

Problematic Endings and Ethical Attachments in Sophocles  
Francis M. Dunn (University of California, Santa Barbara)

I propose a new approach to one problem in the study of Greek tragedy, namely plays that seem to end at the wrong point, either because an apparent end (such as the death of Ajax) comes early in the drama, or because the text of the epilogue is contested. Attention to what I shall call “ethical closure” provides an alternative to formal and aesthetic approaches. In this paper I consider two case studies: textual issues in the ending of Sophocles’ Oedipus the King, and the “double ending” of Philoctetes.

Editorial debate over the end of OT continues unabated; Pearson and Dawe bracket the last seven lines, Hester (Antichthon 1984) and March (Creative Poet) reject the last sixteen lines, a forthcoming article rejects the last 62, and Dawe (RhM 2001) now argues against the last 107. Key issues include the re-entrance of Creon, the entrance of Oedipus’ children, the bantering tone of 1515-23, and Oedipus’ return to the house (rather than departure for exile), all which occur after “the play is really over” (Dawe). Deletions on these grounds, on the one hand, rely on unexamined criteria of completeness, yet defense of the text, on the other, runs the risk of special pleading. Budelmann (MD 2006) avoids this circle by arguing that new events help the spectators move from the closed dramatic illusion to the open uncertainties of their own lives; I suggest, however, that this “mediated ending” is more important in establishing ethical attachments than in disengaging the audience. By 1415 the downfall of Oedipus is complete insofar as Jocasta is dead, Oedipus blind, and past events made known; yet what this means can only emerge through his dealings with others. Coming to grips with the reversal of his authority over Creon, embracing and accepting the children of his monstrous union, and trying to salvage some self-esteem by arguing with his brother-in-law, are crucial to establishing ethical connections after Oedipus’ fall. Indeed, without these re-attachments the drama would arguably remain incomplete.

A good parallel is provided by the law-courts, where the defendant typically concludes by pointing to the children, wife, and other relatives who will suffer if he is convicted. The point is not just (as Konstan, Pity Transformed and others have argued) that Athenian courts admitted emotional as well as rational considerations, but also that a true understanding of the defendant’s situation is not complete without recognizing the attachments that may be at stake in the outcome of the trial.

The ending of Philoctetes is as contested as that of Oedipus, not for textual reasons but because the outcome of the action (departure for Greece) is overturned by Heracles (commanding departure for Troy). One critical response is to propose a kind of anti-aesthetics, reading the contradiction as a sophistic challenge designed to unsettle the spectators (Greengard, Theatre in Crisis; Schein, Greek Drama III), but this ignores the play’s ethical dimension. Blundell (Helping Friends) clearly addresses the ethical complexities of the action, but is less effective on the ending, suggesting that Heracles persuades Philoctetes because he is a friend offering charis. This Heracles is a god, and Philoctetes yields primarily because he is a god. Rather than try to insert Heracles into the ethical transactions of the play, we should recognize in the content of his speech a countervailing notion of ethics – not strictly individual negotiations between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes but broader, collective obligations among soldiers and fellow-Greeks. For different reasons, Philoctetes and Neoptolemus agree that the mutual obligations they have entered into require abandoning the Greeks and returning to Malis; Heracles’ epiphany does not create new ethical attachments, but it does describe those that the two men are neglecting. In Oedipus the King, ethical closure involves recognizing what new attachments the ruined man can make; in Philoctetes, by contrast, it involves recognizing what past attachments the protagonists are prepared to betray.