Late Sophocles

Van Nortwick, Thomas

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Late Sophocles: The Hero’s Evolution in Electra, Philoctetes, and Oedipus at Colonus.

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The last ten years of Sophocles’s life must have been an anxious time in Athens. Crushing the Melians, sailing for Sicily only to starve in the stone quarries, the Athenian navy displays the imperialist politics of the city hardening after the temporary respite of the Peace of Nicias. Thucydides shines a harsh light on both episodes, with their debased rhetoric and misplaced optimism. In 413 BCE, as hopes wane in Sicily, Sparta invades Attica for the first time in several years and builds a permanent fort in Decelea, a few miles north of the city. Farmers crowd back inside the walls from the countryside, returning the city to the overcrowded conditions that fueled the plague of 430–29. The oligarchs seize control in 411; democracy is restored in 410, but not without casualties. By the time Sophocles dies in 406, with the losses in Sicily and elsewhere draining the city’s treasury, the city’s leaders are melting temple treasures and debasing the coinage. Victory at Arginusae in 406 offers some hope, but the victorious commanders fail to save two thousand sailors in the aftermath and are killed for their efforts. Still, victory might have allowed the Athenians to arrange a favorable peace, but they press on to ultimate defeat in 404.

In this edgy atmosphere, Sophocles created his last three plays. What must he have been thinking about his city and its prospects? We have only the late plays to go on, and reading them as a mirror of contemporary events has proved a difficult project for Classical scholars. Yet it seems inconceivable that these works did not reflect the strains of a turbulent time. What little we do know about his life puts Sophocles squarely in the middle of the affairs of his city, as priest, general, councilor, but especially as playwright. His medium as an artist, tragic drama, was central to the civic and religious life of Athens to a degree
perhaps never again seen in the Western world. In the Theater of Dionysus, Athenians could see enacted, over and over, the myths that addressed critical issues in their lives.

It is easy to see how the pressures of a long war energized certain old stories. Euripides’s *Trojan Women* and Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata* reflect in their different ways the suffering of women during wartime, a central theme in both Homeric epics; the former’s *Electra* and two *Iphigenia* plays focus on a daughter sacrificed to male aggression. At the same time, the intellectual ferment of the fifth century, bubbling up alongside the new democratic form of government, had produced debates about the nature of human life, the role of the gods in human affairs, the best form of society, which seem to have penetrated the political arena in ways that made some—including Sophocles—thoughtful if not uneasy. Thucydides’s harrowing account of the Melian dialogue shows political rhetoric in Athens deteriorating under the pressures of war. Through his eyes we see the Sicilian Expedition as an example of the dangerously seductive operation of persuasion in the Athenian assembly. The Sophists have left their mark on the narration of both episodes.

**The Hero in Place**

Summarizing the various innovations we find in Sophocles’s dramatic practice in the late plays is challenging, but one recurrent set of preoccupations centers on the *position* of the hero, understood on various levels. On the one hand, each of Sophocles’s last three heroes lacks to some degree typical heroic agency, the ability to impress his or her will out onto the world through his or her body. This deficit was usually understood by the Greeks to be gendered: the willful thrust of energy and desire to control was seen as a masculine trait. This is not to say that female characters in Greek literature do not sometimes show masculine traits (see Aeschylus’s *Clytemnestra* and Euripides’s *Medea*). But Electra, though fierce in her determination not to accept her father’s murder, is presented as without direct agency in the play. Philoctetes, because of his lack of mobility, his oozing, smelly wound (reminiscent of the odiferous women of Lemnos), his experience of time as something to be endured rather than seized, is feminized, a victim of male conspirators. Oedipus is akin to the Teiresias of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, who is said to “nourish” (*trephō*) power within himself, a kind of midwife (Soph. *OT* 356). All three heroes have bodies characterized by
inwardness, latency, which the Greeks associated with women and things feminine; all three are used in one way or another by males who want to manipulate them for their own ends.

These distinctions between the hero and his or her tormentors are aligned in the late plays with the intellectually potent polarity of logos/ergon. Orestes, his Paedagogus, Pylades, Odysseus, Neoptolemus, his sailors, Creon and Polynices, all are agents of logos. All hope to use words, usually deceptive ones, to control the stubborn hero, whose body finally represents the unwieldy and inconvenient ergon. Certain polarities begin to emerge: shifty, deceptive words versus suffering bodies; active manipulation versus passive endurance; sophistic rhetoric versus traditional aristocratic values; appearance versus reality. Echoes of the intellectual debates in fifth-century Athens are clear enough, with the plays seeming to valorize a somewhat more conservative, aristocratic perspective.⁵ The imperialist excesses of the period also find analogues here, often launched from an assembly fired by overreaching rhetoric.

