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Introduction

The articles in this volume are all literary studies of Greek tragedy.

As the best scholars of earlier generations have seen – Wilmowitz above them all – the full understanding of Greek tragedy by a modern demands the concerted techniques not merely of the literary critic, but also of the linguist, the metrician, the palaeographer, the philosopher, the historian, and the archaeologist. With this principle we agree entirely, adding only that perhaps there is yet another desirable qualification: to have lived a little; to have contemplated not books only, but also men and women, moral dilemmas, spiritual crises, and both the richness and the cruelty of life. Yet the conditions of human existence as such are unresearchable, at any rate by the techniques of professional scholarship; and there are plenty of classical journals available for the publication of articles on linguistics, metrics, and so forth. A volume on tragedy which was both to possess a certain unity and to interest a fairly wide circle of readers, classical and non-classical, had therefore best confine itself to the most commonly understood and easily communicable of those many approaches, literary criticism. Accordingly, on being asked by the Yale Department of Classics to edit this volume, we decided to invite contributions from a number of scholars whom we knew to be working on the literary criticism of Greek tragedy. As the project became known, several other scholars also submitted contributions. We laid down no rules as to topic or method, requiring only that to be included a paper should be literary-critical in a broad sense, good of its kind, and as accurate as possible in its treatment of the establishable data.

The resulting cross-section of contemporary preoccupations and methods is, we think, interesting in its own right. Most remarkable is the distribution of interests with regard to the three tragedians
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and their several plays. We received no contributions on the Oresteia, the Prometheus, the Antigone, the Oedipus Tyrannus, or the Bacchae. One contributor, only, writes on Aeschylus (Seven Against Thebes). Three papers concern Sophocles (two the Ajax, one the Trachiniae). By far the majority of the contributors chose Euripides, and even these, with the exception of one who discussed the Hippolytus and two who discussed the Medea, concentrated on plays which have not been among the most famous during the last century or so. For our purposes, this distribution may be fortunate. The Oresteia, the Oedipus Tyrannus, and the other masterpieces mentioned, remain masterpieces, and still deserve our admiration and our comment; but it is always to be regretted when one or two works of a given tragedian are singled out in the public mind as supreme, and as characteristic, so that the full range of his art – and consequently of our own sensibilities – is dangerously contracted. The present volume may do something to correct such an imbalance.

Furthermore the pattern of choice revealed in the contributions we received may not be entirely accidental; for it is not unique in history. A similar pattern emerges from an examination of the editions and translations of Greek tragedy published in Renaissance Europe.\(^1\) In that period, too, the plays of Euripides (and especially the Medea) aroused by far the greatest interest. In Sophocles, the Ajax attracted most attention. Those few commentators and translators who ventured to approach the still heavily corrupted texts of Aeschylus concentrated on two plays, the Prometheus (always the most accessible of the corpus, for stylistic and textual reasons) and... the difficult Seven Against Thebes. The parallel between that Renaissance selection and the range of contributions in the present volume is strange; future historians may be tempted to speculate why the closing years of the twentieth century, like the era of the Reformation, seemed able to respond better to a lone hero at his wits' end, or an ancient city threatened by annihilation, than to the codas of the Coloneus or of the Oresteia.

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The critical approaches represented in this book will be found to show a healthy diversity, but even so they seem to permit the drawing of a few tentative conclusions about contemporary tendencies. Predictably, biographical and historicist interpretations are here largely avoided – perhaps too much so, one may speculate, considering that these poets were very influential citizens in a tight-packed, politically and intellectually volatile, argumentative, precariously existing city. (Have the Hellenists now learned all too thoroughly the exciting lessons of a criticism developed primarily through analysis of the alienated modern artist?) The literary scholars even of fifty years ago, let alone of the nineteenth century or the Renaissance, would have raised their eyebrows somewhat at this austere concentration on purely literary and aesthetic phenomena. They would have been still more bewildered, however, by a critical trend which appears in the majority of the essays included here: the preoccupation with diction, with verbal themes and patterns, as essential clues to the interpretation of the dramas. It is precisely here, perhaps, that those earlier scholars could have learned most. This is a breakthrough. During the last two generations such methods have already to a great extent transformed our understanding of Aeschylus, and even now – even in this volume – are drastically modifying our understanding of the other two tragedians. There are some latent dangers, of course, in this approach, and it may be that the coming generation of scholars will have to devote itself to counteracting them. The worst is that in less skilled hands the study of Greek tragedy might become merely a matter of cold, static, verbal analysis (as it once did, from very different motives, in the hands of the Byzantines); and that people should forget that one partly subliminal poetic technique is not, after all, the only component in the playwright’s art. Beyond – no, at the end of – all our critical paths stand dynamic happenings at once of baffling wholeness and of baffling complexity: the live Greek tragedies acted out on the stage.