

BOOK REVIEW

Sophocles: Philoctetes. Edited by SCHEIN, SETH L. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xii + 375. Paper, \$36.99. ISBN 978-0-521-68143-8.

Many have long found T. B. L. Webster's *Philoctetes* in the Cambridge green-and-yellow series unsatisfactory. It is reliable on grammar and meter, but has very little to help the student in appreciate the play as a drama or a literary text, and its bibliography is meager. Because it used Pearson's text, with which Webster often disagreed, many notes that were helpful to the scholar were confusing for the student, first explaining the text as printed and then arguing that it was wrong. So, many have been awaiting Seth Schein's new commentary and looking forward to teaching *Philoctetes* with it.

The most important question in evaluating a commentary of this kind is whether it provides the right amount of help in understanding the text to the audience for which it is intended. A small group of Michigan graduate student volunteers—members of the target audience—read selected sections of the play for me as experimental subjects. To use the language of a typical business survey, the commentary met or surpassed their expectations. They were surprised at how often it translates difficult passages, but this is characteristic of the series.

Both introduction and commentary are certainly literary in ways that Webster's was not. The introduction is especially strong on reception, and also has a full discussion of intertextualities with Homer and Euripides' *Cyclops*. The introduction also has a short section on the historical context, which rejects interpretations that identify characters with particular individuals (e.g. Alcibiades) while stressing Odysseus' associations with contemporary politicians. Otherwise interpretive guidance appears mainly in a section on "The Chorus and the Characters." Schein has a very clear view of the chorus as entirely consistent—although their pity for Philoctetes is sincere, it never threatens their dedication to their mission. He stresses how different this chorus is from other Sophoclean choruses in their complete subordination to the dramatic action. Schein is fair in his summary of the differing interpretations of Heracles' epiphany, but argues that the original audience would have found the intervention appropriate and plausible. In general,

Schein manages very well to present his own views on crucial issues without telling the reader what to think all the time.

Meter receives excellent treatment. Staging is addressed only briefly in the introduction, but the most important dramatic actions are signaled and sensitively handled in the commentary; the introduction also does not address the famous difficulty of Helenus' prophecy, but notes make it clear that Schein believes that the audience cannot be confident about what the prophecy actually said and what has been changed in as it was quoted. The bibliography is generous and not overly Anglocentric. The commentary is very helpful on style, explaining particle combinations succinctly, pointing to unusual words and syntax, pointing to the effects of hyperbaton and enjambment, and citing genuinely relevant parallels. While I did not often learn something truly new about the Greek, the notes repeatedly sharpened my attention, making me see features that might have slipped by. Although Schein to my taste tends to overinterpret stylistic and metrical phenomena, I am happy to have been brought to consider their possible significance.

The text is generally conservative and consistently thoughtful (a reader may disagree but will see why Schein has made the choices he has). The sharpest difference between Schein's text and the OCT of Wilson-Lloyd-Jones is Schein's rejection of the arguments that 385–88 and 1218–21 are interpolated.

I do have a few quibbles. Occasionally, there are strange sentences, such as note 94 on page 31, "If there was a cult of Philoctetes on Chryse, it would not have been at the site of his grave in Italy, where there certainly was a hero-cult...but at the site where he was bitten by the serpent." On 1068–9, the note first says that Odysseus is "mocking" Neoptolemus and then that he is "not so much mocking as appealing to him." Luckily, such confusions are few. I was not entirely happy with the treatment of Aeschylus' and Euripides' *Philoctetes*-plays, because he de-emphasizes the differences between them in order to stress Sophocles' originality (although he brings that out very clearly) and does not mention the Trojan embassy in Euripides. On page 35, Schein says that "Sophoclean poetry is plainer in its relatively unadorned diction than that of Aeschylus or Euripides, with far fewer compound adjectives and far less stylistic ornament." This is not accurate—Sophocles uses fewer compound adjectives than Aeschylus, but more than Euripides, according to Mark Griffith's numbers, although *Philoctetes* has the lowest number in extant Sophocles.¹ The classification of Sophocles' abstract nouns as ionicisms, with the comment that many have parallels in "fifth-century Ionic prose, especially medical

¹ In I. J. F. de Jong and A. Rijksbaron, edd, *Sophocles and the Greek Language* (Leiden 2006), 55.

and philosophical writings,” seems to me to put the emphasis in the wrong place, especially since Schein does not mention Thucydides here—that is, the modernity and “intellectual” quality of these words was surely what was salient.

This volume is an excellent addition to an excellent series.

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