

Introduction

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The grace and power with which his intellect moved amid and transcended the rabid theorizing of the avant-garde is one of the miracles of artistic history and almost justifies the classic impression of Sophocles as one who stood quite apart from his time. But he did not stand apart. A full-sized study could be made of passages wherein he touches on ideas current among his contemporaries...

C. H. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study in Heroic Humanism*

1 Sophocles

In an important and persuasive study of Sophoclean heroism from nearly 50 years ago, B. M. W. Knox argued that the fifth-century Athenian playwright Sophocles invented the form of tragedy as the West knows it (Knox 1964: 1–27). To be sure, there were other tragic poets before Sophocles, and from his immediate predecessor Aeschylus we have seven extant plays and some significant fragments. But it is with Sophocles that the plot of the tragic play first centers around the “tragic hero.” As Knox puts it:

The modern concept of tragic drama takes for granted the existence of a single central character, whose action and suffering are the focal point of the play – what we call “the tragic hero” [...] This dramatic method, the presentation of the tragic dilemma in the figure of a single dominating character, seems in fact to be an invention of Sophocles. (Knox 1964: 1)

This form has become all too familiar to us, so much so that the more cosmological, less character-driven tragedies of Aeschylus strike modern audiences – and students – as inscrutable, chaotic. By contrast, with Sophocles, the meaning of the play can always be found, or so it seems, in the central hero’s failure to yield to unstoppable forces and in the inevitable consequences that are written on his or her person.

Such a reading of Sophocles is persuasive, and it works well for most of the extant plays (though Knox does not see a central hero in the *Trachiniae*). At the same time it is predicated on a notion of the hero as isolated in time and space, almost a cosmic force unto himself. It is not difficult to read *Antigone's* Creon in the schema that Knox outlines:

The Sophoclean hero acts in a terrifying vacuum, a present which has no future to comfort and no past to guide, an isolation in time and space which imposes on the hero the full responsibility for his own action and its consequences. It is precisely this fact which makes possible the greatness of the Sophoclean heroes; the source of the action lies in them alone, nowhere else; the greatness of the action is theirs alone. (Knox 1964: 7)

The curious aspect of this reading, however, is that the same kind of thinking has often been applied to Sophocles himself: he is seen as producing poetry of artistic greatness almost in a vacuum, entirely divorced from the political and intellectual currents of his time. Indeed, in a similarly fundamental work, Cedric Whitman launched a reading of Sophocles as a profound humanist with a criticism of previous scholarship, characterizing “the classic view” as producing a Sophocles entirely separate from time and place:

But Sophocles defied all pigeonholes and programs. His simplicity was veiled in a kind of mystery, an indefinable but familiar aloofness and perfection which recalled nothing so much as the Greek spirit itself [...] Sophocles illustrated the Greek spirit, while the Greek spirit explained Sophocles. (Whitman 1951: 4)

Few works have seen Sophocles as an author commenting on the political crises of the Peloponnesian War (as was – and is – done with Euripides), or concerned with the functioning of aristocratic leaders in the emerging democratic *polis* (as is common in readings of Aeschylus). Even when the plays of Euripides and Aeschylus were read in terms of emerging feminist and political approaches (e.g. Zeitlin 1984; Rabinowitz 1993), Sophocles largely floated above the fray as a poet of uncompromising aesthetic worth, untouched by the events of the world around him. (An important exception is Knox’s earlier work; see below.)

To some extent, that understanding of Sophocles was enabled by exciting new literary theories that were just arriving in the field of classics in the 1950s and 1960s. Robert Goheen’s groundbreaking reading of the *Antigone* from 1951 is one of the first explicit works of New Criticism in classics, predicated as it is on the notion that the meaning of a play can be extricated by a reading of the text itself, in isolation, and by careful consideration of the interplay of recurring themes and images. And, of course, the 1960s also brought Claude Lévi-Strauss’ iconic reading of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* to the attention of classicists – and with it the principles of structural anthropology, which were powerfully used and modified by, among others, Charles Segal (e.g. Segal 1981). Such readings, again, derive significance from the interplay of broad themes, now figured as categories of meaning. Although structural anthropology had its roots in the study of living cultures, its methods were quickly appropriated for literary ends by scholars who argued that Sophocles’ plays provide a conceptual map of the Greek imaginary universe. In exploring the tragic hero’s place in that universe, large categories of human experience are elucidated: raw/cooked; animal/human/immortal; nature/civilization. Powerful though these analyses are, they remain largely in the world of abstract ideas and of the mythical past rather than coming to bear on the contemporary political scene.

