

The Happy Tragedian

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Sophocles:
A Study of His Theater in Its Political and Social Context
by Jacques Jouanna, translated from the French by Steven Rendall. Princeton University Press, 883 pp., \$55.00

Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us
by Simon Critchley. Pantheon, 322 pp., \$26.95

When Sophocles departed the mortal world in his early nineties and arrived in the land of the dead, he chose not to compete for the title of greatest tragic playwright, but reverently ceded that honor to Aeschylus—or so Aristophanes imagined in his comedy *The Frogs*. That deference deprived later generations of much that we might have learned about who Sophocles was and how his fellow Athenians regarded his immense body of work, of which only seven out of some 120 plays survive intact. When *The Frogs* enacts a contest for the tragic crown between the old master Aeschylus and the brash young innovator Euripides, Sophocles and his oeuvre remain undiscussed except for a single enigmatic comment by the god Dionysus, the contest's judge. "He was easygoing up here"—among the living—"and he's easygoing down there," says Dionysus, explaining why he won't try to fetch Sophocles back from the land of the dead: the playwright might decline to come.

The word used by Aristophanes to describe Sophocles, *eukolos* ("easygoing"), is echoed by another comic poet of the day, Phrynichus, who in a now-lost play called the recently deceased tragedian *eudaimôn*—"happy." The two epithets have helped establish the modern image of Sophocles as a contented, well-integrated Athenian, at peace with himself and his city. Contemporaneous evidence suggests that his fellow citizens esteemed and trusted him: they elected him at least twice to important offices, including the *stratêgia*, a ten-man board of military chiefs. As a *stratêgos* in 440 BC, Sophocles served under Pericles in an important campaign to quell the revolt of Samos, a subject state in the Athenian naval empire. The only testimony that survives from this generalship, however, a diary entry by Ion of Chios recording an evening with Sophocles during that campaign, suggests that Pericles did not think much of his colleague's tactical skills and also reveals, incidentally, that Sophocles was a witty conversationalist at drinking parties and had an eye for attractive male wine-pourers.

What bearing does any of this have on the interpretation of Sophocles' plays? The Greeks themselves saw links between his life and his work, sometimes tracing them from the latter to the former rather than, as modern scholars prefer to do, the other way around. An ancient preface to *Antigone*, written

perhaps two centuries after Sophocles' lifetime, claims that the Athenians chose him for the *stratêgia* based on the success of that play. Few modern officeholders have been elected on the strength of their poetic works (Václav Havel comes to mind), but the story is not out of harmony with the politics of mid-fifth-century Athens; most scholars have accepted it, to the point of dating the composition of *Antigone* to 443 or 442 BC, just before the Samos campaign. However, another anecdote, derived from a biography of the same era as the preface, claims that Sophocles died, in 406 or 405, with a verse from

Colonus, the region outside Athens to which Sophocles traced his own birth.

The report of Sophocles' heroization comes from a Byzantine dictionary entry for the cult title "Dexion," or "receiver." Sophocles, the lexicographer claims, was awarded this title after his death because he had "received" the god Asclepius (presumably in the form of a statue) into his home as a transitional stage in the establishment of the cult at Athens. The nineteenth-century excavators of a small shrine on the Acropolis were understandably excited when an inscription dating to less than a century after Sophocles' death



Marie Spartali Stillman: *Antigone Giving the Burial Rites to Her Brother's Body*, 1871

Antigone on his lips, as though he had recently composed that work, so there is room for doubt. (Athenian tragedy was at this point an ephemeral art form; each play was written for a single performance, and it's not clear how the scripts were preserved for later revivals and published anthologies.)

The most pressing of these work-life questions concerns Sophocles' religiosity, since the interaction between the human and the divine was a principal theme of his dramas. Notions arise early in the Greek biographical tradition that he was an especially pious man, that he had a close connection to the healing divinity Asclepius, whose cult he helped establish in Athens, or even that his grave became a site of worship just after his death, as happened in Greece when human beings were elevated to the status of semidivine heroes. If true—but this is a thorny issue—such reports would have wide-ranging implications for the interpretation of Sophocles' plays. In *Philoctetes*, for example, the chronically ill title character, a castaway marooned on a desert island by the Greek army headed to Troy, receives a promise that the son of Asclepius will heal him if he returns to the army and fulfills the prophecy that only with his help can the Greeks win the war. *Oedipus at Colonus*, a play apparently written by Sophocles late in life and produced posthumously by his son, ends with Oedipus becoming a hero whose grave will have divine power—a grave located in

