

P. J. FINGLASS, *Sophocles. Electra*, Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries 44, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. xi + 646, ISBN 9780521868099.

This is certainly the fullest and most detailed commentary on Sophocles' *Electra* ever to appear in the English language; in this monumental edition of the play P. J. Finglass offers a massive accumulation of information about so diverse range of subjects as dating, myth, interpretation, stagecraft, manuscript tradition, and textual criticism. Although the introduction is too short compared to the gigantic proportions of the work owing to the fact that most of the subjects treated therein are discussed thoroughly in the remarkably substantial commentary, the author is particularly generous in offering a new Sophoclean text, together with a full-scale apparatus criticus. Undoubtedly, the real strength of the book is the commentary itself. In the 460 closely packed pages of line by line notation (coupled with two brief appendices, the latter of considerable value for the history of the play's interpretation containing Eduard Fraenkel's unpublished notes on the Messenger's narrative-speech) Finglass deals frankly with textual and thematic difficulties, cites appropriately the voluminous secondary literature, whilst most of the time avoiding superfluous references and parallels, and shows profound perceptiveness and wide learning at every corner. Especially useful features are the careful treatment of important grammatical and syntactic points, the foundational synthesis of the scholarly debates on the play as they continue to develop, and the level-headed suggestions on textual problems after an exhaustively scrupulous weighting of all the available evidence. The organization of the copious material is particularly helpful: the commentary is sensibly divided into sections which correspond with the natural divisions of the play and each section is preceded by a more general discussion and, where relevant, a metrical analysis which has benefited greatly by a close scrutiny from the competent classical metrist L. P. E. Parker.

It is fair to say therefore that this new edition of Sophocles' *Electra* is in the best tradition of the authoritative large-scale commentaries coming out in the Oxford and Cambridge classical texts and commentaries series for the benefit of the serious student and the well-seasoned classical scholar. It is no wonder that Finglass meets the challenge of a novel edition of the play considering the enormous amount of effort that has gone into the preparation of the commentary and the numerous capable readers who have examined this impressive body of work over the six years of its gestation (including such luminaries as Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones, James Diggle, and Martin West). According to the Preface, the present edition sprang from an Oxford DPhil thesis dealing with lines 251-870 of the play; the author had the privilege of working closely with Gregory Hutchinson, an erudite scholar, well versed in the commentary format. As I have already

pointed out, the result in no way fails to answer expectations. Despite its bulk and weight, this heavy, almost unmanageable, volume steeped in scholarship and learning deserves the undivided attention of everyone seriously interested in Sophocles and Greek tragedy. It goes without saying that the following minor quibbles and disagreements on issues of presentation and interpretation (mainly concerning the introductory section of the book) come from a most favourable witness to the author's brilliant ways and methods of textual criticism and editorial technique.

By contrast with the astute notations, the prefatory material is the weakest part of the volume, a major disappointment in an otherwise exciting book of an enormously large scope. More specifically, the unusually short introduction (coming up to merely seventeen pages) is unwisely divided into too many sections (seven in all) dealing with various matters ranging from dating, mythical background, and interpretative problems, to political echoes, theatrical production, text history, and reception. There is no doubt at all that this extreme conciseness (often bordering on the elliptical) in the treatment of major issues would strike one as unfortunate, especially taking into account the ambitious character of the whole undertaking. In the past, readers have relished perusing W. S. Barrett's ninety-page introduction to his superb edition of Euripides' *Hippolytus* (W. S. Barrett, *Euripides. Hippolytus*, Oxford 1964) and Donald Mastronarde's fifty-page introduction to his monumental edition of Euripides' *Phoenissae* (D. J. Mastronarde, *Euripides. Phoenissae*, Cambridge 1994); as a matter of fact, like Finglass' edition, the latter was duly published into the prestigious *Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries* series. Nevertheless, as already noted, one should always bear in mind that those sketchy discussions are just a foretaste of lengthier and fuller explorations strewn across the large corpus of the commentary portion. It should be admitted, however, that certain segments are too scarce and inadequate treatments of important subjects. In particular, weak as they can be are those sections discussing, among other things, the previous scholarly work on the play (this particular segment comes under the rather obscure title 'Good Spirits?' paying tribute to Gilbert Murray's succinct account of the play (pp. 8-10)), the possible political associations of Sophocles' *Electra* with the historical reality of the fifth-century Greek city-state (pp. 10-2), a brief piece based on the editor's earlier more thorough explication of his fairly conservative views on this most contentious topic (P. J. Finglass, "Is there a *polis* in Sophocles' *Electra*?", *Phoenix* 59, 2005, 199-209), and not least the reception history of the play consisting of a laconic paragraph furnished with few bibliographical references as a meager tailpiece (p. 17).

