

Andreas Markantonatos, (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Sophocles*. Leiden: Brill, 2012. Pp. xxii, 737. ISBN 9789004184923, hardback., \$247.00.

This massive book, some 33 essays averaging 20 pages apiece, has eight unequal parts: The Poet and His Work (11 essays); Sophoclean Intertextuality (2 essays); Sophocles The Innovator: Music, Language, Narrative (4 essays); Image and Performance (2 essays); Religion, History, and Politics (4 essays); Sophoclean Anthropology: Status and Gender (2 essays); Instructing the Polis: Education Philosophy, Irony (3 essays); Ancients and Moderns: The Reception of Sophocles (4 essays). There is a 54-page bibliography, 10-page index of subjects, and 12-page index of Sophoclean passages.

The editor, Andreas Markantonatos, who has written two fine books on *Oedipus at Colonus*, has assembled an all-star cast. The result is a fine collection of essays on a vast array of topics. Given the *historically-inclined* audience for whom this review is primarily intended, I will review just one article, namely Kurt Raaflaub's 'Sophocles the Political Thinker' (471–88). Space limitations preclude discussion of the only other historical essay, Sarah Ferrario's 'Political Tragedy: Sophocles and Athenian History' (447–70); suffice it to say that that essay draws on quite a few more modern 'political' discussions than does Raaflaub and so is an important companion to his essay.

Raaflaub opens with a general discussion of the political dimension of Greek tragedy, noting that the dramatists "were not simply entertainers but...voices of communal conscience and responsibility" who inherited "a political and didactic function" from Homer and some of the early lyric and elegiac poets (471–2). The fifth century saw profound cultural transformations which caused "massive challenges and tensions that needed to be worked out" and resulted in "the political culture of tragedy" (473). What role did the tragedian play in all this, especially since tragedy, unlike comedy, "is not directly and openly political"? What I missed here was a fuller discussion of the question 'Why Athens?' Why was 'Greek tragedy' primarily an *Athenian* phenomenon? In what ways was tragedy's production primarily dependent on Athens, her empire, and her democracy? And in what ways would answers to such questions impact the author's discussion of Sophocles as a 'political thinker'?

Certainly some tragedies (e.g. Aeschylus' *Suppliants* of 463 BCE, which might be read as "an endorsement of democracy," 474) emphasized the presentation of moral and civic models, but this is not generally the case in Sophocles, whose seven surviving plays present no "unambiguously positive or negative models" (474). So what does Sophocles present? To answer this question Raaflaub examines the four most overtly political tragedies which cover a span of some four decades (450–409): *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and *Philoctetes*. I discuss his readings of all four plays.

Ajax, like *Antigone*, was probably produced in the 440s. It has rarely been interpreted from a political perspective but the wrangling between Teucer (Ajax's half-brother) and the sons of Atreus (Menelaus, king of Sparta, and Agamemnon, commander of the

Greek army at Troy) over the burial of Ajax's corpse in the second half of the play certainly brings up *power issues* relevant to mid-century Athens. Should Ajax's body, which after his suicide at line 866 dominates center-stage, be buried or not? The tyrannical Atreidae, insisting on rigid obedience to law and authority, refuse burial; Teucer naturally insists on it. The stalemate is broken, surprisingly, by Ajax's (imagined) worst enemy, Odysseus, who persuades Agamemnon to allow the burial by recalling Ajax's superlative valor at Troy and by appealing to justice rather than hatred of past enemies (1332–45). In defending Ajax in this manner Odysseus thus “displays new qualities needed in a community based on equal participation by all, and shows ways to overcome an old aristocratic value system that is based on stark contrasts, rigid claims to honour upheld at all costs, and preference for personal over communal considerations” (478–9). In sum, “*Ajax* dramatizes important problems of Athenian democracy and relations among citizens” (479) and also the persistent tension between the potent hegemony of the Athenian empire and its subordinate subjects.

