

Poulheria KYRIAKOU, *The Past in Aeschylus and Sophocles*, Berlin–New York: de Gruyter, 2011 (Trends in Classics Supplementary Volume 11), 596 pp., ISBN 978-3-11-025752-6, € 109,95.

KYRIAKOU'S [= K.] recent work proposes to analyze the importance of the past as an element contributing to the decision processes portrayed in the tragedy and, hence, as a factor inescapably motivating human (or, at the very least, tragic characters') behaviour. This is certainly an interesting and complex problem, involving paramount methodological demands. Given that tragedy portrays agents and personages as both consciously (re)telling the stories of their own, their family's and their community's past, and being in turn inescapably influenced by the past events, any discussion of the relevant problems is necessarily threatened by circularity of argument, and thus, confusion between the voluntarily shaped perception of the past and past events' influence on human perception of themselves and their surroundings. At the same moment, such a study is particularly worthwhile: highlighting the fundamental role of the past (actual and perceived) in agents' motivation, it relates to another frequent object of scholarly interest, namely the important question of curses and the *alastor*¹, but also touches on other important problems such as e.g. concept of personality in Greek tragedy.

Divided into two sections, discussing respectively Aeschylus and Sophocles, the book follows (for each author) the chronological sequence: thus, the exploration begins with the *Persae* and concludes with the *Oedipus Coloneus*, its contents being supplemented by nineteen short appendices, discussing questions relevant to the reading of single dramas, but seen as secondary to the main discussion (the issues are of paramount importance in the classical scholarship, witness the problem of Agamemnon's freedom of choice, discussed in App. III.3; their presence in the appendices contrasts them with "smaller" problems discussed in carefully marked asides abounding in the main body of K.'s work). All seven dramas of Aeschylus are covered in the discussion (nevertheless, the analysis of the *Choephoroi* and *Eumenides* is accomplished in a single chapter, the only such collusion in the work); of Sophocles' plays, the *Antigone* remains conspicuously absent. Two indexes (of places and of names and subject) and a short, but well built, bibliography list (to include all the existent studies relevant to the subject would be near impossible, hence the list necessarily relies on a series of well negotiated choices; one would however expect some reference to Hayden WHITE's influential work on historical narrative) complete the whole. Throughout the book, quotations are almost entirely absent, so one is well advised to read K.'s work as a companion volume. Finally, while on organizational theme: the book is very well edited; still, the table of contents, somewhat surprisingly given the size of the work, omits the internal divisions of the chapters – since references to these latter remain quite frequent in the text, this decision cannot but be defined as baffling if not outright mistaken.

Right at the beginning, K. makes several provisos and caveats: as these are of considerable importance in her own reading, it is only right to address them at this point. She displays much reserve with regard to the intertextual nature of the tragic production, her stance resembling to some extent that of SOURVINOU-INWOOD², yet much more nuanced (in the essence, K. argues that owing to

¹ Some of K.'s findings stand in vivid contrast to the interpretation favoured e.g. by SEWELL-RUTTER's recent study of the subject (N.J. SEWELL-RUTTER, *Guilt by Descent. Moral Inheritance and Decision Making in Greek Tragedy*, Oxford 2007).

² Ch. SOURVINOU-INWOOD, *Tragedy and Athenian Religion*, Lanham 2003. I considered the possible limitations of the stance in my review of the work (Eos XCI 2004, pp. 158–164).

the losses suffered by the tragic *corpus* we are in no position to assess the level of possible “learnedness” of surviving works). She also draws attention to the truncated nature of the Aeschylean *Supplices* and *Septem*, each of them representing one part of respective (lost) trilogy. This state of affairs, she notes, is bound to affect our understanding of a given drama, which must be considered out of dramatic context in which it was intended to function. Owing to those caveats, K. follows a relatively simple methodological principle, that is, she considers each drama (with the obvious exception of the *Oresteia*) as autonomous entity, with almost no allusions to the contemporary literary output. Still, some exceptions may be noticed; one possibly most outstanding is a reference to Bacchylides as literary (or conceptual) context for Sophocles’ *Trachiniae* (pp. 387–389) – interestingly, no justification is adduced for this singular case, although it may be sought in the polemical nature of the passage, aimed at critique of CARAWAN’S interpretation of the play³).

