I TRANSMISSION

1. A LONG CAREER[1]

'Imagine Mozart had lived into old age: we'd be referring to *The Marriage of Figaro*, the *Requiem*, and the Jupiter Symphony as *early* Mozart.' This poignant remark (not quoted verbatim) made to me by the late Derek Parfit evokes not only the frustrated sense of loss which we feel when contemplating the premature passing of an artistic genius, but also the impact which the contingent fact of an artist's death date can have on our overall characterization of their output. In the case of Sophocles, the genius did live on, and continued to produce masterworks right up until the end of his life. The counterfactual here is to imagine that he died rather before the age of approximately ninety in 405. His dying only five years earlier would have denied us *Philoctetes*, performed first in 409 and likely written not long before then, and *Oedipus at Colonus*, produced posthumously in 401 by Sophocles' homonymous grandson, himself a tragedian of some note.[2] But his reputation was by then secure, and we may hope (to pile counterfactual on counterfactual) that some other plays, now lost to us, would have survived in their stead; in which case our picture of Sophocles today would be rather different. A still earlier death, say at the age of fifty, would not only have meant that his *Electra* and, quite probably, *Oedipus the King* were never written, but also that plays sometimes often seen today as 'early', especially *Trachiniae* and *Ajax*, would have been regarded as mature works standing at the summit of a still substantial career.

According to the Parian Marble, a stone on the island of Paros inscribed in 264/3 with a detailed chronology of Greek history, Sophocles' first victory in the Athenian Dionysia, the most important festival which saw the production of tragedy, was in 468 (test. 33).[3] This is said by Plutarch to have also been the year of his first participation in this contest (test. 36); but that additional detail may be invented to make the victory more striking, and Eusebius puts Sophocles' debut

[1] For Sophocles' biography see Tyrrell 2006, 2012; Scodel 2012.
[2] For the younger Sophocles see M. L. West 1999: 44.
[3] Testimonia to Sophocles' life and career are cited from *TrGF* IV.

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in 471 (test. 32b).[4] Whatever the exact date was when he first competed, we are dealing with a career of some six-and-a-half decades: an astonishing record in any era. Few people present at Sophocles' first production would have lived long enough to see his last.

During that time, Sophocles wrote more than a hundred plays. The ancient *Life of Sophocles*, a text written perhaps in the late second century BC, states that he wrote 123 (test. 1.18); it gives this figure on the authority of Aristophanes of Byzantium (257–180), head of the Library at Alexandria during the heyday of critical scholarship there.[5] The tenth-century AD Byzantine encyclopaedia, the *Suda*, gives a different figure, 113, without specifying a source (test. 2). Careful sifting of the preserved titles suggests that 123 is more likely to be nearest to the truth; but even in antiquity there would have been debate over the authenticity of certain plays, or whether two particular titles on the same mythological subject referred to the same or to different dramas.[6] If all Sophocles' plays were first performed at the Dionysia, where each competitor offered four plays to the public, that would mean that he produced tetralogies there on some thirty or so separate occasions, or slightly less than once every two years.

Of those 123 plays (or so), we know the date of three: *Triptolemus* in 468,[7] *Philoctetes* in 409, and *Oedipus at Colonus* in 401. 'The date' means the date of the first performance. In the case of *Oedipus at Colonus* the writing of the play must have taken place at least four years previously. In general Sophocles would not usually have composed a drama and then held it back for many years before it saw its first performance. That would seem a waste of his labour, not least as tastes did change over time; an anecdote from Plutarch describing Sophocles' reflection on the development of his style suggests self-awareness in this regard.[8] But any play may have some gap between composition and performance. Might *Philoctetes* have been largely completed in, say, 415, and held back by its author for some reason? We will never know – as is the case with so much to do with Sophocles' life and works.

