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Review: Sophocles: A Study of his Theater in its Political and Social Context

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Jacques Jouanna, *Sophocles: A Study of His Theater in Its Political and Social Context*. Steven Rendall, trans. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 896 pp. ISBN: 9780691172071. \$55.00. Hardcover.

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“Sophocles does not need to be defended,” Jacques Jouanna asserts toward the end of his compendious and abundant, *Sophocles*, “he needs to be known” (458). The subtitle of this volume, “a study of his theater in its political and social context” indicates how Jouanna proposes to know the man and his work. Sophocles the tragic poet was also an Athenian, an Athenian known both for his political involvement as well as for his piety. In contrast to the revisionist readings of Greek tragedy as, in J. Peter Euben’s words, an institution “whose theoretical dimensions were made possible by a democratic culture it helped define, sustain, and question,”¹ Jouanna devotes his energies primarily to the aesthetic meaning of Sophocles, studying the plays *as theater* with ramifications including but not limited to the democratic polis.

How do you find the man behind the writer? Jouanna notes the diversity of political and religious activity that distinguished Sophocles from other literary men. Sophocles was 5 or 7 at the time of the Athenians’ victory at Marathon. Subsequently he became a political figure, managing the Delian treasury after it was moved from Delphi to Athens. He voted for the Oligarchic 400 in 411 yet opposed its most drastic measures. When Alcibiades returned to Athens, Sophocles composed a tragedy of rejection and return, the *Philoctetes*, that amplified the ambivalence and tension that accompanied this event.

Sophocles was also a religious man. According to the ancient author of the *Life of Sophocles*, he was “loved by the gods like no other.” Sophocles founded temples of Herakles the revealer as well as one to Asclepius. For the latter, Sophocles composed a paean; he glorified both in his work as well. As a tragic playwright, Sophocles honored Dionysus above all, from his brilliant and prize-winning debut in 468, when he won first prize at the age of 27 or 28, to the end of his life and the post-humous *Oedipus at Colonus*.

It would be tempting to triangulate these biographical coordinates with each extant play such that *Oedipus* becomes Athens or *Philoctetes* Alcibiades. To his credit, Jouanna does let Sophocles’ biography determine the readings he offers of the corpus. The connection between *Philoctetes* and Alcibiades operates as suggestive parallel rather than allegory. Like Nietzsche wrote in “Schopenhauer as Educator,” the life here exemplifies the spirit of the work; the work itself, however, elicits this spirit with a richness that on Jouanna’s argument is peerless in Greek literature.

Although Jouanna does not set up his reading of Sophocles in explicit opposition to Aristotle’s account of tragedy in the *Poetics*, the contrast recurs throughout the six substantive chapters Jouanna devotes to major aspects of Sophocles’ tragic art. Jouanna treats the mythic imagination and the difficulty of judging what Aristotle calls “invention” without full knowledge of the myths, let alone immersion in the mythic ether of 5th century Athens. Aristotle emphasizes the

¹ J. Peter Euben, “Introduction,” in *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, ed. J. Peter Euben, 1 – 42. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986: 24.

plot of tragedies but Jouanna begins with spectacle. The modern spectator can reconstruct the plot of many tragedies, but the experience of the plays depended on the spectacle. Sophocles' introduction of the third actor, for example, created a wholly new set of possibilities. For example, Jouanna underscores the brilliance of the three character scene in *Philoctetes* where Philoctetes and Neoptolemus are interrupted by Odysseus. The characters speak briefly in turn during six exchanges; Sophocles' text points to each one's specific gestures and movements. Philoctetes and Neoptolemus overpower the master of words, Odysseus, as they turn away from him and affirm their understanding. "Rhetoric is deconstructed; life takes its revenge" (209).

When Jouanna turns to action, he points out how Aristotle's approach remains too general. Action does happen in time, as Aristotle notes, yet the subdivision of this time into parts misses subtler divisions that Jouanna discusses in terms of "scenes." The breaks between spoken parts and sung parts often introduces discontinuity that Aristotle's divisions overlook. In the case of *Electra*, a dialogue between the chorus and Electra replaces the choral song to integrate the sung parts into the action; this creates a scenic continuity unremarked by the traditional divisional analysis. (Jouanna provides a helpful appendix that presents that structure of each Sophoclean tragedy both in terms of Aristotelian divisions as well as his own division into scenes.)

Characters, contra Aristotle, are not always "as they should be." This description ignores what is familiar or everyday but not necessarily moral in Sophocles' characters. Jouanna provides a rich analysis of the minor characters of Sophocles, treating moments such as the words of the humble chorus in *Ajax* or characters such as the messenger in *Antigone*. Even objects function as wordless characters. The bit of wool that Deianira uses to smear a philter on the tunic for Herakles is destroyed by the sun's heat, which has transformed the floccus into boiling blood. Jouanna writes:

Sophocles has used a little bit of wool reduced to ashes not only to cause the collapse of his character's great illusion, but also to unveil the tragic nature of her own destiny: too much naïve confidence in other people's goodwill, a belated recognition of the significance of an act whose consequences threaten to reduce intentions to nothing. (343)

Such prodigious use of even the most minor elements distinguishes Sophocles from Aeschylus and Euripides. To observe and mark these details is tantamount to knowing the man.

