

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*. David Mulroy (trans.) with introduction and notes. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press 2011. Pp. ix + 109, incl. appendix and suggestions for further reading. \$ 9.95. ISBN-13: 978-029928254-7 ISBN-10: 029928254-6.

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Table of contents preface introduction, text, appendix 1: The Riddle of the Sphinx, appendix 2: A Synopsis of Sophocles' Theban Trilogy, Suggestions for Further Reading

David Mulroy's target audience is non specialist readers. The introduction provides a general sketching of Ancient Greece from the Mycenaean era to the Classical age. A rudimentary explanation of the City Dionysia and short biographical information about Sophocles provides the general reader with a sketch of the historical background that Sophocles lived and thrived in, as well as of the time that the playwright drew inspiration for his plays. Anecdotes of Sophocles playing Thamyras and Nausicaa during his early career enliven the introductory notes. Mulroy's focus on the Peloponnesian war assists the general learner's understanding of the set play. The introduction and analysis of concepts and themes such as hubris, hamartia, tyrant, fate versus free will and tragic flaw aim to provide further assistance for the non specialist reader. Mulroy succeeds in acquainting the beginner with key rhetorical and narrative Sophoclean devices whilst at the same time highlighting Aristotle's *Poetics* as an important text that will enhance the reader's appreciation of the text.

The addition of Asclepiades' riddle of the Sphinx in Appendix 1 illustrates poignantly the successive filtering of sources and introduces the general reader to the work of Athenaeus. In Appendix 2 there is background information regarding Oedipus' birth, adoption by King Polybus and Queen Merope, and him becoming king of Thebes. It seems to me that Appendix 2 provides vital information for understanding the play and the non specialist would have benefited from this

information at an earlier stage in this work, perhaps in the introduction. It should be noted that Mulroy does provide a brief biographical sketching of Oedipus at the beginning of the playtext. However, this sketching of the character is not as detailed as Appendix 2.

Mulroy uses footnotes to provide mythological, historical, geographical and etymological explanation of the playtext as well as to explore ancient Greek customs and general attitude towards religion. The footnote commentary is succinct yet manages to provide the non specialist reader with sufficient information to comprehend the mechanics of the playtext. Mulroy also identifies such literary devices as *kommos* by providing an Aristotelian definition, thus linking the dramatic techniques back to *Poetics*.

Moreover, the suggestions for further reading includes a well chosen selection of works which can shed light on different eras of ancient Greece, introduce mythology, the importance of the role of the Delphi oracle and analyse further the concept of tragic flaw. The list of works includes a companion to Attic Drama and exposes the reader to different interpretations of *Oedipus Rex*.

Mulroy's originality, however, results partially from the use of end rhymed, short, song like choral stanzas that do not adhere to traditional line divisions of Sophoclean choral parts. Mulroy's justification for this break from tradition is to bring a sense of forward momentum to the action. Mulroy also flags the beginning and end of each strophe and antistrophe with the purpose of conveying a closer rhythmic pattern to the original playtext and to reinstate a coexistence of meaning and melody which can facilitate memorisation and bring forward an alleviation of tension.

Mulroy also wants to convey the sense of forward momentum in the spoken parts too. For this reason he uses iambic pentameters instead of iambic trimeters for the spoken parts. The one exception to this is the use of trochees instead of iambs in the first foot and spondees at any point in the line. Another

innovation is that instead of twelve syllable lines Mulroy resorts to ten syllables.

The important question is whether these innovations actually facilitate and quicken the pace of the play. From the very first line, Mulroy's translation does appear more dynamic than many other English translations of *Oedipus King* such as E.F. Watling's (1947) and Robert Fagles' (1982). Watling's translation lacks pace and rhythm whilst Fagles', even though closer to Sophocles' play, seems to delay the action with the use of punctuation. Whilst Mulroy uses punctuation to quicken the action, Fagles uses it more for dramatic pauses.

OEDIPUS:

Children of Cadmus, ancient King's new brood,
why have you taken seats before me here
as suppliants with olive boughs and wreaths?
Meanwhile the city's full of fragrant smoke
and loud with sacred songs and cries of grief.

