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

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Notes

Preface

1. All translations of Greek are mine.
5. Anyone who studies the meters of Greek tragedy has reason to be grateful for the work of A.M. Dale (1968; 1971; 1981).
6. E.g., Burton 1980; Scott 1996. See also Kitzinger’s study of Sophocles’s Antigone and Philoctetes, a challenging vision of the chorus’s unique presence on stage.

Chapter 1

2. See Ringer 1998, 92, who says that Sophocles’s unusually complex doubling and tripling of roles in Oedipus at Colonus “sustains Sophocles’ extraordinarily fluid dramatic structure and stands testimony to the versatility of late fifth-century actors, as well as to the innovative courage of the octogenarian playwright.” And further, of the virtuosity of Sophocles as a playwright and the virtuosity he demands of his cast in the last play: “They also reveal a playwright capable of great technical daring, even at the end of an unusually long and successful career” (93).
3. On Sophocles and Homer, see now Schein 2012, with bibliography.

5. See Ringer 1998. Hall 2009, 105–11, notes that the term “metatheater” refers to several types of representation onstage. She objects to the use of the phrase “play-within-a-play” when referring to Greek drama, which she says has no examples of characters explicitly creating dramas within dramas. What I call “play-within-a-play” she would identify as “role-playing within a role.” I see her point, but for the purposes of this discussion, I will use “putting on a scene” or “play-within-a-play” to refer to any scene in the plays I discuss that features a character or characters pretending to be someone else for the purpose of deceiving other characters. See further Inoue 2009, 48–49.


7. On the “performative” aspects of Athenian culture, see Rehm 1992, 3–11.

8. Il. 11. 654; 19. 17.

9. Knox 1964, chaps. 1–2; see especially 44. See also Winnington-Ingram 1980, 9, 317; Lloyd 2005, 78–79. Finglass 2011, 42–44, voices reservations about the phrase “Sophoclean hero” used to describe the protagonists of Sophocles’s plays. He takes issue with those who see no criticism, explicit or implicit, of the behavior and character of heroes in Sophocles’s plays, arguing that these scholars are confusing the function of the protagonist with the term “hero,” which, he says, “implies moral approval” (43). I would certainly agree that the heroes of Sophocles’s plays are not presented by the playwright in such a way as to imply unequivocal moral approval. This understanding of the word “hero” is anachronistic, importing modern notions of “heroism” into Archaic Greek culture. Greek heroes are characterized by arrogance, excess, and intransigence in the face of uncontrollable forces, hardly the qualities that insure moral approval.

