

## BOOK REVIEW

*Tragedy and Archaic Greek Thought*. Edited by Douglas Cairns. Swansea and London: The Classical Press of Wales, 2013. Pp. liv + 262. Hardcover, \$100.00. ISBN 978-1-905125-57-9.

This volume of essays sets itself apart from much current Anglophone scholarship on Greek tragedy. In his introduction, Douglas Cairns notes that from the 1980s on many critics focused on the genre's "contemporary civic, political, ritual, and performative contexts" (ix; I would be inclined to date this development to the 1960s, when J.-P. Vernant's initial publications appeared). The 1990s brought increasing critical attention to the afterlife of tragedy as manifested in performance and reception studies, and that trend continues to this day. Without rejecting these approaches, Cairns aims to direct attention to the archaic thought-world of the plays—a staple of earlier scholarship.

The work under review originated in a conference, jointly organized by Cairns and Michael Lurje, that took place in Edinburgh in 2008. Cumulatively its eight essays suggest that even as the performance and reception waves are cresting, a revisionist counter-movement has begun. This counter-movement focuses on "questions of the role of the gods and fate in human action; of the justice or otherwise of the gods and of the world over which they preside; of the causes of human suffering and of the stability, indeed of the nature and possibility of human happiness" (x). These questions are raised either explicitly or implicitly in every tragedy that has survived, and they repay the attention they receive here.

More than many collections, this volume reflects the editor's influence and conveys a unified point of view. Cairns' introduction does not merely weave together the essays that follow, but also features a discussion of *atē* in Sophocles' *Antigone* that could easily have been a freestanding article. Additionally, he contributes a polemical chapter on the decisive role of Apollo in *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

Cairns never equates archaic belief with intellectual backwardness; he is at pains to distinguish his approach from the "progressivist and teleological" (x) assumptions of earlier studies (such as Bruno Snell's *Discovery of the Mind* [English translation New York, 1960] or A. W. H. Adkins' *Merit and Responsibility* [Oxford, 1960]), and his contributors follow suit. In "'Archaic' Guilt in Sophocles' *Oedipus*

*Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*,” Bill Allan argues against the easy assumption that Sophocles updated his thinking about guilt and responsibility between *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Two subsequent critics deal with intellectual development and replacement: in “*Atê* in Aeschylus,” Alan Sommerstein considers the evolution of the term *atê* from a secular to a religious concept, and in “Aeschylus, Herakleitos, and Pythagoreanism,” Richard Seaford argues for a shift over the course of the *Oresteia* from a Heraclitean- to a Pythagorean-inflected cosmology. Neither discussion, however, suggests that a primitive outlook is giving way to a more advanced one.

Within his thematic framework, the editor leaves room for fruitful divergences of opinion. In “Divine and Human Action in *Oedipus Tyrannus*,” Cairns excoriates E. R. Dodds, while Michael Lloyd opens his essay (“The Mutability of Fortune in Euripides”) with a virtual homage to that influential scholar. As Lloyd sketches the chronological parameters and the characteristic thought patterns of the archaic age, he quotes from *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951) three times in succession.

The distribution of articles is revealing. Three focus on Aeschylus, four (not counting Cairns’ introduction) on Sophocles, and one on Euripides. Aeschylus is the most obvious candidate for inclusion, since his archaic credentials are taken for granted. Euripides is perhaps the hardest sell because, as Lloyd observes, “a long tradition of interpretation treats him as an innovator both in thought and in dramatic style, whose commitment to the ideas of the sophists implies a corresponding rejection of earlier modes of thought” (207). Sophocles was presumably the most appealing to the contributors because his affiliations are contested: side by side in his plays can be found pessimistic assumptions about the mortal condition that hark back to archaic determinism, and optimistic views of human agency that evoke the fifth-century enlightenment. Although Cairns claims Sophocles for the archaic view, his arguments are not without their difficulties, as we shall see.

Two essays set themselves the limited task of identifying the archaic precursors of specific passages from tragedy. As noted above, Seaford detects similarities to Presocratic cosmology in the *Oresteia*, finding special significance in Aeschylus’ predilection (shared with Pythagoras) for the number three. Since three is also a number ubiquitous in mythology and folk-tale, this explanation may be unnecessarily elaborate. In an article (“Sophocles and the Wisdom of Silenus”) reprinted from a hard-to-find *Festschrift*, P. E. Easterling displays her characteristic gift for close reading as she disentangles intertextual references in the third stasimon of

*Oedipus at Colonus*. In particular, she traces the Chorus' claim that "not to be born trumps every consideration" (OC 1224–5) to the counsel of an unlikely wisdom figure—Silenus, father of the satyrs—as filtered through Theognis and Bacchylides.

The most far-reaching of the articles on Aeschylus is Fritz-Gregor Herrmann's discussion of "Eteocles' Decision in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*." Herrmann minutely analyzes the shield scene in that play and makes the intriguing suggestion that Eteocles chose the warriors for each gate by lot and that (as in *Eumenides*) the process of drawing lots was enacted on stage. Such a tableau brings fifth-century Attic military and democratic practice into visual juxtaposition with archaic belief in the inevitability of destiny (59–60).

The essays on Sophocles, all of which concern the three Oedipus plays, can sometimes be tendentious in their focus on the archaic substratum. Bill Allan astutely notes the rhetorical considerations that underpin Oedipus' revised explanation of his crimes in *Oedipus at Colonus*, but he might have given more weight to the mental alterations brought about by time, which Oedipus in the play's opening lines identifies as his teacher. Both Cairns in his introduction and Vayos Liapis in "Creon the Labdacid" judge Antigone with unwarranted severity. Liapis characterizes her as immoderate in her loyalty to her doomed family and transgressive in her behavior. Although he recognizes that by the end of the play Antigone has been vindicated, while her adversary Creon has deteriorated until he becomes a virtual Labdacid himself, Liapis fails to acknowledge Antigone's loveliness. That quality is not the projection of sentimental modern readings, but attested in the play by her sister, her fiancé, and even the Theban citizens.

In "Divine and Human Action in *Oedipus Tyrannus*," Cairns proposes that Apollo motivates not only Oedipus' parricide and incest, but also his self-blinding. At OT 1331–2, however, and again at OT 1369–70, the text makes it clear that this act is not over-determined, as Cairns argues ("Oedipus' self-blinding is ... something that Apollo causes; but it is also something that Oedipus ... causes," 136), but Oedipus' alone. It is he who improvises this unexpected, drastic, but efficacious punishment-cum-remedy, and he vehemently defends his choice to the horrified chorus.

Equipped with an *index locorum* as well as a subject index, the volume lends itself to rapid spot-checking as well as to sustained perusal. Its emphasis is productive not only because the most popular approaches to tragedy may now be starting to wear thin, but also for practical reasons that bear on the survival of classics as a

discipline. As any instructor quickly realizes, it is the existential questions posed by tragedy that draw students in—and inspire some of them to study ancient Greek and become classicists in their turn.

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