By contrast, those sections on the production date, the pre-Sophoclean story, and the history of the text are lengthier and well-argued. In particular, Finglass rightly acknowledges the formidable task of grappling with problems pertaining to the criticism of an often difficult, if not utterly recalcitrant Greek text. Much as he recognizes the valuable contribution of R. D. Dawe to the collation and evaluation of the manuscripts, as well as praising (with a certain amount of scepticism) the Oxford Classical Text (OCT) edition of the seven extant plays

of Sophocles by Hugh Lloyd-Jones and N. G. Wilson for showing good judgement where Dawe is too audacious for his own good, he does not turn a blind eye to the serious weaknesses and failures of those two modern editions. Dawe's frustrating readiness to incorporate wildly incoherent conjectural emendations into the ancient text, on the one hand, and Lloyd-Jones' and Wilson's exasperating tendency to either adopt highly speculative readings or, far worse, employ totally incomprehensible emendations, especially of their own invention, thereby bending the Greek (and logic) to their will, on the other hand, renders a fresh look at the textual evidence all the more imperative and urgent. As regards Lloyd-Jones' and Wilson's Oxford Classical Text of 1990, Finglass admits revealingly: "in the course of my research I have found myself disagreeing with their text rather more often than I expected when I began" (p. 15). It would not be overbold to suggest that the present far more sensible edition of Sophocles' *Electra* may as well be a clarion call to all serious students of Sophocles to use those two standard editions with extreme caution and learn to appreciate once more the hidden merits of that unfashionable but immensely sound critical edition of Sophocles by no less an authority on textual matters than Alphonse Dain in the well-respected Budé series (3 vols, 1955-1961). It is to be lamented that after almost sixty years of incessant examination of the manuscript tradition culminating in a spate of specialist publications we find ourselves once again in desperate need of a reliable edition of Sophocles, feeling compelled to fall back on older work. Regrettably enough, there have been numerous misguided attempts to resuscitate doubtful conjectural readings, unearth manuscript evidence of little moment for critical purposes, or even strike out anew in an imprudent effort to display excessive creativity, paying no heed to the overall structure of the ancient text and the intricate contours of the plot. Although many editors were determined to rise to the challenge of producing a reliable text of Sophocles, they chose to disregard Richard Bentley's famous dictum at their own risk: *nobis et ratio et res ipsa centum codicibus potiores sunt*. In view of this I would go even further and suggest that capable Sophoclean scholars should contemplate the possibility of producing a new edition of the Athenian playwright as soon as they can or, failing that, start using older but more dependable publications (despite its infelicities, even A. C. Pearson's text is infinitely preferable to totally unreliable modern editions). Ironically enough, as things stand at the moment, Holger Friis Johansen is more relevant than ever, having predicted with almost clairvoyant penetration that Dain's work "will be the standard edition of Sophocles for years to come" (H. Friis Johansen, "Sophocles 1939-1959", *Lustrum* 7, 1962, 114). It is high time that good sense asserted itself.

Moreover, in his introduction, contrary to his wide-ranging commentary, Finglass has a tendency, if one should pardon the expression, to cut through the Gordian knot of interpretative problems with the sword rather than the usual detailed reconsideration of all the contrasting views about a particular subject. This is not necessarily a bad thing especially with regard to the perennial question as to whether Sophocles' *Electra* was produced before or after Euripides' like-named play. The author minimizes the importance of chronological prior-

