

Sophocles: The Theban Plays

By KENNETH REXROTH

SOPHOCLES's life might have been lived by his statue in the Louvre, so wise, so calm, so marmoreal. The same exemplary image could well have written his tragedies. Sophocles sang and danced as a boy in the choir of thanksgiving for Athens's naval victory over the Persians at Salamis. He was the intimate of Pericles and the friend of Phidias and Thucydides. Speakers in Plato's dialogues remembered him as an aged man. He died before the capture of Athens by Sparta. That was all there was—just the long lifetime of one man, from 495 to 406 B.C.

In Renaissance Florence, Tang China, or Elizabethan England, he would have been too good to be true. His was a time never to occur again, and he was superlatively true to it. The unique artistic experience of Attic tragedy was contemporary with the glory of Athenian power, between the wars with Persia and Sparta. It lasted less than three generations; its perfect expression only one. Aeschylus speaks at the opening of the greatest generation in the experience of man, Sophocles for its brief years of mature achievement. To understand the Periclean Age requires an effort like no other. We find about us no standards or experiences that warrant a belief that life was ever like that. The men and women in the tragedies of Sophocles are human as ourselves but purer, simpler, more beautiful, the inhabitants of a kind of Utopia. With all its agonies, this is life as it should be.

Sophocles's dramatic world, like Periclean Athens itself, is self-contained. Its ultimate sanctions are immanent, not transcendent. The mythic beings of Aeschylus are supernatural references for a new system of values, otherworldly midwives of a new social order. In Sophocles this order is operating. The dilemmas of the natural community are not solved by reference to a supernatural one. Aeschylus's sacred democracy is personalized by Sophocles. For him a person is the most concrete thing there is. Tragedy arises out of the flux of fate and oracular doom, but so arises from the acts of free persons. The age-long puzzle of fate and free will is solved by the dialectic of dramatic moral action.

From the style of Aeschylus one could construct a rhetoric of majesty. Sophocles, a few years younger, has already learned to avoid all appurtenances of

sublimity. His style is simple, almost plain. Its majesty owes little to symbol, metaphor. His figures of speech arise from the ordinary linkages of direct communication, the opposite of the incongruous juxtapositions of Aeschylus.

The plays themselves form the transcendent community whose natural product is value. They are the etherializing mirror of contemporary Athens. It is because there was majesty in the audience that the Sophoclean chorus can so directly "bridge the footlights." The chorus is us. As the dialectic of dramatic speech and situation unwinds with that inevitable order that Sophocles learned from the Sophists and that they learned by an analysis of the talk of Athens, the audience is transported into a purified region of conflicting hypertrophied motives. The audience is not "purged of pity and terror," but those emotions themselves of their dross—fear of cowardice, and pity of sentimentality. Caught up in the catastrophe of tragedy, the audience learns compassion and dread.

A humanistic religion like Sophocles's demands less and seems more impregnable than transcendentalism. It answers the mystery of evil with the qualities of art and with tone of character. Men suffer unjustly and learn little from suffering except to answer unanswerable questions with a kind of ultimate courtesy, an Occidental Confucianism that never pretends to solution. The ages following Sophocles have learned from him the definition of nobility as an essential aristocratic irony that forms the intellect and sensibility.

Oedipus Tyrannus, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone* are not a trilogy. Their chronological order is not that in which they were written. *Antigone* is the play of a mature man; *Oedipus Tyrannus* of a middle-aged one; *Oedipus at Colonus* of a very old man, yet they are, in spite of minor anachronisms, interdependent. It is as though Sophocles held within his mind from the beginning a general

structure for the Theban Cycle. The acts of *Antigone* and Creon in *Antigone* are made plausible by their behavior in *Oedipus at Colonus*, written fifty years later. The central play, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, is first in dramatic order. It may be the most perfect play ever written, and since it is the primary subject of Aristotle's *Poetics*, it has been the model for most tragedies since. It is by far the most dialectic of all Greek plays. One situation leads to another with an inexorable necessity. Yet each is created by the interplay of the faulty motives and rash choices of the protagonists.

Oedipus discovers that he has murdered his wife's husband, that he was a foundling, that he has murdered his father and married his mother in a series of dialogues more inevitable in motion than those of the Platonic Socrates evoking the realization of truth among his fellows. Realization comes in a succession of blows and each blow reshapes the character of Oedipus as hammers form a white-hot ingot on the anvil.

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, there is hardly a plot at all, only the contrast of the aged, dying, blinded Oedipus with his daughters, his sons, his successor on the throne of Thebes, Theseus, his Athenian host, and the common people of the chorus. Each character's contrast illuminates him with a growing glory until, as he walks away to die in the sacred grove of Colonus, he has become a sacred being, a *daimon*.

This apotheosis is totally convincing, though Oedipus has lost not one of the faults that led him to disaster in the first place. He is still a rash and angry old, old man. He has learned only wisdom, wisdom that is indefinable, a quality of soul that comprehends suffering and evil, without understanding.

Antigone, although written first, is a fitting conclusion. It is a conflict of people who have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. Creon has forbidden the burial of Polyneices, killed as a traitor attacking Thebes. Antigone defies him, buries her brother, and is condemned to death. Creon's son, Haemon, affianced to Antigone, kills himself; last, his mother, Eurydice, commits suicide. We are back with Aeschylus in the conflict of state and family, male and female. The drama is human, not mythic; the protagonists not wiser; experience has been in vain; the burnt children still love the fire; but the characters are real, each an end in himself.

