

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01082-5 - Account of the Harvard Greek Play


Henry Norman

Excerpt

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Introduction.



 UDDENLY, in December last, an opportunity dawned — a golden opportunity, gleaming for a moment amongst thick clouds of impossibility that had gathered through three-and-twenty centuries — for seeing a Grecian tragedy presented on a British stage, and with the nearest approach possible to the beauty of those Athenian pomps which Sophocles, which Phidias, which Pericles, created, beautified, promoted.” These were the words of De Quincey more than thirty years ago. The opportunity was eagerly embraced, the tragedy witnessed with delight, and De Quincey

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concludes his essay of forty pages with the assurance that "it was cheap at the price of a journey to Siberia, and is the next best thing to having seen Waterloo at sunset on the 18th of June, 1815," and condenses his deliberate judgment in the words which serve as a motto for the present volume. Such unstinted praise awarded to an insignificant representation of the Antigone in English may serve as an apology, if one be needed, for these pages. The play of which they give an account is the masterpiece of classic tragedy ; it was produced under the auspices and within the precincts of a great university ; each detail of the presentation was in the charge of men known for exact scholarship and literary taste ; difficulty and expense were alike disregarded in the effort to give an impressive reproduction of an Athenian performance ; seven months were spent in preparation. The play was witnessed by six thousand people ; on the occasion of the

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first performance, by an audience which, for literary distinction, has probably never been equalled in America; many persons were unable to obtain seats, although ten times the original price was freely offered; it was reported by every considerable newspaper in the country,* and the news of its performance was not only telegraphed to Europe, but was even inserted in the local papers there, so that — owing to the difference of time — while the strains of the first choral ode were ringing through the Sanders Theatre, a Harvard man who was studying in Bonn overheard a group of German students discussing it over the *Biertisch*. These facts seem to call for some permanent record and description: it would be unfitting that an event at once so unique in its character and productive of such wide-spread interest should receive no other memorial than a niche in the limbo of pleasant memories.

* See Appendix 3.

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In the statements concerning Athenian art and literature which are necessary to the comprehension of the Harvard Greek play, the writer presents no claim to originality. To the committee which had charge of the play, to whose learning and exertions its success was chiefly due, he desires to acknowledge his indebtedness and to express his thanks.

In addition to their interest as portraits of the principal characters, the illustrations have been selected to exhibit the typical costumes, attitudes, and incidents of the play. Their number being limited, it was necessary to omit several portraits which might naturally be expected. The groups and portraits are reproductions, by the Heliotype Printing Company, from negatives taken with great success by Mr. James Notman, of Boston, except the portrait of Jocasta (Mr. Opdycke), which is by Pach. The groups were photographed on the stage of the Sanders Theatre with the electric light; they are, therefore,

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representations of the actual scenes of the play. In comparison with the portraits, which were taken in sunlight, they will appear dark and somewhat indistinct; it must be borne in mind that photographing with the electric light is attended with many difficulties which are not present in the ordinary process. These groups of the Greek play, of which eight are reproduced here, are believed to constitute the most extensive piece of photography of this kind which has yet been attempted, and reflect great credit upon Mr. Notman.

The illustrations in the text have been drawn, and in several instances designed also, by Mr. C. H. Moore, Instructor in Drawing in Harvard University. The engraving is by Closson.

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I.



THE presentation of a Greek tragedy was no new idea at Harvard University. In 1876 the Memorial Hall was completed by the erection of the Sanders Theatre, and Professor Goodwin wished to mark the occasion by the performance of the *Antigone* of Sophocles in the original Greek. After a favorable reception and some discussion the plan was abandoned because of its many difficulties. The idea of a Harvard Greek play was then allowed to lie in abeyance, with an occasional allusion by some enthusiastic person, until the summer of 1880. In the mean time the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus had been performed with signal success by Oxford students, and had met with the

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warmest reception in London. Many accounts of the Oxford play and its success had come across the ocean and had aroused the dormant desire to produce a similar play at Harvard. Some of the English newspapers have alluded slightly to the Harvard play as another instance of the “manner in which America follows everything that is initiated in England.” This is unjust, as the idea had been entertained here long before the Agamemnon was thought of at Oxford. On the other hand, the assertion in this country that the Oedipus at Harvard was an entirely spontaneous and independent movement, is equally untrue. We are indebted to England for the immediate inspiration and suggestion of the undertaking; had there been no Agamemnon at Oxford there would have been no Oedipus at Harvard.

The awakened plan took shape at the meetings of an informal philological club,

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which numbered among its members several Harvard professors. A Harvard Greek play, — why not? This is not a country where ideas go a-begging, so the proposal was no sooner made than it found many warm supporters; a few hearty discussions put it into a practical shape and removed such obstacles as had presented themselves, and the opening of the autumn term found it a definite and attractive scheme. A committee was formed, the various divisions of the work to be done were assigned to those most competent to take charge of them, and conferences were held with the students who would probably be invited to take part in the performance.

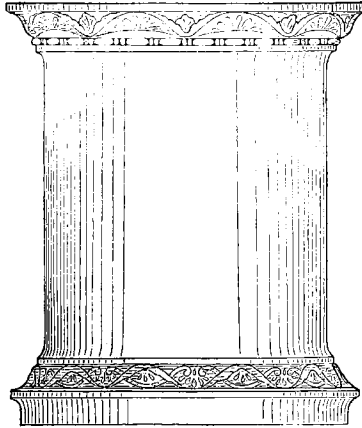
With little discussion it was decided to attempt the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles. This play was chosen, first, as the masterpiece of the classic stage, and as being typical of so many elements of Greek thought; and secondly, because of the significance of its plot to a modern mind, and the adap-

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tability of its scenic details to modern and local conditions.

The distribution of the rôles followed immediately the selection of the play ; the chosen few bent themselves to their long task, and before the autumn term of 1880 was a month old, regular work on the Greek play had been begun.



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II.



LESS than a mile and a half from
Athens stood the hill of Colonus.
Its beauties have been sung by
its own poet.

O stranger, thou hast reached the dwellings of a land
Where noble steeds are bred, — earth has no better homes —
Colonus, with a gleaming altar crowned. Here, too,
The clear-toned nightingale pours forth her plaintive note
Down in green glades where purple ivy grows,
The ivy which she loves, and where the thicket grows
Sunless, untrodden, shaken by no winds, a fruit
Of myriad berries bearing, sacred to the God.
There joyous Dionysus wanders ever
In happy frolic with the Nymphs who care for him ;
And nourished by the falling dews of heaven each day
The clustering narcissus blooms, the ancient crown
Of mighty Goddesses ; and there its golden head .
The crocus shows. The sleepless rills which flow
To feed Cephissus' streams are never dry, but with
Each day their quickening waters o'er earth's bosom flow.
The chorus of the Muses does not shun the spot,
And Aphrodite with her golden reins is there.