CHAPTER 1

Editing Aeschylus for a Modern Readership: Textual Criticism and Other Concerns

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1.1 Introduction

The problems of editing Aeschylus for a modern readership are, to some extent, the same as those involved in editing any Classical Greek or Latin text. In confronting the cultural divide between the 5th century BC and the 21st century AD, the modern editor is faced immediately with the gradual decline in the study of Greek language in schools and universities throughout the 20th century, but especially in its second half. There are now inevitably fewer potential readers for the kind of edition that assumed at least some degree of proficiency in the language, while there are fewer still for the more advanced kind of edition that expects its readers to be at home with a full apparatus criticus and lengthy discussion of textual problems. The price of such editions tends, therefore, to be disconcertingly high. On the other hand, the rapid rise in the popularity of Classical Studies and Classical Civilization courses in both schools and universities in the last fifty years or so has led to a welcome proliferation of translations, often with a few or even extensive notes, which are aimed at readers who do not require an explanation of elementary syntactical or grammatical irregularities. Many teachers who in the 1960s or 1970s first found themselves teaching, with some reluctance and suspicion, courses that involved little or no Greek language were astonished to discover that these students might produce more mature literary, or, in the case of tragedy, dramatic criticism than their fellows who had to spend most of their time worrying about the optative mood or the correct forms of – μι verbs. To read Aeschylus’ Agamemnon was no longer the privilege of those who could cope with Fraenkel’s massive edition,1 and, in any case, given the average length of a university term or semester, many such students must have been frustrated by the failure of their teacher to reach the end of that long play. Students now can read not only the whole of Agamemnon but the whole of Choephori and Eumenides as well. Moreover, in their teaching of such students modern professional

1 Fraenkel (1950).
Classicists have themselves in general learnt much from their colleagues in other disciplines.

Many of the issues involved with editing Aeschylus are similar to those involved in editing the other tragedians, some of them to the editing of any Classical work, some also to the editing of a literary text in any language ancient or modern. My own aim, while dealing with the main practical issues that confront the editor of Aeschylus, has been to focus in particular on those which are peculiar to him. Even when studied in translation, in some respects he presents more problems than the other two tragedians. Even in his own time, or at least soon after it, Aeschylus' language, with its compound epithets and other neologisms, seems to have been considered difficult, highfalutin, and obscure, if we may judge from the way in which Aristophanes parodies it in *Frogs*. Moreover, although he was popular enough for an edict to be passed after his death, allowing his plays, exceptionally for that time, to be restaged at the Athenian City Dionysia, in the 4th century it was the other two tragedians, especially Euripides, whose plays were most often revived. From one point of view that is a blessing for the textual critic of Aeschylus' plays, in that, apart from the end of *Septem*, they are largely free from the probable or certain interpolations of 4th-century actors which bedevil the text especially of Euripides. In our own day Greek language students are much more likely to begin their study of tragedy with the “easier” Sophocles or Euripides, before they turn to Aeschylus, if indeed they ever reach him. It is not surprising that for his delightful parody of the language of Greek tragedy A.E. Housman turned mainly not to Sophocles or Euripides but to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

1.2 The Establishment of a Text

It would, however, be wrong to conclude that editions with a full apparatus criticus and a full treatment of textual problems are outmoded and unnecessary. Readers of translations, versions, and adaptations have a right to take it for

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2 Most (1998) goes back to first principles with the opening words of his Preface, “What is an edition?” and then remarks that the theoretical issues of editing have been discussed less by Classical philologists than by scholars in other fields. His own volume contains only one paper on Greek tragedy, Dawe on “Editing Sophocles for the Third Time.” Most (1999) begins his Preface similarly with “What is a commentary?” and includes one paper on Greek tragedy, Goldhill on “Wipe your Glosses,” which, as it deals with commentaries on Aeschylus, is highly relevant to the subject of the present chapter.

3 See Rader (2011); Griffith (2009: 4–5).