the Furies’ collective emotion foreshadows that of the jurors they will later support.

This progression from irrational instinctive, to rational judgmental, emotive action is seen in Supplices and its companion plays too, as the trilogy moves ‘from coercion and violence (βία) … to persuasion (πειθώ) and social integration’ (p.121). As in Eumenides, V. suggests the chorus has a special role in both instigating and communicating fear (and pity). A third important emotion is grief: the Danaids’ lamentation (proscribed by law in
fifth-century Athens, thus increasing its dramatic effectiveness) inspires pity in both onstage and offstage audiences. V. traces how their supplication awakens Pelasgus’s fear, as he wrestles with the likely ensuing outcomes of rejecting or supporting them, triggering reprisals from Zeus or the Aegyptiads. It is, finally, fear of pollution that makes both Pelasgus and then the Argives accept and support the suppliants. Thus the Danaids have used their own collective fear to instil collective fear in others.

In Seven against Thebes, V. notes that the chorus is less alien: the Theban women express fears (and other emotions) that male characters also hold. The extra-mural sounds of war terrify them, and drive them wailing to supplicate the gods on Thebes’ behalf. Their clamour and initiative infuriate Eteocles, who claims their loud panicked behaviour will cause the city’s men to lose heart and panic too – explored at length, as is the piteous lamentation. V. draws a very brief comparison (for the first time, p.153) between Eteocles’ attempts to manipulate their and the Theban men’s fears and something in Thucydides – namely Pericles’ attempts to manipulate those of the Athenians – and later notes (again briefly) that, as in Thucydides, Eteocles’ argument is not that the Thebans should be swayed by reason rather than emotion, but that they should be swayed by the right emotions (p.165). Aside from these two brief points, no attempt is made to connect the Thucydides and Aeschylus chapters.

The chorus in Sophocles’ Philoctetes is, like those previously, an active participant in the play, which characters react to as to an individual. Their primary purpose is to ‘perform their pity by expressing their own experience of pity and expanding on its nature and appropriateness as a response to Philoctetes’ condition’ (p.179), and their pity and Neoptolemus’s work in tandem. The chorus is an active participant in the deceit, devised by Odysseus, to trick Philoctetes. However, on meeting Philoctetes, it instantly feels pity and says so – a pity Philoctetes asks lead to actions: not just giving him food, but taking him home. The chorus are moved to plead his case – piteously, repeatedly, and at length – to Neoptolemus, who in turn is eventually persuaded, through pity, to switch sides. After the deception is exposed, Neoptolemus leaves the stage, and the chorus attempts, by engendering goodwill and friendship, to persuade Philoctetes to join them. When Neoptolemus returns, he follows its lead and eventually succeeds.

The chorus of Lydian women in Bacchae ‘act as an agent of fear’ both when they ‘communicate aspects of Dionysiac deimon’ (p.214), i.e. the awesomeness of his earthly manifestation, and by doubling the frenzied actions of a second chorus offstage (in the mountains) – it is the second, unseen chorus that is ‘active’. The play initially proceeds through opposition of two fears – that of the divinity, and that of the tyrant (V. underlines Pentheus’s tyrannical traits) – and progresses to the triumph of Dionysius’s deimon, as demonstrated partly by the onstage chorus, doubling the truly deina acts in the mountains. Of the five plays examined, the chorus in Bacchae is least ‘active’ within the play, but perhaps (though V. does not say so explicitly) more active in arousing fear in the audience.

There is plenty of good scholarship in this volume, but I am less convinced it works as a whole. The first reason is the inclusion of the Thucydides chapter, which is almost
entirely unintegrated into the rest of the book. There is surprisingly little scholarship on Thucydides that explicitly focuses on emotions, so this chapter is a welcome addition which could easily have been a stand-alone article. However, its inclusion raises questions about the comparison with tragic choruses that V. does not really address. For example, to what extent is collective emotion really collective, rather than an aggregate of individuals’ emotions, varying in intensity and including minorities who do not feel the same primary emotions as the majority? If this latter explanation better fits Thucydides (as seems likely), is this a good comparison for a genre whose conventions require chorus members to react corporately and identically? Do collective emotions work differently in different (e.g. non-democratic) poleis, and if not is there a tragedy-related reason why nearly, but not absolutely, all examples focus on Athens? Why are no direct comparisons drawn between Thucydides and drama – e.g. between the Plataeans’ or Mytileneans’ supplicatory speeches and that of Aeschylus’s Supplices? And, if collective emotional response onstage imparts moral values in the audience, what comparable role to the audience is there in Thucydides?

Turning to the tragedy chapters, again the analyses of the individual plays are good, and the emotions prism makes them useful additions to the scholarly literature. In each case, V. ably traces the interplay of emotional arousal between chorus and named characters, and shows how the chorus’s emotions actively affect the plots. What is less clear is what more the volume is adding than readings of five plays. V. seems to believe that the very collectivity of the chorus’s emotions is important, yet (as indicated above) she never really makes clear how collective emotions – qua emotions, or qua their social or literary roles – differ significantly from individual ones. In one place she suggests they have more persuasive impact (pp.242–3), yet a few pages earlier describes them as ‘analogous’ (p.239). Finally, little space is given to explaining how arousal of tragic emotions onstage instils the same in the audience, nor how that leads to moral changes or actions within the city. Indeed V. states (pp.32–3) that she will not argue this further in the chapters on tragedy, as it can be inferred from her discussion in the introduction. But an interesting postulation requires argument, not inference. For these various reasons, the volume as a whole feels rather less than the sum of its parts, and therefore somewhat disappoints expectations raised in the introductory chapter.