As indicated above, the Aeschylean section begins with the discussion of the *Persae* (pp. 17–36), the oldest and also the most exceptional of tragedies. Possibly, the most interesting aspect of K.’s analysis is her insistence on the Marathon battle, arguably absent from the play. In her opinion the silence concerning this particular event is particularly important given the strikingly positive portrayal of Darius and the resulting idealization of the past. The interpretation is finely nuanced and pays due attention to the very circumstances of staging: the sentiments of the Athenian public would probably colour their perception of the Aeschylean Darius. In turn, the investigation of the *Septem* (pp. 37–64) may well seem surprising: the focus on the perceived and motivational past results in downplaying the importance and the dramatic impact of the shield-scene, usually the object of considerable interest in discussions of the play: K.’s reading retains firm focus on the persona of Eteocles: still, the scholar is quick to stress the difficulties resulting from the loss of the other parts of the trilogy, the circumstance resulting in certain precariousness of any interpretative attempt. The analysis unravels the complexities at the heart of the king’s decision, stressing the conformity of his behaviour in the play; conformingly, the scholar rejects interpretations calling for an essential transformation of the hero after the shield-scene⁴. As for the study of *Supplices* (pp. 65–88), the drama emphasizes the simplistic and partial nature of the past as perceived by the Danaids. Dwelling on the history of Io to the exclusion of every other historical narration, they end by retelling this particular one story through highlighting its single aspect.

Comprising two separate chapters (*Agamemnon*, pp. 89–142, *Choephoroi* and *Eumenides*, pp. 143–184), the discussion of the *Oresteia* emphasizes the crucial difference between the importance of Aulis in the *Agamemnon* and its absence in the later plays – in this, K.’s approach comes near that of A.M. VAN ERP TAALMAN KIP⁵, yet with notably different results. K.’s Clytaemnestra emerges as a woman consciously persevering in her vision of the past, her memory fixed on the fateful sacrifice – profoundly affected by the events at Aulis, she also chooses to invoke the story of the slaughter, the story which – at least in her opinion – furnishes an ultimate justification of her actions. Her behaviour is mirrored, albeit grotesquely, in Aegisthus, who glories in Agamemnon’s death invoking the misfortunes of his own past. As is duly noted by K., that of all voices present onstage, only the chorus displays some awareness of the multifaceted nature of historical narration, and hence, the ability to look beyond the personal traumas and bias.

Still, K.’s focus on characters’ perception of the past seems to limit the interpretative possibilities where the *Eumenides* is concerned – her reading of the drama tends to downplay the importance of the very impact that the internecine conflict has on the divine level and, as a result, is unable to account for the depth and complexity of changes wrought by Orestes’ revenge. In fact,

³ E. CARAWAN, *Deianira’s Guilt*, TAPA CXXX 2000, pp. 189–237.

⁴ Such as e.g. T.G. ROSENMEYER, “*Seven Against Thebes*”: *The Tragedy of War*, Arion I 1962, pp. 48–78, R.P. WINNINGTON-INGRAM, *Studies in Aeschylus*, Cambridge 1983, pp. 16–54.

⁵ A.M. VAN ERP TAALMAN KIP, *Reader and Spectator: Problems in the Interpretation of Greek Tragedy*, Amsterdam 1990.

it may look as if the study ignored the essential difference between the acts of violence committed by Clytaemnestra and her son (if nothing else, the difference lies in the awareness of the ambiguity of the deed), except where motivational issues are concerned. By contrast, throughout the analysis K.'s argument makes a convincing case for the freedom of human choices: after all, her standpoint is such as to demand that agents act freely, by their own choice, and not constrained by an external, superior force (such as e.g. the Pleisthenid curse).