(Mulroy, 2011,

Oedipus King, lines 1-5).

OEDIPUS:

Oh my children, the new blood of ancient Thebes,
why are you here? Huddling at my altar,
playing before me, your branches wound in wool.
Our city reeks with the smoke of burning incense,
rings with cries for the Healer and wailing for the dead.

(Fagles, 1982, *The Three*

Theban Plays, lines 1-5).

Mulroy's ten syllable lines do promote the action as Oedipus' words appear to have a greater urgency than in Fagles' translation. The punctuation in the first line is identical in Mulroy's and Fagles' translation. Advancing to the next two lines we can pinpoint a difference. The punctuation in Fagles' second line slows down the action as Fagles uses a short sequence of interrogative and affirmative sentences. As a result

the action appears intercepted whilst lines 2 and 3 appear more fluid in Mulroy's translation. The iambic pentameters propel motion. Fagles also adds more words to clarify the playtext, like 'the Healer' whilst Mulroy omits exclamatory words and personal pronouns like 'my' and 'oh' to propel the plot forward.

Still another important question is whether Mulroy's translation stays as close to the Sophoclean as possible within the limitations of the ten syllable iambic pentameters. The original reads:

ΟΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ
Ω ΤΕΚΝΑ, ΚΑΔΜΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΠΑΛΛΙ ΝΕΑ ΤΡΟΦΗ,
ΤΙΝΑΣ ΠΟΘ' ΕΔΡΑΣ ΤΑΣΔΕ ΜΟΙ ΘΟΑΖΕΤΕ
ΙΚΤΗΡΙΟΙΣ ΚΛΑΔΟΙΣΙΝ ΕΞΕΣΤΕΜΜΕΝΟΙ;
ΠΟΛΙΣ Δ' ΟΜΟΥ ΜΕΝ ΘΥΜΙΑΜΑΤΩΝ ΓΕΜΕΙ,
ΟΜΟΥ ΔΕ ΠΑΙΑΝΩΝ ΤΕ ΚΑΙ ΣΤΕΝΑΓΜΑΤΩΝ.

(http://homoecumenicus.com/Classical_Greek_Library/Sophocles/Oedipus_Tyrannos1.htm).

Both Fagles and Watling appear to stay as faithful to the Sophoclean playtext as possible but they each make different decisions when approaching both semantics and poetic conventions. A characteristic example is the translation of line 4 where according to Mulroy the city is 'full of fragrant smoke, whilst according to Fagles "the city reeks with the smoke of burning incense". If we go back to the Sophoclean text we notice the words "ΘΥΜΙΑΜΑΤΩΝ ΓΕΜΕΙ". "ΓΕΜΕΙ" can be translated as 'to be filled with', something which is attributed in Mulroy's passage but which changes into the word "reeks" in Fagles' excerpt. If we move now to the second word, "ΘΥΜΙΑΜΑΤΩΝ", it can be translated as burning frankincense which turns into "fragrant smoke" for Mulroy and 'burning incense' for Watling. Overall, Mulroy's translation does justice to the pace of the Sophoclean drama even though it does not adhere to Sophoclean poetic conventions.

The choral parts also facilitate the promotion of action with the use of end rhyme:

CHORUS:

Great Zeus' daughter is the first I name,
Athena; next her sister, fair of fame,
Artemis-the marketplace her throne,
she guards our native land as if her own-
and Phoebus striking form afar-you three,
allies in mortal danger, come to me.

(Mulroy, 2011,
Oedipus King, lines 159-164).

The rhyme appeals to the contemporary English reader and is consistent with Mulroy's primary goal of forwarding the action. Again, he does not follow the Sophoclean lines faithfully and for this reason he flags the beginning of the stanza as Antistrophe A and includes the original Sophoclean lines in brackets. By deviating from the original pace of the play and adapting it around a contemporary audience Mulroy succeeds in attributing the *pathos* of Sophocles' *Oedipus King*. Overall I recommend Mulroy's translation to both the non specialist and the scholar alike. It provides the former with an accessible pace and style and useful background knowledge. The latter will find it interesting as an exercise in manipulating the metre of the original playtext.