Sophocles and his audience: ‘Classical heroes’ for the élite?

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INTRODUCTION

Johann Joachim Winckelmann not only idealized Greek Classical art, but also the whole ancient Classical Greek world in a way that went well beyond what could be envisaged as historical knowledge. His influence on the history of contemporary literature and on classical scholarship, however, is not an obvious topic to scrutinize, since he was almost exclusively preoccupied with visual artistic creation, and in particular sculpture. Winckelmann is indeed considered as a pioneer figure for art history and archaeology, but his influence on literary scholars is less well studied, although Rudolf Pfeiffer, in his 1976 book on the history of Classical scholarship, had already clearly acknowledged it: ‘Winckelmann’s ideas and writing were decisive for the future of classical scholarship.’

It remains true that in Winckelmann’s works, very little is said about Classical literature, and he does not seem to have directly addressed the question of whether it could be seen as reflecting ‘the ideal’ as Classical sculpture does to his eyes. However, his belief that Classical art was the most accomplished reflection of ‘the ideal beauty’ was extended by his contemporaries and successors to other aspects of Classical culture, and in particular to literature. What began as the statement of a deep admiration for Classical art slowly became a reference, a norm against which all artistic creation must be evaluated. Scholars of ancient literature, and perhaps early specialists of ancient Greek theatre in particular, retrospectively applied this norm to the literary creations of the fifth century B.C., which became ideal works of art detached from their context.

1 A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the conference Winckelmann’s Victims. The Classics: Norms, Exclusions, and Prejudices (Ghent, 20-22 September 2018). I would like to take the opportunity to thank the organisers Wim Verbaal, Paolo Felice Sacchi, and Tim Noens. My participation in this conference has been partly funded by the Reisefonds für den akademischen Nachwuchs der Universität Basel. During those two days in Ghent, I have had the chance to share ideas with David Rijser: his nuanced opinions about Winckelmann and his influence were as stimulating as they were refreshing. Finally, I would like to thank Jean-Paul Descœudres for providing me with the point of view of an archaeologist on Winckelmann’s works, for teaching me that it is possible to admire Classical art while at the same time examining it with a critical and scientific eye… and for all the hours spent discussing the ‘Greek ideal’ and the timeless creations made of Pentelic marble.

2 Katherine Harloe (2013) is among the rare modern authors to have studied in depth and comprehensively the influence of Winckelmann’s work on early Classical scholars. My thanks to the reviewer of this paper for this reference, as well as for the helpful comments on a first version of my article.

3 Pfeiffer (1976), 183. For the reasons why Winckelmann was neglected as a precursor of Classical scholarship, see Harloe (2013), xvi-xvii.
Two well-known figures of early Classical scholarship must here be cited for the direct influence Winckelmann’s works had on theirs: Christian G. Heyne and Friedrich A. Wolf. While in disagreement at some point over the famous *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795) of the latter, both scholars owe to the ideas published by Winckelmann their view of the role of the Classical studies. Heyne’s later scepticism towards Winckelmann’s ideas did not prevent him from being instrumental in introducing them into the academic world, as demonstrated by Vöhler (2002). Wolf, who is now better known as a textual critic than as a scholar who would be in line with Winckelmann’s ‘romantic’ viewpoint, has nonetheless been called ‘the last and greatest of Winckelmann’s followers’ by Pfeiffer, who followed Wilamowitz in acknowledging this influence. Indeed, the text-centred analyses of the *Prolegomena* are accompanied by less scientifically built arguments about the history of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. As Harloe puts it: ‘In different areas of research on the ancient world, Wolf and Winckelmann both attempted to fashion explanatory narratives, and both were gripped by the ideal of fashioning a comprehensive picture of a long-vanished past.’