[4] Scullion 2002: 87–90.
[5] For the ancient *Life* see Lefkowitz 2012: 78–86.
[6] Sommerstein 2012a: 192.
[7] See fr. 600; for this play see Kowalzig 2008.
[8] Plutarch, *How to observe one's progress in virtue* 79b (test. 100). The language is suspiciously Plutarchan, however: see Pelling 2007.

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Occasionally for a fragmentary play we have a *terminus post* or *ante quem*; so *Tereus* must come from before 414, when it is satirized in Aristophanes' *Birds* (possibly from decades before, since comedy happily mocked dramas produced much earlier). As for the five plays which are preserved complete but for which no firm date is given, *Trachiniae* seems to presuppose Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, and so must post-date 458.[9] The ancient hypothesis to Sophocles' *Antigone* calls it his thirty-second play; since that number cannot be alphabetical, it may come from a chronological list, though converting that into a date would require us to know how evenly Sophocles' plays were spaced throughout his career. A tradition that Sophocles' election as general in 441/0 was the result of the popularity of his *Antigone* (test. 25) is unreliable – the play could have become associated at a later date with that political success because of the political sentiments voiced within it, quoted out of context by Demosthenes as a model of statesmanship (19.246–8).

As for stylometric criteria, they need to be used with caution. The ones which do seem to lead somewhere include the frequency and type of interlinear hiatus (over time Sophocles becomes more tolerant of hiatus between lines where there is no accompanying pause in sense) and *antilabê* (over time Sophocles grows fonder of this stylistic feature, whereby speaker change occurs elsewhere than at line-end); they suggest that *Trachiniae* and *Antigone* are relatively early, followed by *Ajax* and *Oedipus the King*, with *Electra* closer to *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.[10] But amid such uncertainty, the discovery of a papyrus that, say, firmly put *Oedipus the King* after *Electra* or before *Antigone* would hardly surprise.

Many, probably most, of Sophocles' plays would have been performed at the Dionysia at Athens, an annual festival held in the Attic month of Elaphêbolion (late March/early April) in which three tragic poets competed, each putting on four plays: three tragedies followed by a satyr-play, a more light-hearted type of drama involving a chorus of beast-like satyrs.[11] Another festival at Athens in honour of Dionysus which involved dramatic performance was the Lenaea, held in Gamêlion (January), where tragedy was performed at least from the 420s. The Rural Dionysia, held across Attica in various demes

[9] Webster 1936a/1969: 168, 177; Easterling 1982: 21–2.
[10] Finglass 2011b: 4–9.
[11] For Sophoclean satyr-play see Slenders 2012; Seidensticker 2012; Hahnemann 2012: 171–3, and below, pp. 45–6.

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(towns/villages), took place in Poseideion (December); that too saw tragic performances.

To compete at the Dionysia or the Lenaea, a playwright needed to be 'granted a chorus' by one of the archons (magistrates), several months in advance of the competition. Sophocles was once refused a chorus by an *archon* in favour of Gnesippus son of Cleomachus (test. 31), but, given his productivity, this cannot have been frequent; the refusal was notable enough to be satirized by the comic poet Cratinus (and therefore pre-dates Cratinus' death in 422).

Although performances at the Dionysia involved three tragedies (followed by a satyr-play), Sophocles does not generally seem to have composed connected trilogies in the manner of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458) or *Oedipus* trilogy (467). The three surviving dramas which deal with the story of Oedipus and his family, namely *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* (often known today as Sophocles' 'Theban Plays'), were put on at different times, not as a sequence. The one possible exception involves the report in a fourth-century inscription that Sophocles was victorious in a competition with a *Telepheia* – a formation which indicates a group of plays (cf. *Oresteia*).[12] Four dramas by Sophocles on the Telephus myth are known, any three of which could have made a connected trilogy: *Sons of Aleus*, *Mysians*, *Assembly of Achaeans*, and *Eurypylus*.[13] The Sophocles in the inscription might be our poet's grandson, but we cannot rule out the possibility that the senior playwright did compose a connected trilogy. And if one, why not more?

