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Simon Goldhill,
*Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy. Onassis series in Hellenic culture.*


With this latest book, Simon Goldhill brings his customary acumen and verve to reading the “language” of Sophoclean tragedy from two very different perspectives. In the first five chapters, which comprise Section I, he focuses directly on tragic language, tackling staples of nineteenth- and twentieth-century classical scholarship such as tragic irony, internal audiences, tragedy’s repertoire of formal devices such as *stichomythia,* the alternation of lyric and spoken verse, and the quasi-ritual lament involving both chorus and actor(s), known as the *kommos.* Section II by contrast aims to provide an archaeology of modern criticism and reception by tracing how the language of interpretation that we still use today has its roots in nineteenth-century German Idealist thinking. Here, “the language of tragedy” refers to the nexus of ideas that, Goldhill argues, have proven singularly important to the cultural status enjoyed by tragedy since the 1820s and to notions of “the tragic” that still dominate the reception of individual plays both on the stage and in the academy.

Chapter 1 presents the interesting claim that the language of *lusis* “becomes a sign in Sophoclean theatre for the failures of human control” (15). Rejecting the classic model of tragic irony whereby the audience knows more than the stage characters, Goldhill applies the term “irony” to situations where the audience/reader is also “implicated in the doubts, uncertainties and fissures of tragic language” (36).

Chapter 2 follows naturally from this, arguing that uncertainties and double entendres in the marked uses of everyday terms function as a kind of distancing mechanism, allowing the audience to take a cue from the spectators on the stage. Chapter 3 brings the focus down to the micro-dynamics of human interaction, analyzing the line-for-line exchange between Creon and his son Haemon in the *Antigone* as an illustration of *stichomythia*’s power to stage a familial breakdown of the highest order. Whereas the longer form speeches, or *rheseis,* that usually proceed *stichomythia* tend to be characterized by restrained diplomacy, *stichomythia* itself both captures and encourages “twists of reason into extremism, and brings out in excoriating detail the emotion seething in articulate, self-confident political stances” (58).

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In Chapters 4 and 5 Goldhill takes on the fraught relationship between the individual and the collective, an abiding concern for tragedy. The charged transitions between spoken and lyric meters (i.e., when a chorus switches from iambic trimeters or chanted anapaests into song) are moments that demand especially careful readings, as do the liberties Sophocles takes with the kommos in Antigone and Electra. Although normally consolatory in function, the kommos Antigone shares with the elders of Thebes has them alternately demonstrating their compassion towards her and chiding her for her self-willed passion, while in Electra, the chorus and the protagonist infect each other with grief as they jointly relive the night of Agamemnon's murder.

In Section II, Goldhill makes a compelling case for tragedy's centrality to the “nationalist historical and political teleology” (151) immanent in nineteenth-century German writing, with its projection of Greece as a mirror for modernity. A main avenue of inquiry is how the “nineteenth-century construction of the abstract and general notion of ‘the tragic’ affect—and distort—the critical understanding of ancient tragedy and Sophocles in particular” (154). While Chapter 6 reveals why Sophocles became the ideal embodiment of “the tragic,” Chapter 7 pursues the paradox of the chorus: although they are acknowledged to be central to the very idea of tragedy, tragic choruses have posed particular challenges to stage directors. Wagner circumvented the problem of how to stage the chorus by relocating to the orchestra pit his “chorus” of pure, disembodied music, while Nietzsche’s view, that the essential tragic element—the Dionysiac—is expressed in the chorus, lies behind Reinhardt’s Oedipus, with its huge cymbal-clashing, running, and ranting chorus. In his production of Hofmannsthal’s Electra, Reinhardt does away with the chorus entirely.

In Chapter 8 Goldhill moves into the post-war era with a discussion of “how Electra lost her piety”—basically a look at Electra’s evolution from long-suffering, noble heroine of the nineteenth century to immoral and mentally unhinged matricide. This “dark” reading of the heroine and her tragedy retains its currency today. Trading in modernity for the postmodern and Electra for Antigone, Chapter 9 offers a perceptive analysis of “the politics of sisterhood,” a phrase that applies just as well to Goldhill’s close reading of the verbal interactions between Antigone and Ismene in Sophocles’ play as it does to his deconstruction of the “sisterhood” of recent feminist critics, with their appropriations of Antigone that tellingly either elide Ismene entirely (e.g., Butler and Irigaray) or elevate her to heroic standing (i.e., Honig).

I found myself wanting more active self-reflection from Goldhill on how his own scholarly postures measure up against, departure from, or seek to overturn the historically laden interpretations that he deftly deconstructs. Notably unresolved
is the tension between Section I’s text-based methodology, with its privileging of close readings that at times put intense pressure on a single word, and Section II’s focus on problems related to or emergent from performances and adaptations of Sophoclean tragedies. Why this text-performance dyad? Is this itself a commentary on the state of our profession, which has bifurcated into two camps that rarely interact—modern reception studies, on the one side, and, on the other, New Historicist readings (of tragedy in its fifth-century context) whose theoretical foundations reach back toward New Criticism?

By placing between the same covers “profoundly conservative” and “rashly revolutionary” critical perspectives (3), Goldhill instills in the reader a new awareness of the interpretive practices that have sustained tragedy scholarship for centuries at the same time that he defamiliarizes them. His eye for telling detail, moreover, combined with his panoramic sweep of intellectual history, is by turns enthralling and disorienting. But if you were hoping for a synthesis of what are essentially two separate books, or for reflections pointing the way beyond this text / performance schism (if that is what it is), you will not find it here. Apart from a short but stimulating Coda, which, among other things, reformulates “texts” as “scripts,” there is little effort to facilitate dialogue between the book’s two halves.

Finally, there are a number of typographical errors and accidental omissions which do not detract from the book’s overall quality but may confuse readers. For example: Hesk 1990, cited in note 10 on p. 40, is missing from the bibliography (and should perhaps read Hesk 2000?); Hesk 2003, cited in note 13 on p. 41, is missing from the bibliography; Dué 2003, cited throughout and as such in the bibliography, should read Dué 2006; Dittmars 1992, note 2 on p. 110, should read “Ditmars”; Halliwell 2008, n. 14, p. 144, is missing from the bibliography; Bierl 1999, n. 57, p. 157, is missing from the bibliography; Taplin 1999, n. 58 and 59, p. 158 is listed as Taplin 1997 in the bibliography; Winterer 2007, n. 70, p. 216, is missing from the bibliography and, in the bibliography; Seidensticker, B. “Die Stichomythie” is listed incorrectly as published in 1991; its publication date is 1971.

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