

# Sophocles Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society

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THE CLASSICAL REVIEW

*Electra* might, in action, serve to further a purpose beyond the play's undoubted success as highly effective theatre.

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## SEGAL'S SOPHOCLES

C. SEGAL: *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society*. Pp. xii + 276. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995. £25. ISBN: 0-674-82100-9.

*Sophocles' Tragic World* (hereafter *STW*) is an organized collection of nine essays (plus introduction) on five plays, *Ajax*, *Trachiniae*, *Philoctetes*, *Antigone*, and—especially—*OT*, to which four of the chapters are devoted. The introduction and three of the essays (one on *Ant.*, two on *OT*) are new; the others are revisions of published articles, dating originally from 1976 to 1993.

For several decades now, S. has been so articulate about Greek tragedy, and so productive in his articulations, that one has acquired an unusually sharp sense both of the changing shape and direction that his readings have taken over the years and of the relative strengths and weaknesses that his readings, like all readings, inevitably show. 'Readings' is the operative word here. *STW* is essentially a series of dense and unsimplified engagements with the words of the Sophoclean text from an experienced and responsive reader who has read and reread those words, thought and rethought his responses, in the light of scholarship and theory—New Critical, Postmodernist, and now, refreshingly, post-Postmodernist theory. Having learnt from each stop on this personal odyssey, S. has achieved a theoretical position which could be seen as eclectic, but would more justly be described as holistic. 'It will not do,' he writes of *Philoctetes* (p. 98), 'to say, with Kitto, "the play is political rather than theological"'. It is both at the same time; any division destroys its peculiar richness and complexity.' Kitto's remark has no very definable ideological background; S.'s, one must say, does. Here and elsewhere the postmodern (structuralist) instinct to convert the theosphere of Greek tragedy into the socio-political is firmly and properly resisted—but then the insight into the nature of human systems on which that conversion is grounded is firmly retained too. It is as if we were invited to say yes, and no, to Hegel and to Nietzsche at one and the same time—and at this point, perhaps, we note that 'divinity' and 'society' are there in S.'s subtitle, along with 'nature', and that 'nature' is placed between them.

In terms of textual engagement, the result of S.'s holism is fine commentary like this:

In the parodos of *OT*. . . the shrines to which the desperate citizens of the chorus appeal are called 'the shore of the altar', suggesting, perhaps, safety from the violence of the plague that seems to buffet the city as if it were a ship caught in a seething storm (184; cf. 23–24); but this same ode, a few lines before, describes the dark, frightful land of the dead as the 'shore of the western god', to which the souls of those who perish in the plague fly like birds before a fiery blaze (175–177). The figurative language brings together, in a single imaginary landscape, nature (the sea), the city (the civic altars), and the gods (the western god, or Hades).

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