

Sophocles on trial: a case for devaluation

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. I anticipate someone who dismisses Sophocles as mere literary craftsman of high skill, arguing that such craftspeople turn up generationally and that the credit should go to the mythmakers.

—The world is better today we know

From tragedies of long ago

How good is Sophocles? Apparently he was regarded as a classic from the start (Easterling 2006: 1). But there is a case against holding him in such high esteem. Suddenly, and strangely, I feared someone would attribute the case to me. Then I feared they would do so in a mocking dialogue, such as this.

Mythmaker 1: I came up with the riddle. One day it just occurred to me. I asked my friends, “Do you know what goes on all fours in the morning, twos later on?” It is a human being. Later I added on threes in the evening. It wasn’t anyone else who came up with that.

Mythmaker 2: I came up with a story idea. One day it just occurred to me and I told my friends, “This guy Oedipus learns of the prophecy that he will marry his mother, so he leaves his mother and then he marries someone else, but she turns out to be his actual mother.”

Me: I came up with lots of stuff. The steps by which Oedipus solves the riddle – well, at least the longer version with the dilemma – and the treatment of Oedipus after

solving the riddle. We're mythmakers, but we don't get any recognition. It all goes to Sophocles.

Mythmaker 1: You don't think Sophocles is that great?

Me: He is a very good literary craftsman. Oedipus the King: it's gripping to read. But good craftsmen or craftspeople turn up in every generation – ever been to the movies? He needed the myths first and mythical material of this quality is rare.

Mythmaker 1: Movies? But Sophocles has been around for centuries.

Me: You don't even have a name and you're standing up for him!

Mythmaker 2: So he should not be allowed at this table with us?

Me: We can allow him here, as long as we sing this song: craftsman craftsman, should have been a raftsman!

This is not my point of view. To begin with, it makes the other mythmakers seem like wholesome respectable fellows. I am not convinced by that. Look, another mythmaker is sitting down (if I even qualify as a mythmaker amongst such people):

Mythmaker 4: Guys, I have got a new story concept. There is a character, Joedipus, and there is a prophecy that he will marry his mother, so he leaves her. And he marries someone else. But that was a mistake. His wife is so bad that it would actually be better to marry his mother, like I did!

Anyway, I wonder: is this dismissive perspective on Sophocles discussed by academics – he is merely a very good literary craftsman; such people appear in each generation; the main credit should go to the mythmakers – and what do classicists have to say against the dismissal? It has surely occurred to others before.

Reference

Easterling, P.E. 2006. Sophocles: the first thousand years. *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies, Supplement* 2006 No. 87: 1-15.