10. See Dunn 2012, especially 99–100, 103.


Chapter 2

1. For Homeric references in this description, see Finglass 2007, 92–101.

2. For an excellent discussion of this scene, see Kitzinger 1991, 302–5.

3. On kairos in Greek drama, see Race 1981, 210–11.


5. For a discussion of the opposition in fifth-century thought, see Parry 1981, 16–62. See also Wilson 2012, 548–50. Woodard 1964 pursues the polarity as it informs the dialectic he sees represented in the characters of Orestes and Electra. He argues (164–65) that the use of kairos, ergon, and kerdos in the opening scene suggests the presence of “mercantile ethics,” a perspective at odds, one would think, with the aristocratic tone of Orestes’s opening remarks, thus undermining his heroic profile.
8. Segal 1981, 250, 257, casts the contrast between the worlds of Electra and Orestes in terms of "inner" and "outer," a formulation that fits the imagery of much of the play. At the same time, since Electra is on stage for the entire play, outside the palace, while Orestes disappears for long stretches, Segal's polarity might be seen as reversed as the action unfolds. And at the end, Orestes and Aegisthus go into the dark palace, while Electra remains outside.
9. On the different ways of experiencing time in the play, see Segal 1981, 262–67; see especially 265, on the gendered relationship between kairos and circular time.
10. Since Electra reminds us that Procne actually killed the son she mourns to retaliate against her husband, who had raped her sister Philomela, the mythical paradigm adds a further shade of darkness to the portrait—perhaps some acknowledgment of her own part in her childlessness? See Segal 1981, 256–57.
11. See further Finglass 2007, 132.
12. For Oedipus as an Erinys in Oedipus at Colonus, see Gellie 1972, 168.
15. See Seale 1982, 59. Kitzinger 1991, 306–7, sees Electra as the "victor" over the chorus in this exchange. Though Electra does elicit a promise of support from the women (251–53), her tone is not, to my ears, victorious so much as lonely and resigned (see 254–55).
17. Whether this play was produced before or after Euripides's Electra is an ongoing question, for which the surviving evidence will not provide a definitive answer. I incline to an earlier date for Sophocles's version, but even if Euripides's play was produced first, the Electra in his play, while certainly powerful and disturbing, hardly qualifies as a heroic figure. See Whitman 1951, 51–54; Gellie 1972, 119, n. 15; Lloyd 2005, 17–18, 31–32; and Finglass 2007, 1–4, all with bibliography.
18. On Orestes as "untragic," see Reinhardt 1979, 137. On Electra as heroic vs. Orestes, Segal 1966, 511: "What is truly heroic in the play, then, rests with Electra. She, rather than Orestes, has been able to win her way, in a debased world, to a living sense of past greatness. She is the one who defends the bonds of physis most vigorously." Kitto 1950, 133, seems to suggest that both Orestes and Electra are heroes in the play, though without much explanation. See also Whitman 1951, 154–55; Woodard 1964, 166–67; Blundell 1989, 173–74; Foley 2001, 158–59.
20. Whitman 1951 sees Sophocles's last period, encompassing the final three plays, as "purgatorial," in that "it deals with the soul's use of time" (150–51). For him, the heroes of those plays exemplify a "new kind of arete, the arete of Odysseus . . . embracing the
qualities of endurance, courage, skill, and self-control” (151). This seems a good description of the Homeric Odysseus but not the figure we often encounter in Athenian tragedy. Electra as we find her in this play actually projects an Odyssean capacity for endurance in the service of an Achillean intransigence. See also Woodard 1964, 206.

23. Woodard 1964 suggests that Sophocles means us to see Orestes and Electra as together forming “a paradigm of the fully heroic, of full human excellence” (170). His dialectical model for the play, while identifying important elements of the characterization of both principals, seems unlikely to have worked dramatically on stage. On the polarities represented by the two characters, see further the exhaustive discussion in Segal 1981, 249–91.

24. For the differences between the two scenes, see Whitman 1951, 157. On the exchange between Electra and Chrysothemis, see Blundell 1989, 157–61.
27. See Segal 1966, 532, on the logos/ergon polarity in the relationship of Electra and Orestes.

28. Foley 2001, 151–59, analyzes Electra’s position as an example of the “ethics of vendetta,” wherein lament functions as something like ergon. See also Seale 1982, 75: “It is [Electra’s] play and this horror is her affair, expressed in the peculiar logic of the play whereby the passive power of emotion becomes by its very explicitness a kind of action.” For the Homeric view of words as deeds, see further Parry 1981, 21–22; for Electra’s words as deeds, Blundell 1989, 157; on Electra’s view, see further Ormand 1999, 61.
30. See Carson 1990, 143: “The unfailing moisture and sexual drive of women is part of a larger pattern, part of a larger harmony between women and the elements of nature in general. United by a vital liquidity with the elemental world, woman is able to tap the inexhaustible reservoirs of nature’s procreative power. Man, meanwhile, holds himself fiercely and thoughtfully apart from this world of plants, animals, and female wantonness—doubly estranged from it, by his inherent dryness and by the sophrosyne with which he maintains form.”
33. On this exchange, see Winnington-Ingram 1980, 219–24, who reads the play as a response to the Aeschylean disposal of the moral conflict; also Segal 1966, 476; Blundell 1989, 150–53, 161–72; Lloyd 2005, 85–90.
34. On the moral issues raised by the matricide see further Segal 1966, 540: “. . . its [the play’s] ‘success’ does not lie in solving the moral problems of the Orestes legend. These problems do not lie at the center of the play, but do contribute to the tone of ir-
resolution and the continued presence of ‘evils’ in the end (see 1498).” For a complementary view, see Kitzinger 1991, 311–12. See also Whitman 1951, 159–60; Dunn 2012, 97–101. On the mythological background for Sophocles’s treatment of matricide, see Lloyd 2005, 19–31; Griffiths 2012, 74–76. About moral conflict in Greek tragedy more generally, see also the useful remarks of Blundell 1989, 11–12.