ity, arguing thoughtfully that “differences between the *Electra* plays are often better understood as the result of different responses to Aeschylus than as the later *Electra* reacting to the earlier, whatever the order in which they were performed” (p. 3). No doubt readers particularly interested in literary theory would feel that here Finglass offers an unnecessarily reductive analysis, carefully skirting the fiendishly complex issue of intertextual relationships between the *Electra* plays. On the other hand, Finglass should be given credit for putting the problem into perspective by laying strong emphasis on the existing differences between the two plays instead of trying to get undue mileage out of a score of uncertain thematic correspondences. Besides, there is enough comparative material to be found in the commentary (cf. e.g. the most helpful notes on ll. 254–309, 612–33, 892–919, and 1398–441). Similarly, in the third section of his introduction, Finglass tries to distance himself from the heated debate on the morally dubious issue of the matricide, suggesting that previous commentators have placed the play on Procrustes’ bed – that is, they have measured the entire play according to the arbitrary standard of their personal take on Electra’s retribution to which exact conformity was forced by any means possible. Although he has every right to be doubtful about interpreters professing to hold the key to understanding the principal thought of the play, he carries his criticism of the commentaries by J. H. Kells and J. March (J. H. Kells, *Sophocles. Electra*, Cambridge 1973 and J. March, *Sophocles. Electra*, Warminster 2001) a little too far, arguing unconvincingly that “both of these scholars will grasp at any interpretation, however absurd, if it will only support their case” (p. 9). It is undeniable, or at least this reviewer so thinks, that Sophocles makes it a trifle harder for the audience to declare their sympathy for Orestes and Electra, whereas Aeschylus paints a less problematic picture of the two siblings, highlighting the ethical force of the retribution, about which there could be no hesitation or compunction. But in the Sophoclean play there is again that same concentration of interest upon the age-old priority of justifiable revenge over kinship of blood in spite of the troubling absence of any hint of mercy, and Electra is the perfect embodiment of heroic endurance, moving against her adversaries with enormous confidence and strength of purpose. We must therefore resist the final ambivalence noted by Finglass by suppressing that uncritical readiness to recognize all too easily our alleged inability to answer the hard questions posed. There is always a danger that our naïve eagerness to proclaim an ultimate indeterminacy of meaning in everything intricate and challenging will eventually blunt our critical faculties, lulling us into a false sense of security. As already noted, in his discussion of the play’s political echoes, Finglass offers a précis of a more extensive treatment of this topic published in an article of 2005. He sides with Jasper Griffin (J. Griffin, “Sophocles and the Democratic City”, in J. Griffin (ed.), *Sophocles Revisited. Essays Presented to Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones*, Oxford 1999, 73–94) against those who go too far by asserting that the play registers the pressure of contemporary political events, without ruling out the possibility that some concerns of the Greek *polis* are mapped onto the drama. There is now however a wide body of opinion that supports the view that the facts of political life have to be taken into

consideration in the interpretation of Greek tragedy. One has the feeling that the author's delicate balancing act between those who find fairly precise analogues to particular historical sequences and others (not many it is true) who cast serious doubt on political points taken home from a tragedy that may have supposedly meant more to an Athenian audience leaves much to be desired and needs further explication.

We come now to the commentary. Finglass offers lucid but profound explorations of the play's overriding motifs, as well as discussing exhaustively numerous textual matters and correcting widely prevalent misconceptions with remarkable acuteness and painstaking insistence. Moreover, he tries to strike a happy medium between those who take up the chase for the most absurd of manuscript readings and those who obstinately refuse to break with the infamous tradition of wild emendation. His command of the secondary literature is nothing if not impressive and his grasp of Greek grammar and syntax appears firm. No review can do justice to the immense scope and the breadth of vision of the commentary. Finglass shows great discrimination in his choice of parallels. Contrary to many recent annotated editions which make dull reading, in the present book entries including unessential information and superfluous references are the exception rather than the rule. Of course, in view of this large-scale commentary, we will have to be very selective in our suggestions on aspects of textual criticism and editorial technique, limiting our discussion to just a small number of characteristic points in the Paedagogus' prefatory speech (ll. 1-22). In particular, pressing matters of textual economy force us to focus on only some problematic issues, knowing all too well that even if the solutions Finglass proposes do not fully satisfy he has a way of posing the problem in a most challenging fashion. We believe that from this sample we can judge of the whole - *ex pede Herculem*.

We should begin at the beginning. Finglass deletes the first line of the play, arguing at some length on the basis of a scholium on Euripides' *Phoenissae* 1-2 (= i. 245.1-4 Schwartz) that the authenticity of the passage was questioned in antiquity. First, he attempts to establish the dubiousness of the Euripidean opening and, once he thinks that he has done just that, asserts that the same should apply to the Sophoclean address in spite of Lloyd-Jones' and Wilson's persuasive argumentation in support of the manuscript tradition (H. Lloyd-Jones & N. G. Wilson, *Sophoclea. Studies on the Text of Sophocles*, Oxford 1990, 42 and *Sophocles. Second Thoughts*, Göttingen 1997, 30). There are serious problems with this way of thinking because the evidence in favour of deletion is extremely thin; what is more, Finglass reaches his conclusion by way of a rather convoluted argument resting solely on the indirect tradition. He himself admits that the evidence "is slighter than for the *Phoenissae* opening" (p. 91), and the parallels he amasses to eliminate the disputed line on stylistic grounds do not carry conviction. Similar addresses in other extant Sophoclean plays show a particular preference for elaboration through the employment of ornate appositional phrases. If the line is omitted on account of interpolation, we are left with an abrupt, not to say slightly churlish, address to the son of Agamemnon, where

