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SOPHOCLES

OEDIPUS THE KING

EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION,
TRANSLATION,
AND COMMENTARY

BY

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MARTINI LITCHFIELD WEST
IN MEMORIAM

κεκλησθαι δ' ἐς δαῖτα, παρέζεσθαι δὲ παρ' ἐσθλόν
ἄνδρα χρεὼν σοφίην πᾶσαν ἐπιστάμενον.
τοῦ συνιεῖν, ὅπότεν τι λέγῃ σοφόν, ὄφρα διδαχθῆς
καὶ τοῦτ' εἰς οἶκον κέρδος ἔχων ἀπίης.

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PREFACE

Oedipus the King is a central work of western literature, a play for which the term ‘canonical’ might have been invented; yet there has been no new critical edition of the play with introduction and detailed commentary (*editio maior*) in any language since 1883. The aim of this book is to fill that daunting gap.

At the heart of the volume lies a new text of the drama. Establishing the text of a long-studied author like Sophocles might seem otiose – yet the two major critical editions of the seven plays, the Oxford Classical Text and the Teubner (the only critical editions published since the discovery of Sophoclean papyri and the collation of a decent number of mediaeval manuscripts), differ from each other in more than a thousand places,¹ which gives an indication of just how controversial this question remains. My text in turn differs substantially from those two recent editions;² intended to present, as accurately as the evidence allows, and subject to modern printing conventions, what Sophocles actually wrote, it will for sure repeatedly fall short of that aim. The accompanying critical apparatus offers the evidence for readings adopted in the text, as well as important variants in the manuscript tradition and significant attempts by modern scholars to emend those manuscripts when they believe them to be corrupt. The complexity of the tradition and the substantial corruption suffered by the text mean that the apparatus is fairly substantial. It is nevertheless highly selective, and could easily have been much bigger; but readers can always turn to the commentary for fuller consideration of any individual point.

¹ For a list see Renehan (1992) 335, 374–5.

² For example, I count fifty-six substantive differences between my text and that of the revised 1992 Oxford Classical Text by Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (excluding matters of orthography and so forth), or more than one every thirty lines; many of these have major implications for sense and interpretation (e.g. 162, 175/6, 230, 463/4, 510/11, 611–12, 624, 625, 677, 892–893/4 ~ 906–907/8, 1196/7, 1453, [1524–30]).

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The commentary repeats the Greek text of the entire play, here lemmatised into sections the length of a sentence or other easily-recognisable sense unit, and each lemma is immediately followed by a translation. As a result the commentary contains a fairly literal translation of the entire play – placed there, rather than opposite the Greek text, because translating a lemma is, for me, an essential part of commenting on it.³ By beginning each lemma with a translation, I tell the reader from the outset what I understand a particular sentence to mean; where the translation is not obvious (and in Sophocles it rarely is), or where any English rendering will fail to bring out some key aspect of the original (again, frequently the case in Sophocles), the note gives a fuller explanation, just as it discusses any textual decision relevant to its lemma.

In addition to establishing and translating the text, the commentary discusses the impact and significance of individual words, of phrases, of speeches, and of episodes and choral songs. The close consideration of language and style which this demands is interwoven with analysis of staging and production. To allow analysis of units larger than any individual lemma, I include notes on whole chunks of text, such as particular speeches or sections within an episode. Individual episodes and choral songs each have their general note too, printed in the larger type used in the introduction to the volume to indicate their status as introductory material. The commentary also contains a full metrical analysis of all lyric sections; these identify the metres used in a song and, where possible, discern stylistic patterns.

A particular problem for the commentator on *Oedipus the King* is the all-pervasiveness of irony within the drama; indeed, the concept of ‘dramatic irony’ was first explicated in the context of a discussion of this very play.⁴ The gap between what the

³ Of published translations I have found most helpful those by Paul Mazon and Oliver Taplin. Lloyd-Jones’s Loeb is often useful too, but sometimes falls short of adequately rendering the sense of the Greek (contrast, for example, his translation of 547 with Mazon’s), and the original 1994 impression of the book occasionally omits entire lines.

⁴ Thirlwall (1833) (although he does not use this exact phrase). For a recent discussion of irony in the play see Rutherford (2012) 346–8;

PREFACE

characters know and what the audience surmise from their general awareness of the myth ensures that a large proportion, perhaps even a majority, of its lines can be read as conveying degrees of dramatic irony.⁵ I have pointed only to some of these instances; for whereas the playwright employing such relentless irony may delight his audience, the commentator who noted every possible case would have the reverse effect on his. So the absence of a comment on irony in a given passage in no way implies a claim that no irony is present.

More generally, the commentary makes no claims to comprehensiveness of any kind, and would soon be found out if it did. Unlike Morris Zapp, who in David Lodge's *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* (1975) was at work on a commentary on Jane Austen's novels 'saying absolutely everything that could possibly be said about them ... The idea was to be utterly exhaustive ... so that when each commentary was written there would be simply nothing further to say about the novel in question', I am relaxed about the selectivity necessary to produce a commentary on this play that fits into a single volume. Professor Zapp, it will be recalled, anticipated writing several on each novel, though in the end he failed to finish even one.

The introduction proper is divided into five sections. The first investigates when the play saw its first performance and tentatively concludes that this took place in the 430s; it emphasises that the date commonly and confidently given in standard handbooks and works of scholarship, the early 420s, has nothing in particular to recommend it. The second examines aspects of that first performance: the festival at which it took place, the composition and reaction of its audience, the nature of the set where the play was staged, an overview of the entrances and exits made by the characters and chorus, and the division of parts between the three available actors. Discussion of the dramatic

also Williams (1993) 147–9. Hug (1872) is a list of phrases with double meanings, an aspect of the play appreciated in antiquity (927–8n.) and the mediaeval period (see Finglass (forthcoming 3)).