35. On Electra’s character here, see Kirkwood 1958, 140; Scodel 1984, 86; Segal 1981, 251; Seafor 1985; Kitzinger 1991, 316–17. The interplay of voices in the scene between Electra and Clytemnestra seems to me to offer evidence that Athenian drama could portray psychological states effectively, pace Rehm 1992, 38. See, on the other hand, his insightful questions about the interplay of “emotional proximity and distance” in the Theater of Dionysus, 46. On the character of Electra in the play, see Blundell 1989, 179–80.

36. See Blundell 1989, 12: “Such [moral] conflict can only be resolved by persuasion, which may induce one of the participants to alter or even abandon a decision or moral principle. . . . These speeches rarely succeed, usually because of the intransigence of one or more central characters. Such doomed attempts at persuasion are a characteristically Sophoclean means of effecting tragic pathos and suspense, and at the same time provide a forum for the revelation of moral character and the airing of ethical issues.”

37. Woodard 1964, 166.

38. Segal 1966, 479, says of this scene (634–763): “not only the vital hinge of the plot, but, with its complex reversals of life and death, appearance and reality, is also a microcosm of the action of the rest of the play.” See also Seale 1982, 65.


42. For the metatheatrical elements in this scene, see Ringer 1999, 163–72.

43. On the reflection of Athenian society through its metatheatrical gestures in its dramas, see Falkner 1998, especially 55.


45. On the use of mythical exempla here, see Finglass 2007, 360–61.

46. Finglass 2007, 370–73, 437–38, has a thorough discussion of the repetitions in this section.


48. For the polarity logos/ergon in the urn scene and more generally in the play, see Segal 1981, 283–89.

49. See Kitzinger 1991, 300–2, 322–23. Her persuasive reading sees the Paedagogus’s lie as “a pivotal moment in the play’s structure [that] reveals a way of understanding each of the other scenes” (301). About the effect of the urn scene on our perception of Electra, she notes, “There could be no more effective way for Sophokles to undermine Electra’s power, to make it peripheral to the action instead of its center” (323).

50. For the metatheatrical elements in the scene with the urn, see Scodel 1984, 81–82.
52. On this anomaly, see Goldhill 2012, 98–100.
53. See Foley 2001, 166–68, on the seductive power of Electra’s lamentation and its effect on Orestes.
54. Gellie 1972, 125–27, has an insightful discussion of Electra’s character in this scene.
55. See n. 61, below.
58. A similar substitution occurs in Philoctetes at line 51. See below, p. 46.
60. E.g., Gellie 1972, 127.
62. See Blundell 1989, 179: “In particular, we must [be] aware of assuming that Sophocles is somehow ‘answering’ either Aeschylus or Euripides.” See further Gellie 1972, 106, 129–30; Kitzinger 1991, 327; Dunn 2012, 101. For a reading that sees Sophocles’s play primarily in relation to Aeschylus and Euripides, see Bowra 1944, 212–60.
63. For the “theatrical joke” in the scene, see Gellie 1972, 212.
64. On this duality of genre in the play, see Gellie 1972, 122
65. See Gellie 115–16 on male action and Electra’s “sensibilities.”
66. See Ringer’s thoughtful discussion (1998, 124–25), where he suggests that meta-theatrical elements in Philoctetes signal Sophocles’s questioning of “the tragic theater’s ability to give new life to old myths.”

Chapter 3
2. For the importance of the setting as a reflection of Philoctetes’s character, see Jones 1962, 221–22; Seale 1982, 26–27.
analysis of the play’s opening as a reflection of sophistic anthropological ideas about the nature of civilization is thoughtful and challenging, an effective answer to those critics who have seen any references by Sophocles to contemporary politics as detracting from the play’s success as tragedy.


6. For Philoctetes as savage, see Segal 1981, 333–34. “For Philoctetes, however, resistance to persuasion is vital to integrity of spirit. His stubborn refusal of persuasion is an aspect of his savagery, a sub-human quality” (334). On the visual impact of Philoctetes’s savage appearance, see Seale 1982, 32.