was found to mention Dexion, along with Asclepius, as a deity with state-sponsored rites. So there was a cult of Dexion by this time—but was it a cult of Sophocles? Worshipful ancient biographers liked nothing better than to turn obscure bits of evidence into proof of the divine nature of their subjects. It has seemed likely to some scholars, including Andrew Connolly in a thorough 1998 review of the material, that Dexion was a name clipped out of Athenian religious history and pasted onto a poet who seemed both godlike in talent and pious in temperament. If Sophocles did become divinized, Connolly believes, this only occurred after 330 BC, in an era when Alexander the Great had made the boundary between mortals and gods far more porous than it had been in Sophocles' day.*

Jacques Jouanna, an emeritus professor attached to the Sorbonne, is no hagiographer but a Hellenist esteemed for his work on Hippocrates and Greek medicine. His doorstopper *Sophocles* assembles the results of more than a decade of intense research; the notes and bibliography are exhaustive, and his long appendices include an invaluable catalog compiling

*See Andrew Connolly, "Was Sophocles Heroised as Dexion?" *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 118 (November 1998).

all that is known about Sophocles' lost dramas. He has gone farther than any classicist has in a long time, or is likely to go for a long time to come, toward reconstructing the life of his subject and the cultural and literary landscape in which he wrote.

Yet he has sometimes gone too far. The biographical portion of his study, occupying its first hundred pages, makes highly questionable assertions. Jouanna writes in euphoric tones, for example, about the Dexion inscription: "How much precise information [it gives] about the heroized Sophocles, as soon as we compare the inscription with the article in the Byzantine dictionary!" He does not consider the possibility that the name Dexion is shared between the stone and the dictionary only because the first gave rise to the second. A tendentious footnote dismisses Connolly's 1998 discussion on the grounds that it is "not very convincing," without further engagement.

Jouanna seems dismayed by the jaundiced views classicists take toward ancient biographical information, and it's true that skepticism has prevailed in recent decades. Mary Lefkowitz's *The Lives of the Greek Poets* (1981) debunked a great deal of the information in these biographies, and recent treatments of documentary evidence—the letters that go under Plato's name, for example—have sought to deny attribution. But in his zeal to reverse this trend, Jouanna ends up

bolstering the skeptics' case. He speculates on how Sophocles "must have" voted on crucial questions that came before the Athenian assembly, asserts that he "probably" hoped for the return to Athens of the divisive exiled general Alcibiades, and ventures a blanket characterization of his political stance as "rather favorable to a moderate democracy." None of this is well founded. It does seem (from a remark quoted by Aristotle) that Sophocles, while serving on a commission formed in 413 BC to change the Athenian constitution, voted, but with misgivings, to replace the democracy with an oligarchic regime known as the Four Hundred. But Jouanna has developed an entire ideology out of this vague remark, which in any case might have come from a different man who happened to have the name Sophocles.

Skeptical historians are not the only scholars who provoke Jouanna's ire. In his concluding chapter, he decries recent approaches to Sophocles' plays that wrench them out of their social setting and assimilate them to modern concerns:

We must... resist interpretations of Sophocles' work that start out from excessively contemporary schemas or concepts, instead of from ideas or structures that emerge from the text itself. The ambition to discover in—or rather to impose on—the most remarkable works

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of antiquity a so-called social relevance does not advance their cause. Sophocles does not need to be defended. He needs to be known.

Jouanna writes here as though he had specific targets in mind, though he does not name them. The candidates are legion: directors who put their own stamp on modern productions of the plays, translators who render them freely or poets who adapt them, teachers (like myself) who connect with students by way of the “so-called social relevance” of ancient literature. With the zeal of a strict constructionist, Jouanna calls these interpreters of Sophocles back to the circumstances of the plays’ original productions in the second half of the fifth century BC, seeking “the message or messages that were likely to be perceived by the audience during a single performance.”