At the same time, heroic bodies as physical objects (as opposed to subjects) on stage influence the outcome of all three plays. The male conspirators in Electra twice pretend to present the corpse of Orestes, whom we might expect to be the hero, inside the urn as ashes and on the ekkyklēma in the final scene. These deceptions forward the plan to murder the royal couple precisely because in each case the remains are not Orestes. But encountering the real body of his sister, wasted by anger and deprivation, suddenly shocks Orestes into recognizing Electra’s genuine suffering as a result of the family’s horrors. At that moment, Sophocles’s dramatic purposes become particularly clear: his play is centered not on the avenging son’s return but on the ruined daughter, imprisoned by her mother and stepfather. To put it another way, the play reflects the impact of war and its aftermath on the women who stay at home while their male relatives pursue power over others. If we are looking for evidence that Sophoclean drama was shaped by contemporary events, this might be a place to begin.⁶

Philoctetes is defined from the beginning by his body: marooned on Lesbos, prevented from exerting heroic force, repellent to others because of his wound.⁷ He smells bad and makes too much noise. In the opening scene, the sailors cower in anticipation of his arrival, imagining him as a primeval creature, barely human. His salvation begins when he recreates himself before Neoptolemus and the sailors as a part of heroic culture instead of a liminal curiosity of nature: a Greek warrior, friend of Achilles and Ajax, bitter enemy of Agamemnon and Menelaus. But as he distances himself from the Polyphemus
paradigm in the eyes of Neoptolemus, the demands of the oracle—which are the demands of the myth—focus our attention on his body. Despite some initial ambiguity, it emerges in the course of the play that the fall of Troy requires that Philoctetes’s body be present there.

The pivotal moment comes in *Philoctetes*, as it does in *Electra*, when one of the male plotters has an intense encounter with the hero’s body. Philoctetes falls to the ground, rendered unconscious by the pain in his wounded foot. Neoptolemus, though he has been showing signs of weakening resolve, has managed to keep pressing forward with the plot to deceive Philoctetes and get the bow to Troy. Seeing his new friend in a deathlike state jolts the young man and he is unable to keep on deceiving Philoctetes. In terms of Neoptolemus’s education, this is the moment when he chooses once and for all to honor his father Achilles’s genetic inheritance rather than the sophistic program of Odysseus. He continues to try to convince Philoctetes to sail with him to Troy, but he will not lie anymore.

Sophocles’s last play is articulated primarily through the lateral movement, symbolic and actual, of the hero’s body across the stage. Blind and feeble, Oedipus is pulled now toward Thebes, now Athens, and finally walks under his own power into the grove of the Eumenides. The events from this part of the Theban cycle of myths, though kept at a distance during the action, all depend on his final place of rest. Sophocles pushes his new paradigm for the tragic hero even further here than in the disabled figure of Philoctetes, who must be moved to Troy but once there is destined to shoot the fatal arrow himself. Oedipus is entirely without physical agency until his last moments on earth. His body, as he tells Theseus, is to be a gift for Athens, but one which the city can only receive after he is dead and buried. Though while alive he is characteristically willful in the way of Sophoclean heroes, the power of his gift comes from the gods and finally will pass through him without the direct operation of his will.

The position of the bodies of these late heroes, onstage and off, is crucial, then, to the leverage that each exerts in his or her story. We may extend this idea of positioning to the placement within the narrative of each figure in relation to the traditional myth that informs the plot. In all three late plays, Sophocles offers us an oblique perspective on traditional myths. I mean the term “oblique” in a fairly literal sense: our line of sight is displaced. Attention is focused on Electra, Philoctetes, and the aged Oedipus, nothing unusual about that. But as we have seen, each of these figures, whose points of view inform our
understanding of the action, is detached in some way from the main thrust of
the narrative that carries the traditional myth. Orestes and the Paedagogus
move purposefully toward the goals of the myth—in this case the murders of
Clytemnestra and Aegisthus—while Electra, on whom Sophocles has trained
our attention, stands apart and reacts to events. She embodies and is defined by
the familiar heroic struggle against forces beyond her control. Her inner dark-
ness, swirling with resentment and self-hatred, contrasts strongly with the op-
portunism of Orestes and the Paedagogus, colorless men of action too shallow
to carry the weight of the Sophoclean hero’s burden.