The famously fierce antagonists of *Antigone* represent the competing claims of family and city. As Raaflaub puts it, “Sophocles here problematizes the relations between ruler and subjects and addresses the question of how far the citizens' duty to obey the authorities extends” (480). Creon has decreed Antigone's brother Polynices to be a traitor who must not be buried. By putting ever-increasing pressure on the unyielding king through the figures of Antigone, Ismene, Haemon, and the Chorus of elder statesmen, Sophocles explores various possibilities of political action and, in that process, enhances the audience's own ability to grapple with such challenges (481). That the audience has such ability is implied in the so-called ‘Ode to Man’ (332–71) which extols human resourcefulness and skill (*technē*). Many readers have taken Creon's tyrannical behavior to reflect Pericles' harsh rule or Athens' harsh hegemony over its many subject cities. Raaflaub, who prefers to take Creon as symbolic of the oppression of *Athens* rather than of *Pericles*, notes that “with Creon as with Athens, it is less imprudence than intransigence and suppression of dissent that turns the leader into a tyrant” (481).

Oedipus Tyrannus seems to have been produced c.429 BCE just as the great plague struck Athens at the outset of the Peloponnesian War. Raaflaub states that the Theban king, “despite his best intentions, is destroyed not least by his own stubbornness and lack of insight” (483). But what stubbornness, other than his relentless pursuit of the truth regarding Laius' murderer, destroys Oedipus? And what lack of insight, other than not knowing the true identity of his biological parents? Raaflaub claims that Oedipus “is called several times and emphatically tyrant, and in the course of the play he develops many of the typological characteristics of a tyrant” (483). Since this is a highly controversial statement, it would have been helpful to see those “many typological characteristics of a tyrant” set forth. Furthermore it is untrue that Oedipus is emphatically called ‘tyrant’; he is called ‘*tyrannos*’ but that word in tragedy almost always means ‘ruler, prince, absolute monarch’, often being synonymous with *basileus*, ‘king.’ It certainly need not and usually does not carry the pejorative connotation of our

word 'tyrant'; not until Plato and the orators does the word carry a necessarily autocratic connotation. Of the fifteen times 'tyrannos' and its cognates occur in *Oedipus*, only once, in the second stasimon, does it unequivocally mean 'tyrant' and that one occurrence ('hybris breeds a *tyrant*', 873) seems conspicuously and consciously ambiguous in its point of reference. It might refer to Oedipus but that case needs to be made, not just asserted.

Raaflaub's main point here, following the lead of Victor Ehrenberg's *Sophocles and Pericles* (1954), is that the Athenian audience would have seen shades of Pericles in the character of Oedipus. Or perhaps more likely (in Raaflaub's view) they would have seen Oedipus as "an embodiment of the collective character of the Athenians" and their 'tyrant city' (484), as was famously argued by Bernard Knox in *Oedipus at Thebes* (1957). Whether one agrees with these analyses or not, they are certainly suggestive and Raaflaub's conclusion seems on target: "Here too myth becomes a medium for dissecting and illuminating essential political issues, and inducing the citizens to become aware of them and confront them" (484). I wonder whether Raaflaub, in light of this and his other readings, sees Sophocles himself in the camp of anti-Spartan Pericles or perhaps rather in the camp of his predecessor, the pro-Spartan Kimon, who was one of the judges who awarded the first-place prize to Sophocles in his first performance in 468 when he defeated Aeschylus (for whose *Persians* Pericles himself had been the *choregos* in 472).

Philoctetes won first prize at the City Dionysia in 409 BCE, in the 22nd year of the Peloponnesian War, "soon after the oligarchy of the 400 and the more moderate regime of the 5,000 had been overthrown and democracy restored. It was a turbulent period" (485). In 412/11 BCE, in the aftermath of the massive destruction of the Athenian fleet in Syracuse that brought the Sicilian Expedition to an ignominious conclusion in the autumn of 413, the 83-year-old Sophocles was chosen to advise the city in this time crisis. Initially, due to the lack of better alternatives, Sophocles, who was no dyed-in-the-wool oligarch, supported — as an unpleasant necessity — the coup by the 400 oligarchs. When he saw their violent ways, however, he turned against them. Soon democracy was restored but it came at a high price; many of the culprits and their friends were executed or exiled.