7. For the contrast, see Segal 1981, 291.


9. Lines 68–69 specify only that without the bow, Troy cannot be taken. Later, it will emerge that Philoctetes himself must also go to Troy. For the ambiguity, see note 49 below.


11. For Odysseus’s perversion of the word gennaios, see Knox 1964, 125–26.


13. For the polarity throughout the play, see Segal 1981, 333–40.

14. For the significance of the polarity in fifth-century Athenian discourse, see Goldhill 1986, 239–42; Wilson 2012.

15. Rose 1992, 311–12, notes that “the use of stories about offspring of famous heroes seems a particular feature of sophistic teaching.” On the two Homeric heroes as models for contrasting values, see Knox 1964, 120–22. For Sophocles’s inclusion of Neoptolemus as the second conspirator, see Kyriakou 2012, 150–51.


18. For the connections between the prologue and parodos, see Burton 1980, 228.

19. For a discussion of the antecedents for the story of Philoctetes, see Bowra 1944, 261–63; Whitman 1951, 174–75.

20. On the chorus’ duplicitous behavior, see Ringer 1998, 111–12. Kitto 1950 sees the use of the chorus as part of the conspiracy as what makes Philoctetes a “masterpiece of the later Greek stage” (305).

22. Note that Philoctetes suffers from odunaios, “body pain,” (185) the word used of the Cyclops’s pain from his wounded eye (Od. 9. 415).

23. For the effect of this kind of entrance, see Taplin 1977, 297.


25. On this scene see Winnington-Ingram 1980, 297.

26. Segal 1981, 301–3, analyzes the rehabilitation of Philoctetes in Neoptolemus’s eyes through the imagery of hunting.


32. Ringer 1998, 109, compares Neoptolemus’s description of the treachery of the Greek leaders to the Paedagogus’s narration of the chariot race in Electra.


34. On this exchange, see Rose 1992, 292–93.

35. Ringer 1998, 112–15, has an excellent analysis of this scene. I cannot, however, agree with him that we are to assume that Philoctetes does not hear the fake Merchant’s words at 572–79. The deception works better if Philoctetes “overhears” what the Merchant says.


38. So Knox 1964, 130, “The closing words of the stasimon are sung as the two men come out of the cave, and the chorus quickly puts its mask back on . . . .” See further Seale 1982, 37; Ringer 1998, 115–16.


40. For the bow as symbol of friendship, see Rose 1992, 294.


42. For the significance of Neoptolemus’s use of hexameters, see Bowra 1944, 281; Gellie 1972, 149; Rose 1992, 297, n.54; Ringer 1998, 116–17.

43. For the impact of Philoctetes’s fainting, see Rose 1992, 296–97. See Taplin 1978, 112, for a discussion of the “tableau” formed on stage when Philoctetes faints and its visual impact on our understanding of Neoptolemus’s character.