Winckelmann’s ideas survived well beyond the eighteenth century, and this article examines their long-lasting influence on Classical scholarship. More specifically, it discusses how the ‘ideal norm’, derived more or less directly (see below) from Winckelmann’s admiration for Classical Greek sculpture, was projected back on Classical tragedy, and in particular on Sophocles, making of ancient Greek theatre an artistic creation linked to a superior ideal and whose audience was for a long time implicitly thought to be an equally ideal élite. To do so, it will first be necessary to explore how modern conceptions of Sophocles’ original audience have influenced our interpretation of his plays and shaped our understanding of the way in which characters are staged in his tragedies, before returning to the question of Winckelmann’s influence in order to assess how deleterious and/or beneficial it might have been for contemporary Classical scholarship.

I. SOPHOCLES’ AUDIENCE IN MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

The evolution of contemporary scholarship (i.e. from the nineteenth century onwards) dealing with the question of the nature and composition of the original audience of Sophocles’ plays, and the corresponding trends in the interpretations of the plays, can be roughly subdivided into three or four stages. Before surveying these stages and trends, it is important to note at the outset that, although they will be presented here as a relatively clear chronological development, they often co-exist and overlap. The following must thus be understood as a schematic survey, aimed at highlighting broad trends in Classical scholarship: it is impossible here to detail all the debates and literary interpretations that Sophoclean tragedies have elicited since their first performance.

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4 This topic is treated in detail in Harloe (2013), Chapters 5 and 6.
5 Pfeiffer (1976), 173.
6 Harloe (2013), 201.
7 Convenient summaries of previous scholarship about the relationship between Greek tragedy and its context of production and performance are provided, e.g., in Said (1998), Carter (2007), Barker (2009), 268 ff., and Wilson (2009), 8–9 with further references in n. 2. For a more general survey of the evolution of contemporary literary theories about the relations between text and context, see Gellrich (1995), 45 ff.
a) Stage 1

At first, modern scholarship did not pay attention to the question of the audience of Sophocles at all. It did not matter who the audience was, and the question of whom the tragic plays were addressed to was never really asked. If remarks were made about the composition of the audience, it was only in an incidental way, and mostly to characterize the spectators as all belonging to a (very unhistorical) ideal learned élite, a prerequisite for them to be able to grasp the higher aesthetical value of the plays performed in front of them.8

Consequently, Sophocles’ plays were seen as having no link or relationship whatsoever with their context of production and performance. Most famously, Friedrich Nietzsche spoke of the transcendence of Classical Greek tragedy, for instance in his Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik (1872). Aeschylus and Sophocles, in particular, were very early idealized as poets whose works had nothing to do with their contemporary world but were linked to a higher ideal, and among the three great Classical tragedians the latter was, surprisingly, thought to be the least tied to his historical and political environment, despite the fact that he was probably the most involved in contemporary politics and held several public offices in the Athenian city.9

As Rose (1976, 56) notes:

“Pure” art is a dubious concept at best for any period; it is a flagrant absurdity in dealing with the drama of fifth-century Athens. Ironically, only in the case of Sophocles have scholars been tempted to claim that, unlike Aeschylus, Euripides, and Aristophanes, here was a poet who achieved a proper Parnassian distance from the intellectual, social, and political revolutions which absorbed his contemporaries.

Indeed, two significant figures of nineteenth-century Classical scholarship, John A. Symonds and Richard C. Jebb, can be taken as good representatives of this trend. Symonds’ Studies of the Greek Poets, first published in 1873, quickly became an influential summary of the development of Greek poetry. In his survey of the works of the great Greek poets, Symonds clearly places the Classical period, and in particular Athenian drama, on a pedestal. As he puts it: ‘Poetry, in the same way, receives incomparable treatment at the hands of the great dramatists. As the Epic of Homer contained implicitly all forms of poetry, so did the Athenian Drama consciously unite them in one supreme work of art.’10 Among the great tragedians of the time, Sophocles receives, unsurprisingly, the highest praise. He is credited by Symonds as having made changes in tragedy that ‘tended to mature the drama as a work of pure art’.11 The scholar even goes further in his somewhat lyrical praise of the Classical poet when he affirms: ‘The art of Sophocles is characterised above all things by its faultless symmetry, its grace and rhythm, and harmonious equipoise of strength and beauty.’12 Here already, the way in which Sophocles’ poetry is described cannot but remind of Winckelmann’s descriptions of the beauty of Classical sculpture. The intellectual link is never made explicit in Symonds’ work. However, numerous passages in his Studies of the Greek Poets put Classical poetry and sculpture in parallel. A very telling quote about Sophocles renders the idea that Winckelmann had an influence on later Classical