The investigation of Sophoclean drama begins with the study of the *Ajax* (pp. 187–240): K. makes a persuasive case in favour of her vision of the protagonist as a man defined and in turn imprisoned by the heroic past: unable to conceive his own persona in terms other than his heroic glory, Ajax clings to the past achievements, past enmities, past hatred, the grim figure of Telamon forming the only mirror against which he measures his stance. K. pays considerable attention to the choral songs, stressing the contrast between the war seen as a field of heroic achievement and the tiresome, everyday encumbrances of war invoked by the Salaminian sailors. The recent past, source of pride and glory for the hero, becomes an unrelieved repetitive toil: this chasm demonstrates, possibly better than anything, the subjectivity of perception, while, simultaneously, setting the protagonist even farther from the Greek forces.

Forming the longest chapter in the work, the study of the *Philoctetes* (pp. 241–314) contains interesting and persuasive analysis of Neoptolemus, regarded here as a confused youth unable to recognize the proper narration of the past – his blundering is read as being directly related to his ignorance of the past. In the essence, he does not know the true person of Achilles, whom he seeks to emulate, hence, forced to rely on the mediated reports of the past, he is forced to choose between the Odyssean and the Philoctetean narration. By contrast, Philoctetes and Odysseus both know the past, yet their memories differ noticeably – K. rightly draws attention to the close relation between Philoctetes' intransigence and his (strongly biased) perception of the past. She also stresses the character and the importance of Odysseus' mission: yet, one wonders whether this importance would really be seen as justifying the means he invents to trick everyone around him, and most particularly his young companion⁶. Also, K. highlights the peculiarities of the chorus, an entity she somewhat tersely terms "a few bad men": this particular chorus is inclined to sanction oath-breaking and effectively encourages perjury, a circumstance rare in tragic literature.

The analysis of the *Trachiniae* (pp. 371–432) remains, at least for me, the most suggestive part of the work. Insisting on Deianira's culpability (at least as far as she should have known better than to use enemy's gift to secure – and prolong – her own status in Heracles' household), K. highlights characters' adamant persistence on preserving their own position in society: if Deianira strives to preserve her troubled yet privileged status of Heracles' consort, Heracles insists on controlling the fate of "his" womenfolk. In this particular reading, the fate of Iole, her forthcoming nuptials with Hyllos, is a direct result of Heracles' reluctance to relinquish his hold on the last female of his choice. In Heracles' mind, the son becomes his substitute, with the intended marriage perpetuating Iole's sexual subjugation to the conquering hero. This approach, influenced by the recent studies of the "traffic of women" seems to unravel the unexpected layers of meaning in the play, emphasizing the super-heroic nature of Heracles' demands, as he attempts to control his *oikos* even from beyond the grave.

Dealing with the best known and most influential of Sophoclean dramas, the *Oedipus Tyrannus* (pp. 433–470), K. traces the significance attached to the past by the characters, emphasizing the "past as *kriterion*" approach of Jocasta, highlighting the quick intelligence of the unfortunate king and parricide as he strives to uncover and retell the events of the Theban (but also his) past, the easy and demeaning practicality of Creon's attitude. Significantly, the chapter often draws on the close reading of the play with its varied perspectives and visions of the past and future in order to

⁶ One notes that K.'s stance differs radically from that assumed e.g. by G. GELLIE in his *Tragedy and Euripides' "Electra"*, BICS XXVIII 1981, pp. 1–12.

answer some questions raised by the modern scholarship (in a way, this latter's presence is more manifest here than in other parts of the book). The main body of the work closes with the study of the *Oedipus Coloneus* (pp. 471–506), the last play Sophocles composed, and simultaneously the play making immense use of the past of its principal personages, of whom the old king remains the most imposing.