44. For death and rebirth in the myths of Lemnos, see Segal 1981, 313–14.

45. So Ringer 1998, 118: “Touching Philoctetes for the first time seems to draw Neoptolemus completely away from the deceptive role he has been playing.” See further Rehm 2002, 153 n.190.
46. For the hero’s body in Sophocles, see Rehm 2002, 169–70; Van Nortwick 2012, 145–47.
48. See above, chapter 1, n. 6.
50. It is not clear how this attempt at suicide would be staged. Webster 1970, 130, says that the ekkyklema is raised up sufficiently from the level of the area in front of the skene, and that this height, plus the fact that the stage was raised higher than the orchestra (an assumption that is controversial for the fifth century), would allow the audience to imagine that Philoctetes, standing on the ekkyklema, could leap to his death. See also Seale 1982, 27–28.
52. See Knox 1964, 117; Segal 1981, 296.
54. Burton 1980, 244.
55. Note that Herakles uses the word muthos, not logos, in describing the message he delivers (1410, 1417), and Philoctetes echoes this gesture at 1447.
56. On the visual impact of Herakles’s appearance on the machina, see Seale 1982, 45.
57. Ringer 1998, 121–24, discusses the issues raised by Sophocles’s use of the deus ex machina here. See also Seale 1982, 46. Roisman 2005, 108–9, suggests that Herakles functions as surrogate father for the lonely hero, a convincing idea, given the prominence of father-son relationships in the play. She also argues (109–11), following Lattimore 1964 (92, n.35), that Herakles is played for the actors on stage by a disguised Odysseus. Though an intriguing suggestion, this interpretation ultimately, as Roisman notes, “gives Odysseus the last word and implies that the play endorses the ethos of deception for the sake of victory” (111), an outcome rather too cynical and bleak, in my view.
58. See Bowra 1944, 301, for the differences between Sophocles’s use of the deus ex machina here and its role on Euripides’s plays.
59. For Herakles as a “major site of ideological struggle,” see Rose 1992, 281, n.25.
60. Compare Athena’s visitation to Achilles in Iliad 1, where her intervention on behalf of Hera to convince him not to kill Agamemnon preserves Achilles’s implacable anger in a way that a change of mind would not. Whitman 1951 says of Philoctetes’s eventual acquiescence in the plan to return him to Troy: “The triumph of Philoctetes is that he finds a way to return to the world, without compromising his heroic integrity” (179). I would say rather that Sophocles finds a way to preserve Philoctetes’s heroic integrity, by bringing Herakles on stage as a representative of transcendent divine will. So Kitto, 1956: “Philoctetes’ refusal to go to Troy is dissolved in such a way that his reasons for not going remain valid” (137). On the function of Herakles as deus ex machina, see further Blundell 1989, 223–25.
61. See Segal’s suggestive remarks (1981, 331) on the “new” model for heroism embodied by Philoctetes and culminating in the Oedipus of Sophocles’s last play.

Chapter 4

1. Some of the ideas in this chapter have appeared earlier in Van Nortwick 2012.
2. So Knox 1964: “His opening speech shows a man who seems to be at the end rather than the beginning” (148).
3. See Knox’s characteristically pithy assessment (1964, 144–46).
5. E.g., Taplin 1977; Seale 1982; Ringer 1998; Wiles 1997; Rehm 2002.
10. On deinos, see Guthrie 1971, 32.
11. Il. 11. 654; Eur. Med. 44. See above, chapter 1, p. 4.
12. Edmunds 1996, 43; Burton 1980, 258. The figure of the old man walking across the stage to deliver important, often devastating news, connects all three of Sophocles’s Theban plays, from Tiresias in Antigone, to the same character in Oedipus Tyrannus, followed by the Corinthian and Theban messengers in the same play, and finally to Creon and Oedipus himself in Oedipus at Colonus.
14. For the meaning of hieros, see Burkert 1985, 269.
15. For parallels between Oedipus and Philoctetes, see Jones 1962, 218. On Oedipus’s fear of being marginalized as “other,” see Van Nortwick 1989, 134–35, 139, 152.
16. See Jones 1962: “The action is therefore poised on the brink of fulfillment by Oedipus’s arrival at Colonus in the opening lines” (222–23).
17. Knox 1964 sees a transformation in Oedipus over the course of the play, through which he assumes while alive the powers of a heros, “a superhuman being, a spirit which lives on with the power over the affairs of men after the death of the body” (147); so also, Bowra 1944, 307–8, 354. This model is a good way to fit the character into existing Greek religious beliefs but leads, in my view, to an incomplete picture of Sophocles’s innovation. Knox’s version of the old hero tends to stress the irascible part of Oedipus’s temperament, his “heroic temper,” which then modulates into a semi-divine anger (“a daemonic, superhuman wrath” 159), while underestimating the striking originality of Sophocles’s vision of Oedipus’s position as a mortal in relationship to other forces in the universe. Likewise, Bowra 1944 sees the entire play as the “heroization” of Oedipus, leading him to understand the old hero as some kind of supernatural being even before
his death, e.g., “Foreknowledge of the future belongs to Oedipus because he is already more than a man” (338). I would insist that we must understand Oedipus’s character and perspective as striking but entirely consistent with human experience. See also Knox’s discussion of other scholarship at 193–94, n.11 and, more recently, Kelly 2009, 41–45; 79–85.