⁵ 'In the two Oedipuses [of Sophocles] we conceive it [i.e. dramatic irony] is the main feature in the treatment of the subject, and is both clearly indicated by their structure, and unequivocally express in numberless passages' (Thirlwall (1833) 503).

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impact of individual entrances and exits, however, or of other points of staging and production, is found not here but in the commentary. The third section considers accounts of the Oedipus myth up to about the fourth century BC, before discussing how original Sophocles was in his treatment of the story. Although other versions of the myth are brief and fragmentary, we can nevertheless discern how Sophocles has adapted the story for his own literary ends, giving the lie to the claim made by a character in the fourth-century comic dramatist Antiphanes that the course of any tragedy involving the Oedipus myth was entirely predictable by its audience.⁶ The fourth section examines *Oedipus the King* as a whole under a succession of different headings: as a suppliant drama, a recognition tragedy, a *nostos*-play, a foundling narrative, a work of theodicy, a tragicomedy. These characterisations are intended to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, and to stimulate readers ahead of tackling the play with the commentary by emphasising the diversity of possible approaches to the work. The fifth and last section considers the transmission of the play from its original performance down to our own day, with a particular focus on its reception in antiquity. Sophocles' plays were reperformed even in his own lifetime, and there is every reason to believe that he hoped that this would continue after his death; focusing on the first performance to the exclusion of any other is probably contrary to the playwright's own intentions, quite apart from the historical and cultural significance of tracing the transmission of so important a work. Part of the evidence for that transmission consists of the manuscripts, ancient and mediaeval, from which, together with other, indirect sources, our text is derived; their value as sources for the text is analysed in this section too, which thus explains the choice of manuscripts cited regularly in the apparatus.

Writing on any Sophoclean drama is a chastening exercise. Writing on *Oedipus the King*, given its deserved fame, is perhaps most challenging of all; here Robin Nisbet's engagingly preposterous dictum, that 'a commentary should not be duller than the text on which it is based', is harder to live up to than ever.⁷ But if

⁶ Antiph. fr. 189 *PCG*.

⁷ In Hollis's edition of Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 1, p. vii.

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this book takes us closer to the text of the play used in its first performance, explains what that text means, and conveys, however inadequately, some aspects of Sophocles' extraordinary ability as a poet and a dramatist, I – and, I hope, my readers – will be content with that.

First thanks are once more due to James Diggle, who has again read each section of the commentary as it was completed; his support and encouragement for my work since we first met at my doctoral viva in December 2003 has been unstinting. It is also a pleasure to reiterate my gratitude to Michael Reeve and Neil Hopkinson, who commented in great detail on the finished typescript; to Lyndsay Coe and to Alan Sommerstein, who generously read the Introduction; to Muriel Hall, whose expert copy-editing has once more spared me many blushes; and to Michael Sharp and all his staff at Cambridge University Press for their unfailing help.

I began working on this book in 2013/14, when I was Head of Department; but by far the greater part of it was written during research leave in the academic years 2014/15 and 2015/16, the bulk of which was funded by the Leverhulme Trust through the award, in 2012, of a Philip Leverhulme prize. Thanks to the Trust's generosity, I was able to present parts of the introduction and commentary as papers in Bologna, Brisbane, Bristol, Calgary, Coimbra, Göttingen, Heidelberg, Kyoto, Milan, Naples, Newcastle, Nicosia, Nottingham, Oxford, Palermo, St Andrews, Sydney, Thessaloniki, Tokyo, Venice, Victoria, Warsaw, and Wellington, and I am grateful to audiences in all these cities for stimulating discussion. The continuing kindness of All Souls College has allowed me easy access to libraries in Oxford, as well as membership of a unique academic community. I have consulted, with great profit, David Kovacs, Scott Scullion, and George Xenis on individual points; Anna Zouganeli provided me with photographs of the vase described on pp. 20–1; Costas Panayotakis guided my citations of Publilius Syrus; and Guido Avezzi promptly communicated to me information from the archive assembled by Liny van Paassen, now

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held at the University of Verona, on conjectures whose locations I had not managed to identify.

Oedipus the King was the first tragedy which I encountered in the original Greek, when, at King Edward's School, Birmingham, we read selections from the play under the direction of James Stone during the academic year 1995/6, using the volume *A World of Heroes* published by the Joint Association of Classical Teachers (now part of the Classical Association). Attempting to read the Tiresias scene in the original was a bracing experience; twenty years on, it has not got any easier. We were given xeroxes of Dodds's article 'On misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*', the first journal article that I ever read, and in retrospect not a bad place to start. My appreciation of the play was further enhanced by Oliver Taplin's brilliant lectures during my first term at Oxford in the autumn of 1997. Any value that readers find in this book ultimately derives from the matchless education, at school and at university, that I was so fortunate to receive.

This edition is the first that I have published which has not been scrutinised by Martin West. Only he and I will ever know how many errors, small and large, he saved me from; without his guidance, any work of mine will be more than usually imperfect. I had intended to dedicate this book to Martin in honour of what would have been his eightieth birthday. Instead, with Stephanie's permission, it is dedicated to his memory.

P. J. F. F.
 Bristol, All Souls Day 2017

LEVERHULME TRUST _____

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