INTRODUCTION

SOPHOCLES AND HIS CRITICS

Andreas Markantonatos

When writing about an ancient author and his work, we cannot escape the feeling that we are faced with a nearly impossible task: more often than not textual evidence is in short supply, while the enormous distance separating ancient author from modern critic adds a further complication to any attempt at making sense of important issues of historical and social relevance. Writing about Sophocles is no exception. The more we study his work, the more we realize that any conclusions regarding dramaturgy and style, as well as textual criticism and interpretation, must be treated as tentative and contingent. The sceptic may argue that theories purporting to unravel the intricacy of ancient plays have no solid basis in hard fact, and what is more, numerous tantalizing snippets of ancient biographical information are either overblown or fabricated. There is a growing feeling among students of Sophocles that specialists of different theoretical hues and backgrounds have talked too much and too confidently about the poet and his work without paying heed to the considerable difficulties in appraising the veracity of the biographical stories, as well as the fiendish complexity of the textual evidence.

This is partly true. Sophoclean drama has constantly drawn the viewing and reading public, as well as academic experts from all over the world, with its remarkable leading characters of fiery passion and immovable bravery, determined valour and iron firmness. To this we should add Sophocles’ complete mastery of dramatic technique which is unforgettably displayed in the structural arrangement of the plots and the innovative expansion of popular mythical stories. It therefore comes as no surprise that since antiquity people have tried to unlock some of the secrets of his stagecraft by either dissecting his plays or situating his work in its historical and social context. The playtexts of Sophocles have had a magnetic effect on lovers of theatre: the survival of even a tiny portion of his dramatic output over more than two millennia speaks volumes for his popularity. Considering the technological inefficiencies of manuscript transmission, as well as the gradual decline of the oral diffusion of texts, it is nothing less than a miracle
that seven extant plays survived the Middle Ages during which the bulk of ancient Greek literature vanished without trace.

Sophoclean scholarship has a very long history with striking modifications in emphasis and, in certain cases, bewildering changes in viewpoint. When we survey the ancients’ take on Sophocles, starting from the original audience of the plays and moving on to Aristotle and the Alexandrian scholars, we become conscious of the fact that the critical idiom shifted from a purely interpretative perspective to a distinctly editorial approach which put a high priority on the reconstitution of the original Sophoclean texts. In the first phase of Sophoclean criticism, Aristotle’s *Poetics* marked the impressive culmination of centuries of theoretical reflection on Greek tragedy: a wide assortment of interpretations was finally woven into a compelling argument which was to exert an unprecedented influence on modern criticism.

Ironically, it was Aristotle’s flair for creating complicated taxonomies which encouraged the Hellenistic scholars in their focus on the reconstruction of ancient playscripts and the classification of textual evidence. Much as Aristotle formulated a highly convincing proposal which was wide enough to include important aspects of tragic experience, brilliantly enriching a functionalist account of Greek tragedy with crucial elements of aesthetic naturalism and moral realism, Alexandrian critics felt it their duty to establish authoritative texts of the plays which were meticulously catalogued in the Library of Alexandria, as well as producing commentaries (some of them quite voluminous) on selected works. Awed by the sheer force of Aristotle’s general theoretical formulation, they chose to direct their energies to editing Sophocles rather than grappling with interpretation. Their choice proved a wise one, for it is to their intellectual vigour that we owe not only the survival of a large part of Sophocles’ dramas well into the second century BC, but also a gigantic body of scholia and brief critical judgements on the plays. Of especial significance is the editorial attention of Aristophanes of Byzantium, who defended manuscript tradition against extensive revisions made by actors and directors.

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1 See recently Lloyd-Jones (1994a) 15–24; Easterling (2006a); Goldhill/Hall (2009). Although rather dated, both Kirkwood (1957) and Friis Johansen (1962) remain notable for their penetration and insight. There are various online bibliographical guides to publications on the ancient world in general and Sophocles in particular, but *L’Année Philologique*, *Gnomon Online*, and *TOCS-IN* are beyond compare.


3 See (e.g.) Halliwell (1987), (1998) and (2002) esp. 177–233.