20. For Oedipus at Colonus as a supplicant play, see Burian 1974; Wilson 1997; Kelly 2009, 75–79; Hesk 2012, 179–81.

21. For Oedipus as “the master of time” in this speech see Zeitlin 1990, 163–67.


23. See Knox 1964, 155–56, an eloquent appraisal of the ode.


25. So Bowra 1944, 331–32.

26. Deinos was used to describe the clever, sophistic speaker. See Guthrie 1971, 32–33.

27. On Creon and the Odysseus of Philoctetes, see Blundell 1989, 233–34.


32. I cannot agree with Knox 1964, 120: “… in Oedipus at Colonus it would have made little difference to our feelings if the order [of the Creon and Polyneices episodes] had been reversed—if Polyneices had tried to use force and Creon had limited his attempt to persuasion and deceit.” The order of the supplications is in this case crucial to the meaning of Oedipus’s life and death.


34. See Blundell 1989, 241; Burian 1974, 422–23.


38. For the resemblance of Polyneices to Oedipus, see Winnington-Ingram 1980, 277; Blundell 1989, 247–48; Kelly 2009, 121.

39. Scott 1996, 239, suggests that the final stanza of the choral ode (1211–48) Has
been interrupted by the arrival of Polyneices, further marking off the scene as an unexpected intrusion.

41. See Ringer 1998, 94–95, for other kinds of metatheatrical gesture in the play.
42. See further Scott 1996, 240–44.
43. On Oedipus’s last moments, see further Zeitlin 1990, 155–67.
44. One is reminded of the end of the *Iliad*, where the meeting of Achilles and Priam creates a sense of aesthetic closure, but always in the shadow of the war coming twelve days hence. See also Burton 1980, 270.
45. E.g., Jebb 1900, xliii. Kitto 1950, 386–87, grants the episodic nature of the play but denies that it lacks unity, saying that “no play shows more strength.” See also his insightful remarks on form and meaning (1956, 87–91). For a positive view of the play’s structure, see Kelly 2009, 85.
46. See Gellie 1972, 112.
47. Zeitlin 1990, 157, compares Oedipus’s escape from endless repetition of the past to the solution offered by the law courts in Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*. Segal 1981 has argued the Oedipus of the last play symbolizes the entire genre of tragedy: “By returning to this figure whose life contains the most extreme of tragic reversals, Sophocles seems to be consciously reflecting upon and transcending the tragic pattern which he did so much to develop (406).” See also Whitman 1951, 191.
49. Ibid. 37.
50. See further Ringer 1998, 91: “[Sophocles’s] use of Colonus represents an example of an ancient dramatist ‘staging’ his home and polis, endeavoring to preserve it, through dramatic action and poetry, from the ravages of war and time.” Sophocles too is creating a gift circle. See further Van Nortwick 1998, 152.
51. Whitman 1951 resists the idea that Sophocles projects the hero’s fate as finally mysterious. Rather, he insists that these heroes, and especially the aged Oedipus, are heroic because of their inner worth, however painfully tested. See especially 213–14.

Chapter 5

1. Thuc. 5. 84–116; 6–7.
2. See Ferrario 2012, 450–58, for a balanced survey of the evidence and scholarship. For *Philoctetes* and the oligarchic revolution, see Ringer 1998, 102–3; Rehm 2002, 154–55; Rose 1992, 327–30; Roisman 2005, 67–69. Kelly 2009, 14–18, has a good summary of the possible historical connections between *Oedipus at Colonus* and events in Athens. Vickers 2008 makes the strongest claims for topicality, but his attempt to find specific references to Alcibiades in the plays is not convincing to me.
5. See Ferrario 2012, 460–61
7. See Seale 1982, 50, on the prominent representation of suffering in Philoctetes, which is focused on the hero’s body.
9. See the challenging discussion of the idea of “late work” in McMullan 2007, especially 1–64, with extensive bibliography.
10. See further Landon 1999.
14. Knox 1964, 1–57. See also 177, of Philoctetes: “The tragic hero hews to the pattern; but the situation in which he is placed is unique.” I agree for the most part with this distinction between the temperament of the Sophoclean hero and the context within which s/he exerts him/herself.