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Interpretation of *Oedipus Rex*

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LURJE (M.) *Die Suche nach der Schuld. Sophokles' Oedipus Rex, Aristoteles' Poetik und das Tragödienverständnis der Neuzeit.* (Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 209.) Pp. xiv + 505. Munich and Leipzig: K.G. Saur, 2004. Cased, €96. ISBN: 978-3-598-77821-6.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X06002939

As much a polemic as a scholarly book, this work differs from the usual philological monograph in that it has no positive aim (i.e. the presentation of its own thesis or interpretation), but only a negative one (the rebuttal of another's thesis/interpretation). Normally scholarship joins both aims together, as authors refute

opinions they believe to be false in order to blaze a trail for their own interpretation. L., however, explicitly refuses to offer a new interpretation of the *O.T.*, asserting that the correct interpretation can be found in Wilamowitz, Dodds, Reinhardt, Diller, Schadewaldt, Knox, Winnington-Ingram, Hölscher, Szlezák, Goldhill and Halliwell (p. 402). This is a bit limited for a book of 505 pages.

In his introduction L. takes aim at the interpretation of the *O.T.* that E. Lefèvre and A. Schmitt, building on earlier work, developed in the late 1980s.¹ Lefèvre and Schmitt argue that the old and popular formula that Oedipus is ‘guiltlessly guilty’ is untenable, and they propose instead that his fall results from his behaviour – his wrong behaviour – brought about by passion. Both scholars take into account other Sophoclean plays (Schmitt *Antigone* in particular). Without any substantial discussion of the two scholars’ theories, L. speaks right from the beginning of ‘regrettable errors’ (‘bedauerlichen Verirrungen’, p. 6). He laments that Lefèvre and Schmitt’s readings did not fall into well-deserved oblivion but were received with approval by Latacz, Coray, Flashar, Erbse, Möllendorf and Flaig. Later he names Bernard, Visser and Schwindt as well. Already in the Introduction, L. relies upon sneering criticism rather than arguments, holding up to ridicule all the scholars named.

L. then reviews in detail the history of interpretation of *O.T.* (pp. 13–254). The title of the first part of this review, ‘The Search for Guilt’ (‘Die Suche nach der Schuld’ pp. 13–137), is the same as that of the book: this reflects the author’s polemical characterisation of an interpretive approach that goes back to the sixteenth century. In the view of L., critics do not *recognise* Oedipus’ guilt; they *look for it*. L. speaks of the ‘wretched history of interpretation’ (‘tostlose Deutungsgeschichte’) of the four centuries before Wilamowitz, whom L. considers the first to understand the Greek tragedy correctly (p. 241). This of course raises the question of why one should expatiate for 228 pages and with long digressions on a method of interpretation judged to be wrong, which in many points anticipates the explanation of the twentieth-century scholars L. attacks.

L. is now ready to look more closely at the analyses of Lefèvre and Schmitt (pp. 255–77). As in the Introduction, the presentation is mingled with polemic. Lefèvre is said to have derived the ‘guilt question’ not from Sophocles, but from a particular interpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* (p. 258). This is wrong, for Lefèvre states emphatically that he does not claim that his interpretation corresponds in general to the Aristotelian conception. Rather, Lefèvre states, one can, with the help of Aristotle’s theory, understand and explain certain facts which can easily be seen in Sophocles. Instead of *ἀμαρτία*, Lefèvre says, one could speak in general terms of wrong behaviour driven by passion (‘affektgesteuerten Fehlverhalten’): it would come to the same thing (Lefèvre p. 9 with n. 34). Likewise Schmitt, who introduces the plot-theory of Alexander of Aphrodisias, the commentator on Aristotle, is alleged to have brought in from the beginning a thesis not derived from Sophocles to explain the Sophoclean text (p. 264). But Schmitt explicitly states that Alexander’s theory offers only a ‘heuristic possibility for interpretation’ (‘heuristische Möglichkeit der Deutung’ Schmitt p. 12). He leaves no doubt that the Sophoclean text is his starting point.

¹E. Lefèvre, ‘Die Unfähigkeit, sich zu erkennen. Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen zu Sophokles’ *Oidipus Tyrannos*, *WuJbb* 13 (1987), 37–58; revised in: Id., *Die Unfähigkeit, sich zu erkennen. Sophokles’ Tragödien, Mnemosyne* Suppl. 227 (Leiden/Boston/Köln, 2001); A. Schmitt, ‘Menschliches Fehlen und tragisches Scheitern. Zur Handlungsmotivation im sophokleischen “König Ödipus”’, *RhM* 131 (1988), 8–30.

Further on Schmitt is criticised for using the Aristotelian concept of *ἀμαρτία* for the explanation of the *O.T.* (pp. 267–70). But in this case too the Aristotelian theory is nothing more than a ‘heuristic’ frame.

It is another matter that, according to L., Lefèvre and Schmitt have misunderstood Aristotle. In response, consider the following. In his use of the concept of *ἀμαρτία* Lefèvre followed the explanations of Lucas, Flashar, Cessi and Fuhrmann (Lefèvre p. 7 with nn. 23–5). Even if he were wrong to do that, this would not make his interpretation of Sophocles wrong, but only his application of the concept of *ἀμαρτία*. In such a case, he would have done better simply to use the word *Fehler*, ‘mistake’. The same applies to Schmitt’s interpretation.² In this case too it would have been enough if L. had explained the concept as he understands it, instead of giving for nearly 100 pages a doxography of various interpretations he considers essentially wrong (pp. 278–373).

The only argument that L. brings forward against the rejected interpretation of Sophocles can be found in the last chapter, where L. turns to *O.T.* itself (pp. 388–403). Sophocles, L. claims, does not bring up the question of Oedipus’ guilt, and accordingly there is no answer to the question in the play (pp. 388–9.). But how should the poet bring up the question? If he had put it in the mouths of the chorus, one would immediately object that the chorus is not the spokesman of the poet (at least not in this case). The chorus of *Antigone*, after all, disapproves of Antigone’s behaviour unequivocally, but their statements have often been denied credence (‘the erring chorus’). L. even knows that Sophocles ‘deliberately’ refused to raise the question of guilt (pp. 391–5), but that he did raise it in *O.C.* Namely, Oedipus says there that he is not guilty (*O.C.* 265–74; 960–1002). L. believes him.

An endless bibliography (pp. 405–87) and indexes (pp. 488–505) bring up the rear.

L.’s book is a typical product of the computer age: loquacious and abundant in content and presentation. Over and over again the same opinions are repeated; over and over again others’ are rebutted; over and over again there is wide-ranging discussion where relevant succinctness would be appropriate. The reader thinks of Horace *A.P.* 1–23. This conglomeration was accepted as a dissertation at the University of Bern in 2001.³

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²‘Tragische Schuld in der griechischen Antike’, in: *Die Frage nach der Schuld, Mainzer Universitätsgespräche 1987/88* (Mainz, 1988), pp. 157–92.

³Lefèvre is often named with André Dacier, because according to L. both misunderstood the *O.T.*: Lefèvre feels very comfortable in that company, Dacier being the pupil of Tanaquil Lefèvre (Faber) and spouse of his famous daughter Anne Lefèvre (Dacier).