Equally influential, in their own way, were psychoanalytic readings of Sophocles, which, beginning with Freud, were fundamentally opposed to the notion that Sophocles' plays should be tied to a particular time and place. Instead, the greatness of Sophocles was to be found in the way in which his plays – especially, as always, the *Oedipus Tyrannus* – revealed the universal and transhistorical secrets of the human psyche (see Armstrong's chapter in this volume). Here, too, the central tragic hero is both necessary and enabled: Freud's reading of Oedipus works only as long as we can see ourselves in the representation of this central figure; and, once this connection has been made, our psychic drives lend legitimacy to the personal and psychological dilemma that the famous king of Thebes must face.

All of these forces combined in the reading of Sophocles to keep him, as it were, isolated from his society, not unlike the heroes of his plays. Even the important work of Whitman mentioned above situates Sophocles primarily by seeing him as the proponent of a humanistic philosophy that, ultimately, seems to derive more from his genius than from fifth-century Athens (Whitman 1951: 229). And yet, one of the curious things about Sophocles is that we know more about his life than we know about either Euripides or Aeschylus, and it appears that he was in fact quite closely engaged in the politics of fifth-century Athens (see Scodel's chapter in this volume). There is sound evidence that Sophocles was involved in local hero cults during his lifetime and that he received the sacred snake of Aesclepius when it arrived in Athens from Epidaurus (Knox 1964: 54–5; Mitchell-Boyask 2008; see Currie in this volume). We know, moreover, that during the disastrous political turmoil of 413 BC Sophocles was appointed to a special council of ten *probouloi*, whose actions seem to have paved the way for a brief and terrible period of oligarchy in Athens (Jameson 1971). Sophocles, then, was hardly a poet living in modern isolation, paying no attention to the culture and politics in which he lived; there is no *prima facie* reason why we should assume that his plays were any more isolated than he was.

2 Politics

Over the past thirty years or so, Sophocles has increasingly been read in ways that tie him directly to political and social context. Indeed, one of the earliest proponents of such readings in the modern period was Knox, whose *Oedipus at Thebes* (1957) saw in the relentless energy of Oedipus an analogue to the Athenian empire itself. The work of scholars such as Simon Goldhill and Peter Wilson, among others, has argued for understanding the tragic festival itself in the context of the Athenian empire that produced it (Goldhill 1990; Wilson 2000). And careful, nuanced readings of Sophocles' language have demonstrated the ways in which his plays are situated in, and respond to, changes in the philosophical, scientific, and medical thinking of the fifth century (see e.g. Blundell 1989; Mitchell-Boyask 2008). In more recent years, scholars have produced feminist readings of Sophocles, demonstrating the ways in which his plays were engaged in contemporary concerns about the place of women in the fifth-century *polis* (among many others, see Wohl 1998; Foley 2001). Moreover, scholars of Athenian law have recently begun to argue that the legal issues presented in Sophocles' plays, far from existing in a distant mythological past, correspond with surprising fidelity to fifth-century law (Harris, Leao, and Rhodes

2010). All of these trends have resulted in a Sophocles who, though still deeply admired for his poetic and dramatic genius, is more carefully situated in a historical context than he was a generation ago.

3 Companions

As a result of my interest in a historically situated Sophocles, my guiding principle in putting together this volume has been to try to bring out the Sophocles of fifth-century Athens, to see both the poet and his works in their specific historical context. This is not to deny the importance of Sophocles the artist, but rather to suggest that some of the most engaging work of the last 20 years has tied Sophocles' language, poetry, and dramatic technique to the remarkable political and social culture of the fifth century in Athens. In a phrase, this book is not an introduction to "Sophocles the Poet" or, to borrow the title of Cedric Whitman's study, "A Study in Heroic Humanism," but a "Sophocles and...": Sophocles and politics, Sophocles and society, Sophocles and gender, Sophocles and medical science, Sophocles and various modes of critical reception. I hope that, in producing such a book, I will interest readers in the best of the new work on Sophocles of this moment.

A word is also called for about the nature of Companions. This book will have many audiences, each with different needs and desires. To be sure, one of the functions of a book like this is to provide useful summaries of recent and important work. But such summaries, in my view, often lack the verve of original new interpretations and tend to flatten local differences. In approaching the authors who have written for this volume, then, I asked each one to produce new work and to write a chapter that looked forward at least as much as (if not more than) backward. This volume, if it is successful, should open up new paths of Sophoclean scholarship and should play a part in defining the directions of research for the next 20 years. In my view, the authors here have done a splendid job of meeting this challenge (and not a small one at that).

