RICHARD MINADEO The Thematic Sophocles (Amsterdam, Hakkert, 1994), vii + 198.

'...The following essays are an effort at criticism, not scholarship, and are intended as keenly for the undergraduate student of Greek tragedy as for its professorial exponent'. I would say 'more keenly': there is no bibliography, and citations in footnotes are confined to matter fairly easily available in English. My review will assume the legitimacy of this approach.

The author begins by rejecting the 'religious', 'heroic', and 'theatrical' approaches (of which Bowra, Whitman, and Waldock could be taken as respective champions) and offers an approach based on two themes which are, indeed, prevalent in Greek thought: that of justice (defined as 'to help one's friends and to harm one's enemies') and that of truth (defined as to make logos, what is said, correspond to ergon, what is done). This is, perhaps, in as much danger of providing a bed of Procrustes as the more traditional approaches; I prefer to withhold judgment until we see how it is applied to each play. In practice, it amounts to evaluating the moral status of the protagonist of each play according to two separate criteria, each of which has two subsections.

It should come as no surprise that Ajax fares very badly. He is no good at helping his friends. This is most evident in the scene with Tecmessa, in which Minadeo follows the communis opinio: the scene is based on the Hector/Andromache episode of Iliad VI, with alterations which consistently put Ajax in a worse light than Hector. More controversially, Minadeo accepts Athena's comments in the prologue as definitive: Ajax has (like Achilles) reacted to his loss of a prize by rejecting his comrades, but goes much further than Achilles in his vengeance. This acceptance involves answering in the affirmative the question 'Was the judgment of the arms a fair
one?’, which Pindar had already answered in the negative and Sophocles, one would think, leaves open. To hate one’s enemies is respectable, if one has correctly identified them. Ajax has not, and suffers throughout the play from a fatal dichotomy of logos and ergon. His suicide Minadeo argues is an ultimate act of betrayal, inspired largely by the fact that he lacks the moral courage to confront his father. His famous ‘deception speech’ is consciously deceptive, to gain the opportunity to commit suicide in the open air (Really? What was stopping him?). Only Odysseus has any real claim to heroic stature, and even he endangers his claim by excess of charity, since to be generous to an enemy also ‘ruptures the heroic code’.

It will come as a much greater surprise that Antigone fares almost as badly as Ajax. In her last scene, a ‘transport of self-lamentation’, she abandons the lofty principles to which she laid claim earlier in the play: family love, piety, the quest of honour. Her real motive was always family pride, not love; she subjects Ismene to a ‘venomous display of imperiousness’ and rejects her love as she later rejects Haemon’s. Clearly, she is not good at helping her friends. So far, Minadeo has, perhaps, a better case than most are willing to admit. But in order to blacken her further, she must also fail the truth test. Minadeo revives the remarkable theory of McCall: the first burial was performed by the gods. Her indignation at 423-7 was therefore not inspired by the unburying; ‘She curses not the removal of ritual dust, but of raiment (410). Dust the storm (417ff.) would have removed’. Elementary, my dear Watson. I would still maintain that anyone who argues like this in dealing with a play should be locked up until he has learnt by heart Waldox’s chapter on ‘The documentary fallacy’, in which he enlarges on the futility of postulating a ‘real life’ behind the play, to which the text offers subtle clues. But to resume: she is guilty of the crime of which she accuses Ismene (543): she loves only in words. All that she actually achieves is the death of Haemon and Eurydice. Her suicide deprives her of the chance of learning the truth by suffering (925ff.) In the sequel, the gods ignore her as she has ignored them. The vilification of Antigone is not accompanied by any rehabilitation of Creon, who might have got some points as
a good hater; he too suffers from a tyrannical disposition, and his logos and ergon are, like hers, at odds.

If this is Antigone, what hope is there for Deianeira? She also suffers from the logos/ergon discrepancy, especially in her deliberate deception of Lichas, which brings about his death. Mainly, however, she deceives herself:—not with the over-optimism with which Antigone begins, but with over-pessimism; like many modern scholars, including me, she has failed to read the signs of Heracles' coming apotheosis. But at least Minadeo refrains from turning her into Medea: 'Awesomely transcending her errors, she ends in moral magnificence, a study in human dignity'. In the light of his coming apotheosis, her husband cannot be seen as her moral inferior; and he is not. Swiftly passing over his 'selfish indifference to the bonds of philia', which was stressed at such length in the cases of Ajax and Antigone, Minadeo writes: 'He has....a courage and endurance that beggars description. More germane to our thematic interests, he is all but a stranger to deception.... Finally, and most important, he is pious... The Athenian stage never saw a filial courage more respectful and enduring than that which permits him, already racked with searing pains, to face the torture of live cremation without complaint.' In Antigone, as we have seen, it was 'a transport of self-lamentation'—but gods-to-be don't do this kind of thing. He is pious, Deianeira 'abandons the gods', and each is appropriately rewarded (I thought we had rejected the religious approach?).