We see Philoctetes at first through the eyes of the conspirators, Odysseus,
Neoptolemus, and the chorus, a lonely cave creature beyond the pale of human
civilization, an object of anxious fascination for those who would trap him. As
he gradually comes into sharper focus through exchanges with Neoptolemus
and the chorus, Philoctetes moves from outsider to insider, establishing himself
as a fellow Greek warrior betrayed by his commanders. The conspirators work
on him with lies and playacting, trying to align his desires with the demands of
the oracles that define the goals of the myth, here the destined fall of Troy. Again,
he fits the heroic profile in terms of temperament, while his pursuers
remain the agents of the myth on stage.

The separation of heroic temper and mythical plot is more complex here
than in Electra. Neoptolemus, though somewhat naïve, is by genetic inheri-
tance and—as it eventually turns out—temperament, heroic material. His edu-
cation, handled by Odysseus and then Philoctetes, seems to point to him as
potentially the play’s hero. But as Philoctetes’s stubbornness and self-destro-
tive tendencies come out, he displaces the young man as the focus of the play. His
continued refusal to bend before the imperatives of the myth keeps him de-
tached from the plotters’ perspective and holds the mythical story at a distance,
far off at Troy.

Oedipus at Colonus leaves the site of its traditional myth offstage in Thebes.
The old Oedipus spends much of his time fending off both the consequences of
his past acts there and the forces that would pull him toward the dismal future
that awaits his children. His late scene with Polynices seems designed specifi-
cally to allow him to separate himself from the Theban cycle of myths. Polynei-
ces, as he trudges to Thebes and certain death, carries with him the Erinyes of
his father. Once he is gone, Oedipus moves toward the site of his eventual tran-
scendence of all human life.
A New World

Whatever his reservations in old age about the message or medium of his art, the power of Sophocles's last works is undeniable. And finally, we have only the work. Knowing more about Sophocles's life outside of his plays might tempt us to speculate about the connections between his biography and his art, the way scholars like to think about the reflection in his late quartets of Beethoven's loneliness or hearing loss. Maybe it is just as well that we are spared those alluring possibilities. We can on the other hand be reasonably sure that Philoctetes and Oedipus at Colonus are products of the last five years of his extraordinarily long life, with Electra likely coming shortly before. These works comprise Sophocles's "late work," and as such they might invite comparison to the final creations of other famous artists, such as Rembrandt, Shakespeare, or Beethoven.

The whole subject of "last works" and/or "late style" has come under scrutiny recently, and some distinctions have emerged that will be useful here. First of all, the artist whose work spans a long period might be expected to have learned his or her craft, to have solved or at least worked through artistic problems that caused trouble in earlier years. Living to a ripe age would at least offer the opportunity for growth. Of course, there is no guarantee that lessons will be learned. Bad art can persist. And some artists—Mozart being an obvious example—start making extraordinary work early, so a shorter life might not rule out this kind of seasoning. Apart from the ripening of skills, there is the question of the artist's perspective as it might reflect his or her time of life. The awareness of mortality weighs on anyone who feels it close, and the older an artist gets, the more likely that death's nearness will be felt. Thus we may want to proceed cautiously in appraising Mozart's "late" works. We might be tempted to see his Requiem as composed in the shadow of his own death, but nothing else in his last year suggests that he felt he was composing his final works.

Edward Said, writing at the end of his own life, added another caveat. Commenting on the frequent image of the artist in old age who has achieved a certain serenity and detachment from the struggles that mark earlier stages in life, he suggests an alternative version:

Each of us can readily supply evidence of how it is that late works crown a lifetime of aesthetic endeavor, Rembrandt and Matisse, Bach and Wagner. But what of artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence,
difficulty, and unresolved contradiction? What if old age and ill health don’t produce the serenity of “ripeness is all”?¹¹

Much has been written about *The Tempest* as an example of the former paradigm, though not every Shakespearean would agree.¹² Examples of the latter would likely include Beethoven and Ibsen.¹³ Rembrandt’s last portraits (and self-portraits) certainly project a detachment from immediate time and place, but whether they project serenity is another thing. The weathered face we see might just as well reflect anguish and struggle as serenity.

