Francis M. Dunn · Sophocles' „Electra“ in Performance

DRAMA

Beiträge zum antiken Drama
und seiner Rezeption

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Preface

by
Francis Dunn

In recent years, performance criticism has profoundly altered the relation between scholarly criticism of drama on the one hand and theatrical performance on the other. But performance criticism is not easy to identify; it is less a particular approach than a general heading for various ways of bridging the gap between criticism and performance. Oliver Taplin (1977), for example, reads the texts of Aeschylus in order to determine entrances, exits and other elements in a "grammar" of dramatic technique on the Athenian stage. John Barton (1984) explores with professional actors the process of interpreting the language, verse and roles of Shakespeare. And Dennis Kennedy (1993) traces the different ways in which modern scenography has appropriated Shakespeare. Yet for all their differences, most approaches that might be called performance criticism (Barton excepted) simply enlarge the scope of criticism, giving the scholar license to "read" performances as well as texts. Taplin applies philological method to entrances and exits, and new-critical method to scenographic imagery; Kennedy turns reception criticism to the visual interpretation of drama, and new historicism to the conditions of modern re-staging. This collection takes a different approach: rather than efface the gap between criticism and performance, it seeks to give this gap its due. There is a real and meaningful distance between performance and criticism, and between the competence of an actor and that of a scholar. This collection promotes a dialogue in which scholar, translator, actor and director can each speak in her or his own voice. For each of these people, the "text" of Sophocles may be something different, and the process of understanding or interpreting it may vary, but they have enough in common to make for a useful and interesting exchange. Both fifth-century tragedy and the modern performance/criticism of it are complex and multidimensional--a condition reflected in the different voices and perspectives represented here.

This collection began as a conference organized at Northwestern University in May 1993 by Francis Dunn and David Downs.¹ To promote a useful dialogue, the organizers invited scholars and theater practitioners involved in many aspects of interpretation: literary and cultural criticism, translation and adaptation, acting, directing, choreography and stage design. To allow each participant to speak as much as possible in his or her own voice, the presentations included scholarly papers, dramatic performances, acting workshops and video screenings, with ample opportunity for discussion and debate. And to prevent these different voices from becoming a babel or cacophony, presentations were largely

¹ For a review of the conference, see Grote 1993.

restricted to a single tragedy, Sophocles' *Electra*, and to various ways of reading and interpreting the play today. By all accounts, the conference was a great success in facilitating useful exchange among the participants. Readers may now judge for themselves to what extent it promotes intellectual and artistic exchange among a broader audience. And different readers may find different aspects of this exchange most helpful. One that will immediately become obvious is a common interest in the urn as both literary symbol and stage presence. Another that is equally pervasive but less obvious has to do with the place of *Electra*. As Rush Rehm points out, *Electra* occupies a setting that is undefined: not in the palace but not at Agamemnon's tomb, not out in the country with Aegisthus and not among the landmarks described by the Tutor. As Michael Walton and Karelisa Hartigan point out, she likewise remains to a large extent outside the action, outside the plot for revenge, even outside the final act of matricide. This rootless *Electra*, as Anne Carson shows, inhabits instead a world of unrelieved λύπη, where the pain that gives her life meaning also immobilizes her. And as Fiona Shaw's account suggests, to create *Electra* onstage is impossibly difficult because it requires somehow giving voice to the void, somehow finding a pulse in this paralysis. Together, contributions such as these can open up fascinating points of contact among staging, plot, language and performance.

A published version cannot reproduce the lively exchange that took place at the symposium, nor was it possible to include contributions from all the participants. But to help readers gain a sense of the different approaches employed, and the exchange they generated, we include photos of several stage performances, transcripts from a workshop and a panel discussion, reactions of several contributors to the conference as a whole, and essays by the directors of both featured productions, Sophocles' *Electra* and Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* (to order a video of the *Electra* production see p. 172). This collection also includes two items that were not presented at the conference: a short note on lines 54-55 (Dunn), and a discussion of metatheater in Sophocles (Ringer).

The conference on Sophocles' *Electra* in Word and Action was generously supported by Northwestern University and by a Major Grant from the Illinois Humanities Council. Preparation of this collection owes much to the encouragement of Niall Slater and Bernhard Zimmermann, to the word-processing skills of Liz Frech and Tyson Blades, to the interest and enthusiasm of my students, and above all to the inspiration of David Downs.