How well can such perceptions be recovered? Jouanna mounts a heroic effort, examining with “archeological rigor” every facet of Sophoclean drama: the Theater of Dionysus in Athens where it was staged, the machinery and stage properties on which it relied, its conventions for handling the passage of time and depictions of space, its use of verse meters, and (least recoverable of all) the music and dance steps that accompanied its choral odes. He looks at tragedy “from the wings,” contemplating the technical problems faced by a playwright who had only three actors to work with (others could stand mute on stage but not deliver lines), who could not put programs in spectator’s hands to indicate shifts of scene or time lapses, and whose “special effects” came only from the *mêchanê*, the crane-like “machine” that lifted actors playing gods above the stage, or the *ekkuklêma* (“wheeler-outer”), a cart or trolley that could bring into view what was otherwise hidden behind closed palace doors. Sophocles handled all such matters himself, filling the positions not only of playwright but of director, composer, choreographer, costumer, and stage designer, so Jouanna deals with each in turn, and his study sometimes verges on an encyclopedic tour of ancient Greek theater. That is valuable, but the thesis that guides it—that only through an understanding of these technical matters can the meaning of the plays be recovered—may be dismaying to nonspecialists.

Sophocles presented his dramas in tetralogies—groups of three tragedies, usually on unrelated themes, followed by a ribald farce called a satyr play—as part of two annual Athenian festivals that honored Dionysus. The more prestigious of these was the Greater Dionysia in March, at which three playwrights, chosen by an elected official, staged tetralogies in competition with one another on three successive days. Demand for these three slots was keen, since the pool of talent in the age of Pericles was deep; on at least one occasion, Sophocles did not make the cut. A tetralogy chosen for production was assigned to a *chorêgos*, a wealthy private patron who assumed the burden of hiring and equipping the chorus and its trainer, the *chorodidaskalos*.

Jouanna’s account of this process is highly detailed but, as with his other discussions, marred by leaps of inference: he assumes, on thin evidence,

that each *chorêgos* was paired with a playwright by lottery, rather than by a system that allowed for choice or the pulling of strings. It’s a minor point but relevant to the question of Sophocles’ winning record at the Dionysia (eighteen first-place finishes there, compared with thirteen for Aeschylus and four for Euripides, though he also competed more often). As Jouanna notes, the success of the plays depended in large part on the generosity of the *chorêgos*, and it was he, not the playwright, who received the principal prize—a memorial tripod, displayed along the Street of Tripods that led to the theater entrance. As in the modern film industry, with its competition for Oscars, the wealthiest “producers” might well have gravitated to a perceived winner and thus increased his advantage.

The apparent popularity of Sophocles—he never came in third—has reinforced the image of the *eukolos*, beloved and perhaps even divinized by his city, and this image has in turn influenced the interpretation of the extant plays. After having strongly endorsed the divinization legend, Jouanna naturally tilts toward readings of them that emphasize their piety over the doubts and unresolved questions that others have sensed in them. His discussion of *Ajax* is a good case in point. In the opening scene Athena appears on stage, describing to a frightened Odysseus how she has driven Ajax mad and caused him to turn his homicidal rage on herd animals in the belief that they are his human enemies. When Ajax is wheeled onto the stage amid the beasts he has slaughtered, Athena treats his delusions as reality as she questions him about his deed.

The scene has disturbed many with its portrayal of a goddess who not only deprives a mortal of sanity but then seems to toy with him for amusement. Jouanna claims this discomfort is dispelled later in the play when we hear of an episode in which Ajax told Athena, in the midst of a battle, that he didn’t need her to fight beside him. This “supreme impiety...of refusing the divinity’s aid,” as Jouanna terms it, retrospectively justifies the cruelty Athena had shown in the opening scene: “At first, Sophocles deliberately misled the spectators regarding the goddess’s conduct so that he could enlighten them later on. It was a way of warning them against making hasty judgments concerning the gods.” The playwright was thus not only pious himself, Jouanna insists, but determined to make his audience pious as well.