Sophocles' career overlapped with two other great practitioners of tragedy.[14] Born in 525/4, Aeschylus was already competing in the early years of the fifth century; his career lasted some forty years, until his *Oresteia* of 458, after which he travelled to Sicily, dying there in 456. He is said by different sources to have composed seventy or ninety plays; we have about eighty titles. Euripides was born around 480, and first competed in 455; he produced plays for almost half a century, before his death in 406. So for the first decade and more of his career Sophocles was competing with the great tragic master of the previous generation; there was then a gap of only three years between Aeschylus' last production and Euripides' first, and Sophocles would

[12] *TrGF* I DID B 5 = *TrGF* IV p. 434; Finglass 2015a: 214–15.
[13] Webster 1936a/1969: 3.
[14] For Sophocles' relationship with them see Davidson 2012.

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compete with Euripides for the rest of his career, a full fifty years. The influence of the older master, and the constant competition with his near-contemporary, must have affected Sophocles' own development; the continuing need to best the formidable Euripides ensured that Sophocles' dramatic skills remained perpetually honed.

For despite such eminent opponents, Sophocles was immensely successful in the tragic competitions. An inscription from about 300 states that he won eighteen first prizes at the Dionysia alone.[15] In terms of victories over his entire career in all competitions, the first-century historian Diodorus Siculus gives him eighteen (test. 85), the second-century grammarian Carystius twenty (test. 1.33–4), the *Suda* twenty-four (test. 2.10); the last-mentioned source states (perhaps relying on the authority of Carystius) that he never finished last. Eighteen victories at the Dionysia means in effect finishing first with seventy-two plays, 'a startlingly high proportion of his total output';[16] one way of reconciling at least some of the numbers above is to posit that victories beyond the eighteen, whether two or six, were at another competition, say the Lenaea. We do have evidence, in the form of an inscription from the last quarter of the fifth century, for Sophocles' participation in the Rural Dionysia, at Eleusis, where he was victorious;[17] another victory in a deme is recorded by the *Telepheia* inscription (p. 4 above), found at Halai Aixonides and probably referring to a competition there. In terms of results for individual plays, *Philoctetes* and probably *Triptolemus* were placed first, as *Antigone* may have been too (if the anecdote in which the success of the play leads to Sophocles' appointment as general is reliable at least to that extent); *Oedipus the King* was placed second, defeated by Aeschylus' nephew Philocles.

Victory at the Dionysia was not by popular vote, or even popular acclaim; the franchise was restricted to ten judges, one nominated by each tribe before the contest and approved by the *Boulê* or Council. Moreover, not every vote from the ten judges was counted; some were selected by lot, and whoever came out ahead in that subset of the votes was the winner. As a result, the successful playwright could have won as few as four, even three, of the votes actually cast.[18] Yet while as a consequence we should not place too much weight on any

[15] *TrGF* I DID A 3a.15 = Mills and Olson 2012: 144.
[16] Buxton 1984/1995: 5.
[17] *TrGF* I DID B 3; Finglass 2015a: 212–14.
[18] Marshall and Van Willigenburg 2004: 102.

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individual result – there is little point in wondering how *Oedipus the King* was not victorious, given that it may nevertheless have won the most votes, that we do not know the quality of the judges that year (or any year), and that we know nothing about the other plays in the tetralogy or about the tetralogy of plays which defeated it – the figures for Sophocles' career in the round are nevertheless a significant indicator of his popularity, unless we are to suppose that judges persistently favoured his works against the views of spectators.