the father's name comes awkwardly first in a collocation that reveals an unparalleled sense of comradeship between slave and master; it would not be too bold to suggest that some of the audience would have even construed such a shortened opening, resembling, as it were, a severed body brutally hacked off from the waist up, as slightly offensive to Orestes. Although the Paedagogus is very close to the Argive prince, emotionally involved as he is in this sorry situation of deception and retribution, proper decorum in all matters is rarely ignored in Greek tragedy, especially as regards the relationships between persons inhabiting different worlds at the opposite ends of the social spectrum. Besides, it is obvious that so ceremonious an address calling attention to illustrious achievements of the royal house chimes in with the ensuing emphatic accumulation of elaborate references to such celebrated local sites and divinities as the ancient Argos (l. 4), the gadfly-stung daughter of Inachus (l. 5), the Lycian marketplace of the wolf-killing Apollo (ll. 6-7), the famous temple of Hera (l. 8), and Mycenae, rich in gold (l. 9). Provided of course that the sands of Egypt do not produce any relevant papyri attesting to the spuriousness of the Sophoclean beginning, the weight of evidence, both textual and stylistic, against the deletion of the first line seems to me to be overwhelming.

At line 11 Finglass prints *φονῶν* alongside Karl Wilhelm Dindorf (Guilielmus Dindorfius) who so interpreted the *paradosis* already in the third edition of his *Sophoclis Tragoediae Superstites et Perditarum Fragmenta* (Oxford 1860³) – apparently there seems to be some confusion with the numbering of the consecutive editions of Dindorf's book because Finglass erroneously (?) attributes the emendation to the *fourth* edition of 1860. It is true that the use of *φοναί* adds dramatic intensity to the rescue of Orestes at the actual moment of his father's violent death. Nevertheless, most modern editors of the Sophoclean text are unanimous in support of the manuscript reading, and Finglass fails to offer convincing evidence other than an implausible interpretation of the scene of Orestes' release from fatal danger, as well as Diggle's fleeting mention of the passage (J. Diggle, *Euripidea. Collected Essays*, Oxford 1994, 156 n. 4), but we need far more than this to accept the alteration.

In lines 17-9 Finglass rightly detects a "sense of expectation at the beginning of this most significant day" (p. 99), castigating more audacious critics who have recognized allusions to either an imminent catastrophe or a joyful outcome. He cites enough evidence to support his argument, noting that "dawn commonly marks the beginning of action" (p. 99). It is in cases like this one that the author's commonsensical approach to interpretative issues pays huge dividends for our better understanding of the play. Indeed, it is rare to find so reasonable a treatment of thematic details in the field of classical studies, where many commentators often slavishly reproduce the most absurd interpretations in an almost Pavlovian response to every critical stimulus. Furthermore, at line 19 Finglass sheds sobering light on the interpretation of *εὐφρόνη*, taking issue with Housman, Kaibel, and Diggle, who think that the word stands for *εὐφροσύνη* ('festivity'), whereas 'night' is unquestionably the most commonly used meaning. Much as he sensibly argues that *ἄστρον* is a genitive of quality, he completely misses

the structural echo of line 17, especially *λαμπρὸν ἡλίου σέλας*, which lends further strength to his suggestion.

All in all, Finglass has met the multiple challenges posed by so intractable a text magnificently. Although there are occasional passages which will send scholars back to the Greek with raised eyebrows, he never fails to offer explicatory notes underpinned by extensive research and critical evaluation. The volume is rounded off with three indices of extreme exactness and great usefulness. The very rare typos are lonely exceptions in this accurate printing of a beautifully designed book. The only significant slips I noticed were incorrectly accented characters in two Modern Greek book titles (e.g. pp. 563 and 603); moreover, Traglos on pp. 523 and 603 should read: Travlos. It is therefore only fair to conclude by saying that with this authoritative edition of Sophocles' *Electra* Finglass *exegit monumentum aere perennius* in the annals of classical scholarship.

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