

Zitierhinweis

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JENNY MARCH, *Sophocles. "Oedipus Tyrannus"*, Aris and Phillips Classical Texts, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020, 324 pp., £95.00, ISBN 978-1-78962-792-3.

Nearly two decades after her edition of Sophocles' *Electra* for Aris and Phillips (2001), Jenny March returns to Sophocles with an edition of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The lucidity, enthusiasm, and passionate commitment to the value of Hellenic studies which characterised her previous edition are all evident in this new volume, which can be warmly welcomed as a reliable introduction to the play for teachers and pupils alike.

After the Preface comes an Introduction of 48 pages, divided into four sections: 'The Myth before Sophocles', 'The Play', 'The Myth Lives On', and 'This Edition'. The first is itself subdivided into sections on 'The Pre-dramatic Tradition', 'The Myth in Aeschylus' and 'The Myth in Art', which provide a useful guide to the relevant background material. (Personally, I would not separate 'The Myth in Art' from 'The Pre-dramatic Tradition'; to learn about the pre-dramatic tradition of any Greek myth, one must take into account whatever evidence is available, whether material or textual, so the categories set out here are overlapping.)

The second section, by far the longest, has seven sections: 'Name and Date', 'Dramatic Design', 'Sophocles' Innovations', 'Staging', 'Characters', 'Themes and Issues' (under which heading are discussed 'Dramatic irony', 'Recognition', 'Foundlings', 'The role of Apollo', and 'Oedipus' tragic fate'), and finally 'The Question of the Ending'. These sections show good engagement with the play and with some recent scholarly literature. In terms of Apollo's role and the fate, it is particularly heartening to see citations of recent work by David Kovacs and Douglas Cairns on the gods in the play, rather than just the famous but now rather outdated article by E.R. Dodds on the subject. At the same time, it is a relief to see that this is not the only issue discussed. So much attention has been paid to it that other perspectives on the play have often been surprisingly neglected; but as the headings just mentioned indicate, thankfully not by March.

The third and fourth sections are much shorter. The third looks in brief at subsequent treatments of the Oedipus story by Sophocles himself, and by Euripides, Aristotle, Seneca, and Freud. This section could have done with greater awareness of more recent scholarship. So March's account of Euripides' *Oedipus* should have pointed readers to Vayos Liapis's attempt to reject many of the fragments ascribed to that play as inauthentic – I do not agree with him and have said so in print, but since this is a live issue readers should be alerted to it. Her discussion of *Phoenissae* cites only an article published during the Kennedy administration; readers need to know about more modern treatments. The bibliography on Aristotle's *Poetics* is obviously vast and readers could have done with a lead or two on the issue of *hamartia* and its importance for Sophocles' play. (Let me point to one now, which appeared after March's book: H. Vinje, "The beauty of failure: *hamartia* in Aristotle's *Poetics*", *CQ* 71, 2021, 582-600.) Brief remarks on Seneca

and Freud are all right as far as they go, but better would have been an account of the impact of this play in the ancient world. What can the evidence of quotations, papyri, scholia, literary allusions, and performance history tell us about the place of *Oedipus Tyrannus* in ancient culture down the centuries?

The fourth section, on the text, is rightly brief, but it is a shame to see the old canard that *Oedipus Tyrannus*, together with *Electra* and *Ajax*, were ‘selected in the Byzantine period for study in schools’ (p. 48). Evidence for the predominance of the seven plays that would eventually survive, and even of the three in the so-called Byzantine triad, can be identified centuries before the Byzantine period. Again, we could do with a historical sense of the engagement which this play saw during antiquity, which would help eliminate mistakes of this kind.

The ten-page bibliography which follows is divided into a list of texts and commentaries (seven items; it is good to see Lewis Campbell’s still-useful edition heading the list), followed by everything else. Almost all the works cited are in English. This makes sense up to a point, though it would do no harm if readers of the play consulting this edition were reminded that the interpretation of ancient Greek literature is not simply undertaken by people writing in English.

The text, apparatus, and translation are in the standard Aris and Phillips format. It is a shame, though, that the basic format of the apparatus has been taken over from the Oxford Classical Text. That edition cites too many manuscripts – including those of the Byzantine scholar Triclinius, which do not need to be regularly cited in even a very detailed critical edition. As a result, for many entries March’s apparatus is longer than the one in my Cambridge Orange edition, which is something of a paradox. Better in this context to ditch the manuscript sigla altogether, and to indicate simply when a reading is attested in one or more manuscripts, and when a conjecture is being printed. That would give readers of this edition the information that they need; those in search of more will naturally look elsewhere.

March makes her own textual choices throughout, and argues for them in the commentary. The big choice which an editor of this play needs to make is what to do about the last hundred or so lines, all or parts of which scholars from the early eighteenth century down to the present day have deleted as being unSophoclean. March is on the whole a sceptic, deleting three separate sections: 1424-31 (most of Creon’s opening speech), 1438-45 (part of an exchange between Oedipus and Creon), and 1515-30 (from the beginning of the trochaic tetrameters until the very end of the transmitted text). The controversy over the authenticity of the ending shows no sign of abating, but that is no bad thing; it is salutary for readers of the play at any level to learn that something as fundamental as how one of the great tragedies of world literature ended is a matter of dispute, on which every reader needs to take a side.

Having said that, I do not doubt that March has taken the wrong side; and it is for me a pity that as a result, the two handiest commentaries for teaching purposes in English – March’s and Dawe’s (revised edition 2006) – both gut the

ending. Across the admittedly small selection of plays that we have, Sophocles seems to show a particular fondness for the open ending – something that may be associated with his move away from connected trilogies (see my *Sophocles, Greece and Rome New Surveys in the Classics* 44, Cambridge 2019, 98-105) – which tells against the idea that an inconclusive conclusion, with Oedipus back in the palace awaiting Creon's further consultation of the oracle, cannot be from his pen. I would have preferred an edition which attempted to engage with what Sophocles is doing here, rather than with what March sees playing 'in the theatre of [her] mind' (p. 42) – a phrase which seems to point to the influence of preconceived views concerning what ought to happen in the drama, rather than allowing Sophocles to tell his story.

Any one-volume commentary on *Oedipus the King* requires a miracle of compression: so much has been written about the play, and yet (*experto crede*) one can feel that all this mass of scholarship, together with one's own efforts, is merely grazing the surface. March's commentary is not daunted by this problem, and offers a sensible and brisk analysis; when she differs from previous commentators, she often highlights that difference of opinion, which is a valuable service to readers in that it exposes them to different points of view.

That said – and this may be an unusual complaint for a reviewer to make – I sometimes felt that my own work was being cited, and directly quoted, too much, sometimes at the expense of other scholars whose fundamental contributions I certainly engage with, but not to the extent of rendering it unnecessary for readers of March's book to read and assess those contributions for themselves. To cite just one example, I missed a citation of the late Albert Henrichs's famous article in March's commentary on the famous 'Why should I dance?' passage. Readers deserve to be pointed towards such a key discussion. A great work such as Sophocles' play is not appreciated in all its fullness by any individual; we need a multitude of perspectives to do it justice.

Overall, though, this is a reliable and stimulating introduction to Sophocles' great play which teachers and pupils should feel confident using. And what comes across throughout – as it does from all of March's works – is her passion for Greek literature and myth, her commitment to the value of learning about ancient Greek culture. That enthusiasm has sustained March in her publications over several decades now; may there be many more in the years to come.

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