Sophocles is said to have played the cithara in his play *Thamyras* (test. 1.5), where he evidently played the title role;[19] but, owing to his weak voice, he is said to have ended the custom whereby the dramatist was one of the actors (test. 1.4). As with any theatrical innovation attributed to a particular tragedian, this was probably a general shift in practice which was later associated with the biggest name of the relevant period; in this case, the growing professionalization of the acting profession meant that it was no longer possible for the same man to excel both in writing and in acting plays. (Some of Sophocles' later tragedies, notably *Oedipus the King*, *Philoctetes*, and especially *Electra*, seem to have been written to provide especially demanding parts for star actors.) So a recent contribution has called into question whether the chorus really was increased from twelve to fifteen members, let alone whether Sophocles instigated such a change as is stated in his *Life* (test. 1.4), and doubts whether the increase in the number of actors from two to three (test. 95–8) should be attributed to him either.[20]

During the 470s Aeschylus produced plays for Hieron, tyrant of Syracuse, and returned to Sicily towards the end of his life; Euripides put on tragedies at the court of Archelaus of Macedon, and is said to have died there.[21] But Sophocles, we are told, stayed at home, despite the invitations of many Greek autocrats: such was his devotion to Athens (test. 1.10).[22] Yet his receiving these invitations at all is a sign of the spread of his fame, which will have resulted from circulation of texts of his plays. For even if Sophocles did not travel, nothing prevented his texts from travelling without him; any enterprising producer who could get hold of such a document was in a position to put on a

[19] Power 2012: 298; P. Wilson 2009. For traditions about Sophocles' musical training and accomplishments see Power 2012: 287–91.
[20] Sansone 2016.
[21] See, however, Scullion 2003 for a persuasive contrary view.
[22] Stewart 2017: 44.

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performance of Sophoclean tragedy, without worrying about whether Sophocles himself would consent to it.

Perhaps Sophocles did produce his plays abroad at some point during his long career; a biographer could have suppressed such information to differentiate him from Aeschylus and Euripides, not least because he was involved in Athenian politics beyond those two other tragedians and so might have been presented as particularly resistant to foreign travel. That involvement lasted his whole life. He is said as a boy to have sung the paean at the celebrations after the battle of Salamis (test. 1.3), although 'we must reckon with the possibility that this is a fiction designed to show that already in his youth the future poet was marked out for greatness'.[23] Certainly, the list of public offices in which he served as a man is impressive.[24] He was Hellenotamias, one of ten magistrates in charge of the financial affairs of the Delian League (i.e. the Athenian Empire) in 443/2 (test. 18); this may well have been an elected office, and the inscription which records his office lists him first. Two years later he was elected one of the ten Athenian generals, and helped to put down the revolt of the island of Samos from the Athenian Empire (test. 19–25); he may have been elected again for 423/2 (test. 26). In 413 he was one of the ten 'Probouloi', men over the age of fifty selected to steady the state after the disastrous end of the Athenian expedition in Sicily, who ended up appointing the Four Hundred to govern the city (test. 27).[25] He was a priest of Halon, a hero associated with Asclepius (test. 1.11), for whom he wrote a paean still sung hundreds of years later.[26] And these are just the offices that we are told about, by a miscellany of scattered sources.

According to the Hellenistic historian Ister, Sophocles after his death was worshipped as a hero, with a decree mandating annual sacrifices (test. 1.17). A much later tradition reports that he was heroized under the name Dexion, because he received (*dekhesthai* in Greek) the image of the god Asclepius (brought to Athens in 420) into his home (test. 69). The change of name is not paralleled (at least in this period) for the heroization process, and it is more likely that this anecdote is based on a misunderstanding or outright falsification.[27] Yet if

[23] Buxton 1984: 4.
[24] Osborne 2012: 271–3, Sommerstein 2017.
[25] Jameson 1971.
[26] Soph. fr. 737(b) *PMG*; see Connolly 1998: 3–4.
[27] Connolly 1998.

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any Athenian dramatist were to receive state cult, Sophocles would be the obvious choice, given both his enormous success in the theatre and his close association with Athens over a period of some decades. The survival of his plays after his death, however, to which we now turn, would depend on their reception in cultures far beyond Athens, in space and time.

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