As for the possible weaknesses of the book: the first, paradoxically, may stem from its very detailedness: the close reading seems never to evolve into any comprehensive account of "the past" as this latter is conceived by the Aeschylean/Sophoclean characters. Due to its title, one may expect from K.'s work some account of the general perception of the past (understood in a slightly more liberal sense than one's own past) in the dramas of the two great poets. Certainly, K. devotes considerable attention to the manner in which personal past can shape and, indeed, predetermine one's actions, she also highlights the intrinsic subjectivity of the vision of this personal past as manifested by the characters and choruses of the respective plays: yet, somewhat disturbingly, she never even raises more abstract questions about the continuity (or, respectively) discontinuity of the generally understood past and its perception; neither does she pay attention to the possibility that a character may perceive himself as an aberration, disruption or, indeed, end of some narrative of the past. This is a weakness which may, at least to some extent, be forgotten: after all, K. studies the way in which the characters rely on the near past for guidance (and hence, the past as a determining factor of decision process) and not the somewhat abstract concept of narrating and/or perceiving the past in the ancient drama. Yet, it brings about the already mentioned omission of the *Antigone*: never discussed in full and almost entirely absent from the work, this tragedy constitutes the only Sophoclean drama omitted in the study. The fact receives some attention in the programmatic *Introduction* (p. 12), yet even given this admittedly brief explanation it seems at best hazardous: after all, by K.'s own admission this single Sophoclean play does not fit the motivational pattern detected in other dramas. Now, one could reasonably expect some explanation whether anything (and if so, what) acts as a substitute of the past in the motivational scheme of the *Antigone* or, for that matter, whether the play is in any way affected by its author decision to have his characters act with no manifest or substantial reference to his or her past. Even more importantly, one can justifiably ask the question whether any past is of importance in this particular tragedy: after all, the chorus refers to collective human achievement, while various characters orient themselves and their activities with respect to age-sanctioned beliefs and customs.

Then, K.'s account, detailed as it is, seems to fluctuate between the notions of individual, personal, communal and "national" pasts, or even legendary and immediate pasts, never indicating whether there is any difference in their employment by single character (or, for that matter, by single playwright). While it may be argued that all these pasts contribute to one's individuality, it is also to some extent important to trace the varying focus of characters' perception of their own/familial/communal past, their possible appropriation of another *genos* tale (in fact, Aeschylus' Clytaemnestra tends to appropriate and subsequently exploit the narration belonging to her husband's family, with elements such as e.g. the Pleisthenid curse, an act which in turn may be seen as bringing her closer to the Atridae *genos*).

Also, there are several surprises occasioned by unnecessary and overreaching generalizations: thus, I have some problems accepting that events of twenty years earlier, events still shaping the dramatic "here and now" would be regarded as "distant past" by the characters, as suggested by K.'s discussion of *OR*. Also, I doubt whether social/communal taboo on matricide must necessarily result in abhorrence of the Sophoclean *Electra* (p. 367; one thinks of Polish translator of Sophocles' plays and celebrated classical scholar, the devout Catholic Kazimierz MORAWSKI, who at the beginning of the twentieth century praised the heroine as incarnation of virtue *on par* with Antigone and Christian martyrs⁷).

⁷ Sofokles, *Tragedye*, trans. by K. MORAWSKI, Kraków 1916.

To conclude: this is a bizarre book. Its value lying in the detailed and close analysis of the text, it does not possess, in its Aeschylean part, the imposing grandeur of FRAENKEL's commentaries nor the imaginativeness and breadth of ROSENMEYER's or CONACHER's studies; similarly, the Sophoclean section falls short of the suggestiveness of the analyses proposed by WHITMAN, BLUNDELL, or BURNETT. Yet, there is something inescapably persuasive and undeniably valuable in K.'s work, something possibly best appreciated when one does not look for the synthetic or for the abstract: a solid reliability of her reading, its attention to detail, balanced nature of the discussion, actuality of caveats, all these contribute to the overall worth of the work. In the essence, I would be inclined to think that its quality is best seen when read as a collection of interpretative essays on single plays rather than monographic study of the importance of past narration in the dramatic output of Aeschylus or Sophocles.

Joanna Komorowska
Cardinal Stephan Wyszyński University, Warsaw