Oh children, follow me. I am your new leader, as once you were for me.

(Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus 1542–43)

Sophocles’s Oedipus at Colonus ends with his most famous character walking serenely through the central doors of the stage building (skēnē) in the Theater of Dionysus and into the grove of the Eumenides. For a blind old man, enfeebled by age, to make this journey is miraculous enough; that he is the play’s hero is stranger still—no sign here of the familiar willful figure, defining him—or herself through defiance of higher forces in the universe. Rather, Oedipus reaches in this final exit the goal he announces at the beginning of the play: to achieve a “glorious consummation” at the end of his long and tumultuous life by obeying the will of the gods. His last walk, a riveting moment in Western theater, marks the end of Sophocles’s long and fruitful career as a playwright. In the old Oedipus, he completes a reimagining of the tragic hero that stretches across his last three extant plays, beginning with Electra, continuing with Philoctetes, and ending on the last day of Oedipus’s life. That evolution will be the focus of this book.

All three characters are, as we will see, strikingly original. But their enduring fascination, for scholars, for directors, for playgoers and readers of the plays, is not mysterious. In their words and actions, we encounter large questions about human life. How do we balance the demands of our often imperi-
ous individual will with the need for community? Can the egregious powers of one person be harnessed consistently for the greater good? What is the place of human life within the larger cosmos? And most insistently, what does it mean to be human, to be a creature who knows that s/he must die? As vehicles for exploring such questions, Electra, Philoctetes, and the aged Oedipus take their place beside many other examples of the tragic hero, not confined to or originating in Greek drama or even Greek epic. Such figures can be found at least as far back as The Epic of Gilgamesh. But the rise of tragic drama alongside Athenian democracy and the centrality of the art form in Athenian public and intellectual life give the traditional heroic stories a unique and powerful resonance when they appear in the Theater of Dionysus. One of the goals of this book will be to show how the hero in Sophocles’s last three plays evolves to reflect contemporary issues in late fifth-century BCE Athens.

Though there are marked differences between the last three heroes, we can see certain common patterns in their relations with other characters and their roles in the articulation of the plot of each play. Each occupies a liminal position in relationship to the central myth that drives the plot; none is typically empowered to impose his or her will on others. Ragged and disreputable, deceived and manipulated by others who would use them for their own purposes, they seem unlikely candidates for the role of Sophoclean tragic hero. In the last decade of his life, the playwright appears to have set himself the challenge of writing plays that feature the eventual triumph of a disempowered protagonist rather than the ruin of someone who is viewed with envy by others. The nature of that triumph in each case is the key to understanding Sophocles’s purposes in his last decade as an artist. As we watch these unlikely heroes stubbornly resisting what the received stories require of them, our perception of traditional assumptions about behavior and motive carried in the structure of the myths is continually challenged: Can the Electra we see onstage really be healed by the deaths of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus? If Philoctetes is the chosen instrument for divine will in the fall of Troy, why is he discarded for ten years on a deserted island? And why is he chosen in any event? How can such a thoroughly reviled figure as Oedipus become the conduit for the working out of divine will?

When I began teaching Greek tragedy forty years ago, I had no direct experience with the problems faced by directors and actors who were seeking to bring the ancient dramas to life onstage. I presented the texts in the same way I did Homeric epic, as stories founded on ancient myths. Trying to explain the intellectual richness and complexity of the plays in this way was certainly challenging enough for a rookie teacher. And I was not out of step with my fellow Classicists.
Sustained attention to issues of performance has come relatively late to Classical scholarship, beginning with the pioneering work of Oliver Taplin in the 1970s. Since then, a steady stream of important work on staging and performance has opened up new avenues of thought in the study of Greek drama. The opportunity to work on several productions by the Great Lakes Theater Company in the 1990s added immensely to my own appreciation of these issues.

I also had much to learn about the chorus in Greek drama. The complexity of metrical structures in choral songs was (and is) daunting. Again, I have benefited from the excellent scholarship of others. Likewise, creative analysis by Classicists of the choruses as “music” has enriched my own understanding of the full impact of the dramas onstage. Sophocles extended the dramatic expressiveness of his choruses in his last three plays, making their songs an even more integral part of the characterization of his heroes. In place of traditional stanzastic forms, sung exclusively by the chorus, we begin to see actors sharing their entrance song with the chorus, weaving their thoughts and emotions into the complex metrical structures. The characterization of Electra, for example, is articulated in part by her lyrical exchanges with the chorus (El. 121–212); when Antigone leaves the stage to perform purification rites on behalf of her aged father in Oedipus at Colonus, past practice by Sophocles might lead us to expect a self-contained choral song, a reflective pause while action occurs offstage; we get instead an intense lyrical exchange between Oedipus and the chorus of citizens, raising, not lowering, the temperature onstage (OC 510–50).

It will be evident to readers that my discussion of the last three plays owes much to these new approaches. But the primary focus of what follows is Sophocles’s vision of the tragic hero. There has been no shortage, of course, of excellent scholarship on this topic. Reinhardt, Whitman, Knox, Segal, and many others have all written brilliantly on the nature of Sophocles’s heroes. My debt to them will be obvious, and I have tried to acknowledge their ideas in the discussion that follows.

I hope my ideas are of interest to Classical scholars, but I also want to make my arguments accessible to nonspecialists. With these aims in mind, I have on the one hand retold more of the stories than experts require and I have translated all the Greek texts into English. At the same time, readers will notice that I often insert transliterated Greek words or phrases parenthetically in my translations and analysis. My purpose in this practice is to allow those who know ancient Greek to follow my thinking more closely. I regret that Seth Schein’s commentary on Philoctetes reached me too late to be included in this book.