

PATRICK J. FINGLASS, *Sophocles*, Greece and Rome. New surveys in the classics 44, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019, x+ 126 pp., £16.99, ISBN 978-1-108-70609-4.

The latest in the ‘New Surveys in the Classics’ series, this short book is dedicated to key concepts and themes in the study of the ancient Mediterranean world, and, as such, is aimed at a wide readership of scholars, students, and teachers. Books in this series typically provide a comprehensive overview of the topic under scrutiny, an account which normally includes reference to the most up-to-date scholarship; for this very reason they tend to be periodically updated.¹ From the outset, Finglass acknowledges that, given the numerous books, volumes, and commentaries on Sophocles and his dramas which have been published in the past two decades, he aims to ‘complement such resources, not to replace them’ (1). This statement should be taken as a serious warning. Readers seeking the latest thinking on the performance, staging, and even literary interpretation of Sophocles’ plays will be disappointed by this book. Though Finglass covers topics such as stagecraft, myth, and heroism, which are themselves fundamental to the study of Greek drama, his account contains major omissions of critical work in, and even understanding of, these areas. Instead, the book’s strengths lie in the textual history and transmission of Sophocles’ tragedies. In my view, the book will be valuable to those seeking to learn more about tragedy as a *textual* phenomenon.

The first part of the volume (‘Transmission’) offers brief essays mostly centred on Sophocles in antiquity: specifically, on his life and career (ch. 1), the ancient spectators and readers who encountered his works (ch. 2), and the ‘survival and rediscovery’ of his plays from antiquity to now (ch. 3). Finglass’ interest in the textual dimension of tragedy is evident throughout: for example, when he discusses Sophocles’ career, a brief discussion of stylometric criteria (p. 3) appears well before any mention of the wider festival context in which these plays were performed. Likewise, the discussion found in ch. 2, ‘Ancient Spectators, Ancient Readers’, mostly concentrates on the latter, with an impressive overview of the way in which Sophocles’ text has travelled across the centuries, via ancient papyri, medieval manuscripts, and Renaissance printed editions. Chapter 3, ‘Survival and Rediscovery’, contains a helpful consideration of why textual

¹ For example, the previous edition devoted to Sophocles by R.G.A. Buxton, which was originally published in 1984, was reprinted in an expanded version in 1995.

disagreements, no matter how minor, have a profound effect on the way in which we understand and approach Sophocles' plays.

Unfortunately, the second part ('Interpretation') falls short in various key areas. Most of the discussion is heavily dominated by myopic matters related to text and language, even in chapters which aim to explore rich and complex topics such as 'heroism' (ch. 10) and 'politics' (ch. 11). The 'stagecraft' chapter (ch. 4), for example, devotes more attention to the papyrological remains and textual interpretation of Sophocles' *Niobe* than to the multiple theatrical possibilities that were afforded by the fifth-century stage. The heroism chapter heavily emphasises outdated mid-twentieth century work on the topic, citing only a handful of publications dated after the 1990s. The work of Jean-Pierre Vernant, a staple in any undergraduate (or even high school!) class devoted to Greek tragedy, is nowhere acknowledged, even though it has heavily influenced our current understanding of tragic language, myth and politics (the subjects of chs. 7, 5, and 11, respectively).

What the book omits is especially fascinating. Despite recent scholarly advances, attention to satyr play is sadly lacking in the book: Finglass mentions *Ichneutae* only once (on pp. 45-6). Given the inordinate emphasis that the book (rightly) gives to fragmentary tragedy, this omission is surprising. I was personally disappointed that the book also did not even gesture to the long and rich modern reception of Sophocles' plays across the globe; in a footnote in the introduction (p. vii), Finglass makes clear that his account will not at all cover such information. Even more astonishing is the general neglect of tragedy as a site of reception itself; despite the inclusion of a chapter devoted to myth (ch. 5), Finglass nowhere mentions the ways in which Sophocles and his fellow playwrights adapted Homeric and other earlier mythical narratives, often to innovative ends. In fact, Homer is only mentioned once in the entire book (on p. 45)! Just as surprising is the fact that the book does not at all acknowledge essential theatrical machinery, not even in the 'stagecraft' chapter (ch. 4); a reference to the crane (*mēchanē*) only appears when Finglass cites Antiphanes' famous complaint against tragedy (on p. 39) – the general concept of the *deus ex machina* is mentioned only on two pages (p. 34 and p. 102) – and the *ekkyklēma*, which brings so many dead bodies on stage, is nowhere to be found.

In short, readers should heed the image found in the cover, a picture of a second-century papyrus from the Oxyrhynchus collection. The image, a scrap of Sophocles' *Tereus*, visibly represents the major gaps in our knowledge of Sophocles, while also itself illustrating the fragile and fragmented paths of transmission of his plays. And while fragmentary tragedy is arguably one of the most exciting areas of inquiry in Greek drama, the textual remains of Greek plays is only one aspect of ancient drama. Despite its useful overviews of a few difficult topics such as

textual transmission and metre, a 'new survey' of Sophocles that does not acknowledge that his tragedies were live theatrical performances, or that they were experienced by an audience who likely marvelled at the ways in which mythical material (e.g., from Homer) was transformed and made anew, is hard to justify and recommend.

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