BOOK REVIEW

Late Sophocles: The Hero's Evolution in Electra, Philoctetes, *and* Oedipus at Colonus. By THOMAS VAN NORTWICK. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015. Pp. xiv + 154. Hardcover, $65.00. ISBN 978-0-472-11956-1.

This study focuses on the last three plays of Sophocles with the intent of identifying contemporary issues in late fifth-century BCE Athens. The author argues that Sophocles, in the last decade of his life, deliberately "wrote these plays to show the eventual triumph of a disempowered protagonist rather than the ruin of someone who is viewed with envy by others" (viii). In these last three plays, the author (Van Nortwick) argues, Sophocles changes his vision of the tragic hero, reflecting "new ideas about the sources of human excellence" (2), taking the reader back to the traits found in Homer's Achilles—first, that he goes too far in his quest for vengeance, and second, in his stubborn selfishness, pride and anger, making him *deinos,* "to be treated with care." (4; cf. 86, 98, 135 n. 26).

Van Nortwick sees these traits in all of Sophocles' heroes, but in the last three plays, Sophocles distances his heroes from the central action of the play, bringing some detachment from the original story. The heroes of these last three dramas endure the manipulations of others, waiting for their lives to gain meaning through suffering. Physically, there is a sense in all three heroes of their "inwardness, latency, even gestation, which replaces the usual outward thrust of heroic will. Electra is said to 'give birth to war in her soul' (*El.* 218–219); Philoctetes' wound is always ready to burst forth with pus, oozing infection from inside; Oedipus, blind and led around by children, recalls Teiresias iin *Oedipus Tyrannus*, who 'nourishes (*trephō*, *OT* 356) truth inside himself….In all three plays, the issue of profit (*kerdos* or *onēsis*) figures prominently." (96–97; cf. 116).

Van Nortwick begins with the *Electra*, wherein the "mythical revenge story… carries its own imperatives: Orestes must avenge his father's murder; decisive action is needed; no time for hesitation." (7) Sophocles'

Orestes, however, attributes his deceit (his feigned death) to Apollo (as opposed to Homer's attributing Odysseus' use of deceit to Odysseus himself). Van Nortwick points out the fifth-century Athenian concern with the *logos/ergon* polarity, wherein the claim of *logos* to always represent the truth would be viewed with suspicion; as a result, Apollo had instructed Orestes to use deceit. But it is Electra, not Orestes, who is the hero of this play. She is the focal point of the play, not an active agent in the death plot. Van Nortwick closely examines the plot, comparing it to Aeschylus' and Euripides' versions of the story. Whereas in Aeschylus' trilogy, for example, the characters are played out against a vast cosmic backdrop, "Sophocles has created characters whose interior life and past history complicate our understanding of motive and causation" (20).

Sophocles' Electra, sometimes identified with the Erinyes, identifies closely with the women of the chorus. In the end, Van Nortwick concludes that "Sophocles supplies little to help us decide if 'justice' has been done <by the killing of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus>, or even what <this> term might mean in the context of this work" (37). In Electra herself, however, Van Nortwick concludes that Sophocles has created "one of his most powerful and most disturbing heroes." He also shows that "a sung version" of the exchange between chorus and actor appears here first.... in extant Sophoclean drama," thus supplanting a traditional choral song with a "sung dialogue"(11). The effect "is to develop Electra's character relationally... bringing an immediate response from the sympathetic older women." He concludes that Sophocles is here calling into question the form of Athenian tragic drama "as a reliable mirror of the city's values" (41).

Van Nortwick then examines the *Philoctetes,* which, like the *Electra,* opens with two men—Odysseus and Neoptolemus—plotting. "By the late fifth century, Odysseus had become the paradigm for the clever, shifty speaker who manipulates others with words." (43) Comparing the Cyclops episode from the *Odyssey* to the opening of the *Philoctetes*—both characters (the Cyclops and Philoctetes) had been tricked by Odysseus—Van Nortwick suggests a meditation on the implications of the Golden Age, raising the question, "who will be the savage in this play and who will be the civilizing hero?" (45). In his goal of capturing Herakles' bow (which is necessary for the fall of Troy), Odysseus must contend with

Philoctetes to win the support of Neoptolemus, who comes to recognize in Philoctetes a suffering mortal rather than a mere pawn to be manipulated in order to complete this mission.

Van Nortwick neatly pursues and develops the struggles of all three, along with the gradual development of the figure of Philoctetes. He concludes that Philoctetes, whose nature emerges only very slowly in the course of the play, shares many traits with Sophocles' Electra. Both lack the physical abilities we usually associate with Greek heroes, but they are the "guardians of traditional aristocratic values" (79). There are unresolved questions at the end—will Philoctetes, who will be the agent for the fall of Troy, go there himself, or will only the bow be there?

In the third play discussed, the *Oedipus at Colonus,* Van Nortwick argues, it is Oedipus' body that will become the focus for the wrangling over the outcome of various prophecies (80). Beginning with a map of the location of the final play (the Theater of Dionysus), Van Nortwick considers the meaning of the allotment of space—on the left/East, is Entrance, Thebes, and the Grove of Trees; on the right/West is the Exit, Athens, and the Equestrian statue. To the South is the Grove of the Eumenides and the *skēnē*; to the North is the audience and the Acropolis. Thebes, as is usual in Athenian tragedy, represents the Anti-Athens, while Athens offers the promise of sanctuary. While others pull him back and forth, Oedipus finally opts to be buried near Athens, which has him "moving in concert with the path of the sun" (84.) A prophecy of Apollo has told Oedipus to end his wandering in the Grove of the Eumenides, and "by doing so, he will bring profit (*kerdē*) to those who receive him and destruction to those who send him away" (85).

In the *Oedipus at Colonus,* the hero's displacement is more overt, as he remains aloof from the struggle between his sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, with the result that Polyneices chooses to return to Thebes and certain death, in order to avoid shame (5). Van Nortwick argues that Oedipus' detachment suggests that Sophocles was beginning to question the usefulness of old myths for responding to problems of his time. For him, the definition of "hero" is anachronistic; in Sophocles' plays, "heroes" do not imply moral approval. He concludes that "Despite the many parallels between Oedipus and his heroic predecessors in *Electra* and *Philoctetes*, the

story of the old man's last days stand apart from the previous two works—indeed <from> most Greek literature—in its insistence on the need to *transcend* the tensions and struggles, the *agōnes,* that dominate so much of ancient Greek culture" (111).

This has been a brief summary of a series of complex discussions of the views of Sophocles at a time when Athens itself had/was undergoing a revision of its values, particularly in the historical context of the last years of the Peloponnesian Wars, the "intellectual ferment... bubbling up alongside the new democratic form of government…, debates about the nature of life…, the best form of society" and values, and at the same time the definition of "hero" (117). The author provides a most satisfying discussion of Sophocles' struggle with these ideas and terms.

PATRICIA A. JOHNSTON

Brandeis University, johnston@brandeis.edu