Having thus relapsed into piety, Minadeo goes on to confront the problem of Oedipus. He finds an innocent Oedipus morally unacceptable, and who shall blame him? So Oedipus must be guilty of something. 'It is simply that, when he learned of his fate at Delphi, he chose to avoid it. Accordingly, albeit on an unconscious level, he elects to challenge the oracle, to match wits with the gods. This amounts not alone to serious insubordination to divine authority, but, implicitly it denies the existence of the divine altogether. In a word, it invites ruin'. Now, there's a solution: he should have obediently trotted off to kill his father and marry his mother, and, no doubt, he would have been rewarded with appropriate happiness. 'Nor does it matter that few or none in
the audience would have chosen otherwise. The choice was his, and he freely took the way of impiety'. As a result, he spends most of the play with logos and ergon hopelessly at odds, and abuses philia in his treatment of Tireseas (sic) and Creon (Again, there is some truth in this; there is a good deal in common between this Oedipus and the Creon of the Antigone). Only at the end does he emerge as 'a man exceptionally gifted with a capacity for love'.

Electra, like Oedipus, is found guilty on a charge which is not that usually made against her. *Pace* Winnington-Ingram and others, her devotion to revenge is not culpable, since it has been clearly ordained by Apollo (I agree). The *logos* of Apollo must find its fulfillment in the *ergon* of Orestes. In this context, most of what Electra says in this play—her lamentations, her debate with her mother, her false grief, her futile hope of herself achieving vengeance, her excessive rejoicings, her 'horrendous call for a second matricidal blow'—is a simple waste of time, in ironical contrast with the real requirements of the situation. Her deception of Aegisthus, which does not fit this pattern, is blithely ignored. If the criterion of justice is applied (as it briefly is) then, of course, she does far better.

In his treatment of the *Philoctetes*, Minadeo is closely following Bowra, though he does not admit this; was Bowra too pietistic and old-fashioned to be consulted? The key is the correct interpretation of the oracle: 'As Troy cannot be taken without Philoctetes' active and voluntary presence, he must be honestly persuaded, and not duped or compelled, to rejoin his erstwhile companions'. We are dealing with the familiar *logos/ergon* antithesis, having the benefit of being able to read the play backwards if we wish (the full text of the oracle is not given until 1320ff.). Sophocles' original audience, unfortunately, would have had to take the play as it came, and, as Waldock makes clear, the playwright seems to maximise his dramatic effects by leaving this obscure (But that is a theatrical view, which Minadeo treats with contempt). Philoctetes introduces the theme of love and hate. He is basically in the right here (true!), but as blind to the real meaning of the oracle as are his adversaries. Fortunately, the gods have mellowed with time, and in the last
three plays they are far more tolerant towards human blindness than they were in the first four.

The *Oedipus Coloneus* marks the apotheosis of Oedipus, and of Minadeo. In no other play do his methods work so well. Hero and gods work together to ensure that the oracular *logos* is fulfilled in *ergon*, and in the process hatreds and loves are fully vindicated. 'We may thus say that, in his final testament, Sophocles visited upon human life, for all of its anguishing chances and its horror, a profound affirmation'.

Minadeo's book provides a mixture of the challenging and the simply exasperating. His attempt to apply the same pattern to all the plays suffers from the same defects as other such attempts: sometimes one of his themes seems to prevail unjustly, sometimes the other, and sometimes another theme (notably the religious) manages to have the better of both. Perhaps the negative side prevails. I cannot really believe that we are meant to sit through Sophocles' plays carefully noting evidence for the prosecution of the heroes (or the defence, for that matter). Such an approach detracts from both the dramatic impact of the theatre and the moral complexities of human existence, which Sophocles seems to highlight but not to attempt to resolve. In short, we have a book which deserves a place in a well-stocked library of criticism, but should never be entrusted to novices as a sole commentary.

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