4 This Volume

This volume is divided into seven parts. Even in a volume of this size, it quickly became clear to me that each area represented here could be a volume all by itself. Each of these areas of inquiry, therefore, contains three to nine chapters that should in fact be taken only as representative of exciting work in each subfield. These chapters stake out new ground, but they do not fully map the territory; instead, I hope that, through the chapters themselves and bibliographic sections at the end of each chapter, this book will be a spur to further investigation of Sophocles – the man who did, in all sorts of ways, invent tragedy as we know it.

The first category of chapters, "Text and Author," provides an overview of both technical and historical issues: how the text of Sophocles arrived to us in its current remarkable form, what we know of the life of the man who first produced these plays, and how we chart his place in relation to the other two canonical Athenian playwrights, Aeschylus and Euripides.

This section is followed by the longest one of the book: a series of chapters on each of the extant plays. The pieces contained here, more than those in other sections, serve a

double purpose: they offer thorough overviews of the major issues presented by each play, and they strike out in new directions, providing fresh readings. By necessity, these chapters also touch on the guiding themes of other sections in the book: Kitzen's reading of the *Trachiniae*, for example, has much to say about representations of gender, and Liapis' analysis of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* presents a new understanding of the dramatic techniques used in that play. This section also includes new chapters on the *Ichneutae*, a Sophoclean satyr play from which we have significant fragments, and on the other extant fragments. These often neglected texts reveal surprising aspects of Sophocles as a poet and dramatist.

The following section, Part III, contains four chapters that deal with Sophoclean technique: his use of stage conventions, his use of particular modes of speech, and his treatment of the tragic chorus. To be sure, many other chapters could be written about various aspects of Sophocles as a dramatic artist; the selection here, however, highlights some of the most distinctive features of his dramas.

Part IV consists of a series of chapters that explicitly investigate Sophocles' interaction with contemporary political, religious, and intellectual thought. These chapters all deal with multiple plays, reaching out across Sophocles' career and his involvement in Athenian life of the fifth century. Needless to say, the authors in this section do not all agree with one another on every point; it is a necessary feature of any artistic artifact that it will produce different understandings of its relation to the time that produced it, and Sophocles viewed through the lens of law displays differently from Sophocles viewed through the lens of class conflict.

Though the chapters in the next section could have been folded into the previous one, it seemed wise, given the large body of outstanding work produced in the last decades, to have a separate section dedicated to issues of gender and sexuality. The chapters here go beyond other recent work on Sophocles and gender, in one case questioning the validity of gender as an interpretive category in Sophocles' plays, and in the others producing readings of specific aspects of gender (motherhood, marriage) and of its relation to other socially produced states (such as freedom).

The last two sections take us deliberately out of fifth-century Athens, to focus on the ways in which Sophocles has been read in subsequent centuries. Part VI presents a series of chapters that deal with important interpretations of Sophocles' plays. Here too, however, my interest has been a historicizing one. Rather than commissioning a Freudian reading of Sophocles, for example, I asked for a chapter that would discuss Freud's reading of Sophocles in *its* historical context. That there are only six titles in this section highlights the extent to which this volume can only provide a sampling of the available possibilities: the various historical moments that have produced their own Sophocles are virtually limitless, and I have done no more than collect several pieces that touch on some of the most important ones.

Similarly, the final section of this volume, Part VII, deals with an area of research that has, in the last decade, seen an absolute explosion of exciting work: reception. Though Sophocles' plays belong, in a sense, to the fifth-century Athenian context in which they were originally produced, they are also constantly being re-interpreted, re-imagined, and re-produced. These "receptions" of Sophocles are fascinating in the many ways that they shift and change the focus of canonical works (especially the *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*). The best work in reception, however, does more than simply point out that a new work of fiction has its roots in Sophocles; it shows how those shifts and changes in form and content belong to their own historical moments, reflecting the particular

political and philosophical concerns of their times and authors. In their own way, by making what seems at first familiar fit into a different mold, these works of reception allow us to see the jagged edges of Sophoclean drama, formerly worn smooth by too many repeated readings. Again, this area of scholarship is almost limitless; I have provided a sample of some of the areas in which reception work has been done in recent years.

5 Conclusions

A volume such as this one is necessarily multivocal. What surprised me in putting it together was the extent to which it seems that there is still so much more to be done. Any of the sections of this volume could occupy a separate volume of the same size and length as this one. I hope, however, that the readers of this collection will find it as fresh as I have in the process of assembling and editing it. If it offers a compass and a directional guide for future work on Sophocles – an author whose heroes emerge no less compelling for having been restored to a sense of time and place – then it will have done its work.

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