That is the political context of this late play which pits the crippled Philoctetes, friend of Achilles, against the unsavory relativist Odysseus, who had himself abandoned the snake-bitten Philoctetes ten years earlier on the desert island of Lemnos (not far from Troy) and who will use any means to sack Troy. In short, Sophocles creates a head-on collision between two Homeric figures who represent *physis* (inborn nature) and *nomos* (social convention) respectively. It turns out that a prophecy informs the utilitarian Odysseus that he needs Philoctetes and/or his magical bow to sack Troy. To complicate his plot Sophocles injects Achilles' teenage son Neo-ptolemus ('Mr. New at War') into the middle of this conflict. Odysseus persuades the young man to set his shame aside for just one day and steal Philoctetes' bow. The lad initially assents but the more he gets to know and respect the marooned *Philo*-ctetes ('he who possesses love') and becomes his

friend (*philos*), the more difficult his moral dilemma becomes. Finally, although Achilles' son could have stolen Philoctetes' bow, he recovers his true Achillean self (*physis*) and agrees to take Philoctetes home rather than to Troy. But because this ending would violate the facts of the traditional myth about the sack of Troy, Heracles appears suddenly and unexpectedly, *ex machina* (1409), and persuades Philoctetes to go with Neoptolemus to Troy where, he promises, the epileptic man will be cured by the healer Asclepius, and will sack Troy with his new friend, and both men will win undying glory for their heroism and valor, just as Heracles did for his twelve labors.

Thus, as Raaflaub states, the ending allows the characters “to overcome profound differences in attitudes, convictions, and methods in the interest of shared (communal) needs and goals” (487). That generic conclusion seems fair enough, especially given the charged political context in which this play was performed, i.e. the first City Dionysia (409 BCE) after the restoration of democracy. But as to the specifics of the ending, it seems to me that Raaflaub has mistaken Sophocles' purpose. He calls Heracles' speech (1409–44), delivered from the roof of the stage building in a mixture of anapests and iambic trimeters, “rather uninspiring” (487), stating that it “emphasizes personal rather than communal aspects” and that Philoctetes and Neoptolemus submit to this necessity, “unwilling though they are” (488). None of these three claims are accurate. After hearing Heracles speak both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus are quite willing to go to Troy, as the text indicates (1447–8). And the ending is hardly ‘uninspiring.’ On the contrary, as William Arrowsmith has shown, it is one of the most compelling and exciting endings in extant tragedy, one in which the dramatist has created a thing of beauty out of a mythological necessity: “Heracles appears ... not because Sophocles wanted a positive ending, but because Philoctetes' very nature – his humanity and love – requires Heracles to appear, just as Philoctetes' intolerable sufferings *almost* prevent Heracles from appearing. It is a perilous victory that Sophocles intends here, a bare victory, perhaps little more than a hope, but it is a hope in the deepest possible relation to the turbulence created Only a very great poet could have ... wrestled such immense turbulence – all of man's agony of condition and social desperation – into this kind of order. The order is just barely large enough to contain the disorder the plays shows us. In some sense it is not order at all, but an image of man's most desperate bravery – trying to be moral in a world which offers almost no evidence of morality or meaning ... Philoctetes goes to Troy because Neoptolemus' sympathy and fellow-love prove that human society is finally a possibility, a project of courageous hope Heracles in this play is, I think, less divine intervention than a projection of what is noblest and most divine in Philoctetes.” [Arrowsmith, “Turbulence in the Humanities’ *Arion*, Third Series, 2.2–3 (1992–3) 194–208, esp. 202–3; this essay was first published in 1965.]

In sum, Raaflaub's political readings of the two earlier plays, *Ajax* and *Antigone*, are generally persuasive in the way that Christian Meyer's essays on the same two plays are persuasive [see *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy* (1993) 166–203]. But his readings of *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Philoctetes* are less so, especially when one looks closely at his

understanding of the details of those plays. In the end I certainly agree with his concluding sentence that “by asking penetrating and unsettling questions, he [Sophocles] raised the citizens’ critical awareness and enabled them to cope better with the manifold challenges they were facing” (488). But couldn’t the same thing be said of Aeschylus and Euripides? Otherwise put, what is unique about Sophocles’ contribution as a ‘political thinker’?

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