

# Late Sophocles: The Hero's Evolution in Electra, Philoctetes, and Oedipus at Colonus by Thomas Van Nortwick.

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## **Late Sophocles: The Hero's Evolution in Electra, Philoctetes, and Oedipus at Colonus by Thomas Van Nortwick (review)**

Francis Dunn

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Reviewed by:

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*Francis Dunn*

Near the end of his life Sophocles, who already had sons by two different wives, took up with a courtesan named Archippe. His sons were so concerned he would squander their inheritance (from senility, we are usually told, and perhaps on his new mistress) that they tried to have him ruled incompetent to manage his estate. Sophocles, now hardly less than ninety years old, responded by reciting in court from his unperformed *Oedipus at Colonus*, thus demonstrating that his poetic powers were undiminished and securing an acquittal.

One branch of biographical criticism uses stories such as this, and more reliable accounts of Sophocles' role in the political and religious life of Athens, to explain how individual dramas fit within the playwright's career and his changing interests and concerns. Let's call this the "outside-in" approach. The other main branch of biographical criticism starts from the surviving plays and uses their themes to reconstruct the changing concerns of the author. Let's call this the "inside-out" approach.

Thomas Van Nortwick, in his study of three Sophoclean plays, prefers the latter approach. The evolution of his protagonists thus offers a picture of Sophocles' own evolution—a story not of advancing senility but of increasing dismay and disillusionment. Against a backdrop of prolonged war and the endings of Athenian democracy and tragic drama (5), we see the aging playwright's dismay at sophistic teachings and the erosion of aristocratic values, and his "misgivings about the potential for harm, to Athens and its citizens, of his life's work" (68).

The hero's evolution chiefly consists in three things: a detachment from the story, a lack of heroic agency, and the prominence of metatheater. By detachment Van Nortwick means, in *Electra*, the divide between the protagonist's emotional investment in revenge and the practical conduct of revenge by Orestes and his companions. In

*Philoctetes*, the hero's detachment consists in his physical separation from the war at Troy and his belated agreement to join the Greek cause. **[End Page 134]** And in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the protagonist's distance from Thebes and its ongoing troubles reveals a spiritual divide between his own exalted end and those he leaves behind. From this liminal role of the hero within the plays we can infer the playwright's own disenchantment with poetry and theater.

A lack of "typical heroic agency" coincides in *Electra* with the protagonist's detachment, as she has little effect upon the male characters' plot of revenge. In *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, lack of agency consists in the hero's crippled or infirm condition and the attempts of others to use him for their own ends. As a result, the hero in Sophocles' late plays is feminized (Van Nortwick does not consider whether the maddened Ajax or the poisoned Heracles has more or less agency than the aged Oedipus).

Metatheater involves play-acting and deception in *Electra* and *Philoctetes*, while in *Oedipus at Colonus* it consists of the "tragedy in miniature" in which Polyneices confronts his father and eventually departs to a certain death. Insofar as it involves deception, metatheater undermines ordinary human relationships; insofar as it exposes drama's power to deceive, we may infer that it also exposes Sophocles' fears about the harmful capacities of his chosen craft.

For the benefit of nonspecialist readers, to whom the book seems chiefly addressed, Van Nortwick weaves together plot summary, play interpretation, historical and literary background, and cultural context. There is enough mention of choral meter to convey the formal and musical changes that took place alongside the hero's evolution, but not so much as to confuse or overwhelm the reader. Behind discussions of metatheater in *Electra*, and of the body in *Philoctetes*, lies a good knowledge of Sophoclean scholarship, yet learning is never paraded in the text. And Homeric heroes, about whom Van Nortwick has written much and well, make useful cameo appearances to illustrate, by contrast, the new...

right to dispute the thesis of Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford 2002), that Romans made no ultimate ontological distinction between humans and gods, parts of Koortbojian's argument assume an overly rigid division between gods and humans in Roman religious discourses (23). Humans were assimilated and equated to gods with increasing frequency in late-Republican Rome, which created a cultural climate amenable to the official consecration of Caesar.

This is nonetheless a thought-provoking and valuable book with a judicious assemblage of material and textual evidence. Its scrupulous research and thorough, discerning analyses of divinization in a pivotal period of Roman history make it an indispensable resource for all scholars of Roman culture and religion.

SPENCER COLE

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