Sophocles has found better translators in the past than Aeschylus—Richard Aldington, Yeats, Browning, Shelley. The best contemporary edition of the Theban plays is published by the Modern Library and the University of Chicago Press. The translators are David Grene, Robert Fitzgerald, and Elizabeth Wyckoff.





Books

LITERARY HORIZONS

Mothers, Sons, and Lovers

A MAN of thirty-five takes his second wife and her eleven-year-old son to visit his widowed mother on her farm in Pennsylvania, arriving late one Friday afternoon in summer and leaving the following Sunday. During the interval nothing dramatic happens except that the mother has a seizure—what she calls a “spell”—after church on Sunday. The four characters talk, and as they talk, the reader becomes aware of the complicated relationships that exist between mother and son, man and wife, wife and mother-in-law, stepfather and stepson, and so on in all possible combinations. Certain characters not on the scene are also important, particularly the deceased husband and father and the divorced wife with her three children. When the book ends, conflicts have been clarified but not resolved.

This, I think, is a fair outline of John Updike's short novel, *Of the Farm* (Knopf, \$3.95). The farm is located on the outskirts of Olinger, a city that appears in much of Updike's fiction. The deceased father was a schoolteacher, as was the father in *The Centaur* (SR, Feb. 2, 1963) and in various of Updike's short stories. Both the country and the characters will seem familiar to Updike's regular readers, and the writing is as felicitous as usual.

“To produce a mighty book,” Herman Melville wrote, “you must choose a mighty theme.” This is a hard saying. Would the themes of *Hamlet*, *Anna Karenina*, or *Madame Bovary*, if stated in summary form, sound like mighty themes? We can know for sure that a theme is mighty only when a great writer shows us what can be made of it.

Besides, is mightiness the sovereign literary virtue? For some time now a few critics have been clamoring for Updike to do something “big.” There is an American tendency—encouraged, I am afraid, by both Hemingway and Faulkner—to believe that a literary career is like a series of world's championship battles,

that the great writer goes on slaying one giant after another until he is himself slain. Wright Morris discussed this tendency in *The Territory Ahead*. “Just the other day,” he wrote, “William Faulkner, in one of his now-frequent interviews, referred to Thomas Wolfe as the greatest American of them all. Why? Because he tried to do the impossible. The romantic agony could hardly be better phrased, nor failure made so credible and flattering. To fail, that is, is the true hallmark of success.”

In *Of the Farm* Updike was obviously not trying to do the impossible. He chose a small, manageable theme, one that might have seemed rather slight even to Henry James, and tried to see what he could do with it. His problem might be stated this way: if you bring four persons together for forty-eight not particularly eventful hours, how much can you show the reader about them? He complicated his problem as a novelist by having the story told by one of the participants, so that he was unable to enter the mind of any of the others.

The narrator is Joey Robinson, vaguely engaged in some sort of business enterprise, though his mother had hoped he would be a poet. He doesn't tell us much about himself, but, as we see him in relation to the others, we have an impression of his good points and bad. His mother is the central character, the one of whom Updike wants us to be most aware. Always a puzzle to Joey, she baffles him again and again as the two days pass by, and the reader is surprised and amused as the contradictions in her character reveal themselves. Although she lives in a myth she has created, she can be realistic and tough-minded enough when it serves her purpose, and, for all her years and her bad health, she remains a strong woman, not particularly lovable, perhaps not even admirable, but a force to be reckoned with.

Joey's affection for his mother is

28 SR's Check List of the Week's New Books

41 *Of the Farm*, by John Updike

42 Letters to the Book Review Editor

43 European Literary Scene, by Robert J. Clements

45 Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters 1874-1897, edited by Dan H. Laurence

46 Dr. Johnson: His Life in Letters, edited by David Littlejohn

47 The Unloved Germans, by Hermann Eich; Germany: Yesterday and Tomorrow, by Peter H. Merkl

48 Russia and Germany: A Century of Conflict, by Walter Laqueur

49 Canada: The Uneasy Neighbor, by Gerald Clark

51 Autumn Books for Young People, by Alice Dalgliesh

63 Benjamin Franklin: Philosopher and Man, by Alfred Owen Aldridge; Poor Richard's Politics: Benjamin Franklin and His New American Order, by Paul W. Conner

64 The Painted Bird, by Jerzy Kosinski. The Hawk Alone, by Jack Bennett

65 Aura, by Carlos Fuentes

65 Tentacles of Power: The Story of Jimmy Hoffa, by Clark R. Mollenhoff; Hoffa and the Teamsters: A Study of Union Power, by Ralph and Estelle Dinerstein James

69 The Fashionable Savages, by John Fairchild

104 The Job Hunter, by Allen R. Dodd

104 The Mistress and Other Stories, by Gina Berriault

105 The Beggar, by F. M. Esfandiary

more than merely dutiful; nevertheless there is a long-standing antagonism between them, growing out of the years when he took his father's side against her. Try as he will to be gentle, his resentments break out. “You poisoned one marriage for me,” he says the first night after his wife has gone to bed, “and I want you to leave this one alone.” When he joins his wife, he lets himself go: “I'm thirty-five and I've been through hell and I don't see why that old lady has to have such a hold over me. It's ridiculous. It's degrading.”

The mother, as Joey realizes, is a pathetic figure—old and ill and alone and by no means ready to die. (“My mother was skittish in cars; it was grotesque, how much she loved her life.”) But if she is pathetic, she is still capable