About Sophocles’s technical mastery of his craft in the last three plays there is no doubt. His handling of the chorus in particular shows considerable innovation. Otherwise, the late work lies somewhat athwart these distinctions. We would hardly be tempted to call any of the plays “autumnal” or “serene,” though at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* the old hero steps calmly into timelessness. Nor, on the other hand, would we say that any of the plays goes “against the grain,” in terms of the standard forms associated with tragedy, though the playwright uses familiar elements to achieve a radical reimagining of the genre’s central figure. The final trio of works might best be understood as combining retrospection with innovation. On the one hand, each of the plays looks back to significant themes and characters from earlier in the performance history of tragedy or, in the case of *Philoctetes*, from Homeric epic. Sophocles revives the Orestes cycle of myths, which had appeared in the *Oresteia* almost fifty years before. *Philoctetes* becomes an extended negotiation between the legacies of Achilles and Odysseus, with a brief but crucial cameo from Polyphemus. In the last play, Sophocles’s most famous creation returns for an extraordinary farewell.

Yet while the playwright looks back to gather up familiar material, it is always in the service of a fresh perspective. Many new ways of thinking and seeing pervade Sophocles’s last plays, but our understanding of them must begin with his hero, the arresting figure he did so much to create over his long career. When we say that the heroes of his late plays depart from what we have come to expect, the standard against which we measure them derives primarily from his own earlier works.¹⁴ There, more than in Aeschylus or Euripides, the lonely hero demands our attention. Not as someone to admire, but as a lightning rod, who draws the powers of the universe to him/herself, who stands on—or more likely crosses—the boundaries that the Greeks understood as shaping the cosmos. Sophocles offers us multiple perspectives on the action and speech of the
characters, but finally we see everything through the lens of the hero. So when he reimagines that figure, our view of everything on stage and beyond changes.

One effect of showing the action slantwise in the last three plays is to shine a light on the suffering of those who are not in the chain of command, abused women, wounded soldiers, old men cast out of their homes. The scope widens in *Philoctetes*, showing the hero, who recalls Electra in many ways, against a backdrop of expanded causation, in which his will, while still formidable, does not drive the action that the myth’s outcome requires. The familiar dynamic of tragic narratives, a hero’s will opposed to transcendent forces, becomes more complex here. We see Philoctetes first as part of a larger plan, reflecting the mysterious purposes of the gods. He must eventually act, but only if and when he and his bow are moved by others to Troy. His opposition to divine will, the emblem of the tragic hero, only emerges around line 900, after he learns of the conspirators’ deception. Once his own fierce defiance comes into view, he, and not Neoptolemus, emerges fully as the hero of the play. At that point we may in turn begin to recognize the pattern of displacement we saw first in *Electra*, underscored by the similarities between that play’s hero and Philoctetes.

The compressed portrait of Philoctetes as hero may help to explain Sophocles’s use of the deus ex machina, an unusual move for him as far as we can tell. Because we have been invited from the play’s opening scenes to understand Philoctetes’s importance in the context of larger forces, their return in the person of Herakles is not as jarring as it might be. In any event, by having the god impose the proper ending, the playwright preserves his hero’s heroic temperament without having him destroyed in the process. He remains a Sophoclean hero but his agency can be folded into the gods’ larger purposes nonetheless.

The implications of this shift of perspective come to full flower in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Whereas Philoctetes retains his characteristic defiance of larger forces even as he becomes an instrument of them, Oedipus walks on stage determined to follow the will of the gods. He will seek death not as the only alternative to capitulation but as the glorious consummation of his long life. Willful he can be, but his defiance is of those who would keep him from obeying, not resisting, divine will. His mysterious redemption is all about finding a way to fit himself into the larger rhythms of the universe. In so doing, Sophocles’s last hero steps outside the arena where so much of Greek tragic literature, beginning with the *Iliad*, is played out. The characteristic struggle between the hero’s will, which s/he sees as the engine of self-creation, and the often mysterious imperatives of larger forces, does not appear in *Oedipus at Colonus*. For Achil-
les, for the younger Oedipus, for Ajax, Electra, Antigone, and surely many other
Sophoclean heroes in plays now lost to us, impressing his or her will on other
people and things is the path to self-realization. To put it another way, to get
one’s way is to become oneself.

And the world onstage is formed by this vision. Heroes make things happen
by working their will on people and things around them. Others do what they
can in the wake of these powerful figures and we look on at the world this dy-
namic creates. So when the old Oedipus walks into the grove, drawing the
power of the gods through himself as he is being drawn toward them, he leaves
us a different world, one in which we can find fulfillment by playing our part in
a larger field of forces, whose powers are not ours to direct. The result of this
final consummation is difficult to fix in words, because we are so conditioned
by the Western view of consciousness that valorizes individual will. To under-
stand one’s life as part of a larger circle of gifts is challenging, but this view is
surely what Sophocles dramatizes in his last play.