Jouanna's exacting treatment of these first four aspects of Sophocles' plays – the mythic imagination, space and spectacle, time and action, and the characters – lays the foundation for the more constructive and impressive arguments about humans and the gods. Again a contrast with Aristotle proves instructive. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle cites two verses from Antigone's forceful speech asserting the merely human basis of Creon's edict to illustrate what he means by the "general law" common to all humans as opposed to the "particular law" that varies depending on the states. Aristotle describes the unwritten law of *Antigone* as a natural law and not a divine law (In a rare moment of pique, Jouanna cannot help declaring of Aristotle's description: "In the earliest interpretations, the thought of Sophocles' character was used, deformed, even betrayed" [397].) Jouanna asserts contrariwise that "the religious aspect is essential" (Ibid.). Antigone's usage of the term "unwritten law" is the first in extant Greek texts. It would later come to possess the general meaning Aristotle attributes, but in the moment (both

of the play and of ancient Athens), Antigone's distinction between the gods above and the gods below emphasizes the agreement of all gods concerning the necessity of ritually burying the dead. Antigone will have to answer to the gods' tribunal. Jouanna expands on this:

Once humans have breathed their last, their bodies are no longer under the jurisdiction of the city, no matter how they behaved while they were alive. They belong to the gods below. Any decision to prohibit burial is ultimately impious. (399)

You might be inclined to scribble in the margin here, as I did: "Antigone was right!" But Jouanna's interpretation does not simply reduce Sophocles' dramas to morality plays. The chorus's hymn to Dionysus at the end of the play, right after Tiresias has prophesied the action's fateful end and Creon resolves to depart immediately, suggests a more complicated interpretation. Left alone, the chorus hymns Dionysus, asking him to come to their aid. "This hymn," writes Jouanna, "is one of the most accomplished and most fervent prayers in Sophocles' theater" (400). A ritual prayer, it not only performs a religious act in conformity to ritual customs; it also produces an effect on the spectators, arousing emotion and making them think. Moreover, it leaves open the moral question that Antigone's righteousness raises. When the chorus ends with the expression "Iachhus [Bacchus, sc. Dionysus] the Giver," it does not name what Iachhus gives. "Nothing or everything? Nothing and everything?" Jouanna asks (405). The play ends with silence.

Gods see but humans don't. Sophocles places his spectators in position to realize this. The appreciation of tragic irony depends on such a realization: forces from outside indicate the hidden truths that spectators can discern but those on stage cannot. Sophocles works masterfully with the basic sequence of ignorance, discovery, and the explosive effects of this discovery. In *Oedipus the King*, for example, Oedipus believes he has acted correctly in a web of oracles that must be fulfilled. Yet his lucidity weaves the net in which he will be caught. Oedipus' blind, violent attack on Tiresias when the latter has spoken the truth gives a sign of Oedipus' blindness. Yet unlike Creon in *Antigone*, Oedipus becomes anxious as well as angry. The story of the king's murder leads him to wonder to Jocasta about what "tumult" (*anakinêsis*) has come upon him. Sophocles brings this emotion to a raging fortissimo through successive iterations. Jouanna points out the "exceptional scope and rarity" of the words used to designate Oedipus' anxiety, which prepare for the decisive moment at the beginning of the reversal (429). Sophocles thus separates the budding discovery from the reversal, contrary to Aristotle's assertion. Jocasta's discovery is contemporary with Oedipus' reversal; their different discoveries produce a kind of doubling of effects characteristic of Sophocles. Only after the meeting with the Corinthian messenger and the Theban shepherd does Oedipus understand. When he exclaims at that moment "Oh oh! All brought to pass, all true!" Jouanna writes that "Oedipus assess a whole life brought under the sign of the forbidden" (432).

"The gods act silently," asserts Jouanna during his discussion of ignorance, discovery, and the effects of discovery (427). This phrase contains the pulsing heart of his theory of Sophocles and of Sophoclean cosmology. As in *Oedipus the King* so too in life: there is not a single discovery but several; human beings live in shades of ignorance, like the prisoner's in Plato's cave. Unlike Plato, however, Sophocles reveres not philosophic inquiry but the mysteries of dreams, prophecy, and divine intervention. Oedipus' fate was sealed before the tragedy began. Wisdom is

the first condition of happiness; it consists in not committing impieties toward the gods. Given human ignorance, however, this wisdom mostly comes belatedly.

Jouanna saves extended treatment of *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles' last tragedy, for the end of his book. Oedipus has won wisdom from his suffering; from this discovery he emerges convinced of a change in status, one that Sophocles indicates when Oedipus calls himself "sacred and pious." "Nowhere else in Sophocles' theater," Jouanna notes, "does a character call himself 'sacred' (325). Oedipus uses the word again at the final moment when he departs on the god's summons to his final resting place. This reversal of destiny for a tutelary hero of Athens crowns Sophocles' achievement: Oedipus's tomb becomes a sacred site; "the spectator could not have failed to perceive an analogy between the author's destiny and that of his character." What's more, this connection points to the real reasons for Sophocles' heroization: not for his literary work but for his religious work, especially the introduction of the cult of Asclepius to Athens.

Despite all of Jouanna's celebration of Sophocles' brilliance, a sense of loss also shadows the festivities. Only 6% of Sophocles total production remains; for as much as Jouanna conjures it, the felt experience of the performance eludes even the most brilliant contemporary presentations. Regardless of its entanglements with democratic culture, Greek tragedy remains a nebulous, shimmering planet just barely visible to the naked human eye. Immense imagination and enormous erudition seem requisite to approaching the greatness and complexity of Sophocles' oeuvre. Jouanna has advanced the world's understanding closer to this elusive goal.