A similarly blithe confidence pervades Jouanna’s treatment of *Electra*. This play enacts Orestes’ grisly murder, abetted by his sister Electra, of their mother, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus—the couple who had earlier slain Agamemnon, Electra’s father. The same story had been dealt with by Aeschylus in his *Oresteia*, a tragic trilogy that survives intact, well before Sophocles staged it (Euripides too has a surviving play on the theme, though it’s not clear whose came first). Aeschylus’s

version explores the moral and theological complexities of Orestes’ matricide, an act sanctioned by Apollo in the name of eye-for-an-eye justice but bitterly opposed by the Furies, defenders of the obligations of kinship. Aeschylus brought these gods on stage in the third play of his trilogy for a debate on Orestes’ guilt; the jury that hears their arguments is evenly split on its verdict, an acknowledgment that neither side had an absolute claim on justice. Sophocles, by contrast, set his *Electra* entirely in the mortal world. Neither Apollo nor the Furies make an appearance, and Orestes makes surprisingly few and vague allusions to an oracle from Delphi assuring him that his matricide has



Henry Fuseli: The Death of Oedipus, 1783–1784

divine sanction. Many have found this lack of assurance troubling and see in the play Sophocles’ refusal to resolve the moral dilemma raised by the myth.

Jouanna will have none of this. He makes much of a phrase in Orestes’ opening speech in which Apollo’s oracle is quoted (or perhaps only paraphrased by Orestes) as directing the young man toward “just slaughters.” “The justice of his vengeance is guaranteed by the gods,” Jouanna asserts, as though this brief phrase, practically oxymoronic in its pairing of “just” with a particularly harsh term for homicide, could put to rest all the myth’s moral questions. The choral sign-off that ends the play, so platitudinous that some editors prefer to delete it as an interpolation, is here said to “stress the happy consequences of a vengeance that puts an end to the family’s trials and brings liberation.” One senses the specter of Dexion, the man who was so reverent toward the gods that he allegedly became one of them, lurking behind Jouanna’s untroubled reading of this play.

Simon Critchley provides a valuable corrective to this Pollyanaism in *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us*, for *Electra* is the work he selects to exemplify what he calls “Sophocles’ theater of discomfort.” “*Electra* is a play where action is sidelined by language, redemption is subtracted, and justice seems a massive irrelevance,” he writes, focusing not on the absence of divinities but on the “negative intensity” of Electra, her seeming inability to take action or evolve. In the brash, freewheeling style deployed throughout this lively book,

he labels the play a “tragicomedy” and compares Electra’s character to that of Winnie in Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days*, an ineffectual talker incapable of action or even motion (she spends part of the play buried in a mound of earth, even up to her neck). He sees much influence on Sophocles’ play of the innovative Euripides, whose own *Electra*, he believes, may well have preceded it. (In the Euripidean version, the justness of Apollo’s oracle is openly challenged by the Dioscuri, the divine twins who appear *ex machina* at the play’s end.)

Critchley, who teaches philosophy at the New School and writes on a broad range of subjects, is exactly the kind of interpreter of Sophocles whom

Jouanna decries for decontextualizing Greek tragedy, for he insists that “ancient tragedy is not ancient. It is quintessentially modern.” His book is a deeply personal meditation on the meaning of tragedy, understood not as a theatrical form but “a mode of experience that can be found well outside the theater...in our domestic lives, our familial relations and kinship structures.” He draws freely on films and pop songs, the plays of Beckett, the writings of classical scholars, and his conversations with the poet Anne Carson and the actor Philip Seymour Hoffman. Mostly, though, he turns to his fellow philosophers, Plato and Aristotle above all,

but also Hegel, Kant, and Nietzsche, all of whom have thrown light on the tragic experience.

Critchley’s inquiry offers many surprises, but most unexpected is his intense interest in the Greek sophists, a group normally reviled by serious thinkers for their shifty modes of thought and their willingness to take either side of an argument. Amid the fragmentary remains of the writings of Gorgias and Protagoras, he finds an acceptance of contradiction and irresolution that links sophistry to tragedy and ranges both in opposition to philosophy. “Tragedy presents a conflictually constituted world defined by ambiguity, duplicity, uncertainty, and unknowability,” he writes. “Tragedy is the experience of transcendental *opacity*.” The troubling third play of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, in which the debate over Orestes’ guilt or innocence results in a deadlocked vote (resolved only by the intervention of Athena), is thus for Critchley an emblematically tragic moment.

Critchley begins his book by calling attention to “how little we know and how little we will ever know” about Athenian tragedy, and it is precisely here that he and Jouanna part company. “Of the many things we *don’t* know about ancient tragedy, the most important...is some sense of what the spectator was expected to take away from these spectacles,” Critchley writes. For Jouanna, it is only that knowledge, painstakingly amassed from historical research, that gives access to the meaning of the plays. But his *Sophocles* demonstrates the perils of skewing that research to reach desired outcomes. □

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