8 See, e.g., Symonds (1893), 2 and 5.
9 See Jouanna (2007) for elements of the biography of Sophocles.
10 Symonds (1902), 22.
11 Id., 421.
12 Id., 416.
scholars even more plausible. Symonds indeed writes: ‘Sophocles attempted neither Cyclopean nor Praxitelean work. He attained to the perfection of Pheidias.’\(^{13}\) In the second volume of his work, he moreover clearly compares the different stages in the development of Greek sculpture, following an outline that seems to derive straightforwardly from Winckelmann’s works, to the evolution of Greek tragedy.\(^{14}\) Symonds must have received criticisms from some of his contemporaries for doing so since, in the conclusion to the second volume of the third edition of his \textit{Studies of the Greek Poets}, he writes:

‘Critics, for whose opinion I feel respect, have observed that, in what I wrote about the genius of Greek Art at the end of the volume, I neglected to notice the sterner and more serious qualities of the Greek spirit, that I exaggerated the importance of sculpture as the characteristic Hellenic art, and that I did not make my meaning clear about the value of the study of Greek mode of thought and feeling for men in our scientific age.’

Symonds tries to answer these critics in his conclusion, making it clear that he is not ready to depart from a point of view inherited, albeit never quite explicitly, from Winckelmann.

Likewise, Jebb, the influential commentator on Sophocles, can still be seen as having inherited, more or less directly, a point of view on fifth-century Athenian tragedy that one cannot but liken to Winckelmann’s views on Classical Greek sculpture. In his 1893 book \textit{The Growth and Influence of Classical Greek Poetry}, he indeed writes that Sophocles ‘renders Tragedy a perfect work of ideal art’\(^{15}\). The scholar even goes further when, in the introduction to his commentary on \textit{Oedipus Coloneus}, he takes a clear stand against seeing reflections of contemporary events in the play. For him, ‘the play is purely a work of ideal art’.\(^{16}\) In other words, Jebb shows that he is very reluctant to make allowance for the context of the plays in his interpretations of Sophocles’ works: they are detached from their contemporary world and stand alone in their ideal beauty, above everything, very much as Winckelmann had described the ideal works of Classical Greek sculpture. In several passages, Jebb indeed draws an explicit parallel between Sophocles’ works and Classical sculpture. The clearest is perhaps to be found in his \textit{Growth and Influence of Classical Greek Poetry}, where he states:

The artistic side of the Periclean age is indeed represented by the plays of Sophocles in literature, as by the Parthenon in architecture and sculpture. Sophoclean tragedy exhibits the same union of power with purity of taste, the same self-restraint, the same instinct of symmetry, which can still be admired in the remains of the temple.\(^{17}\)

Here again, the influence of Winckelmann is strongly felt, and Jebb is well aware of the importance of the eighteenth-century man, as he makes clear near the end of the same book. Indeed, he traces back to Winckelmann (and Lessing) the development of the ‘sense of what is characteristic and distinctive in the best Greek literature’, which he directly links to Winckelmann’s ideas about the qualities of ‘the best Greek art’.\(^{18}\) There is no doubt that one of those qualities is the fact that those best works of art and literature are linked to a higher ideal and not to their contemporary contexts.

\(^{13}\) \textit{Id.}, 424.

\(^{14}\) Symonds (1893), 25–27.

\(^{15}\) Jebb (1893), 215.

\(^{16}\) Jebb (1907), xlii. On the same idea, see also Jebb (1908), xli.

\(^{17}\) Jebb (1893), 214.

\(^{18}\) \textit{Id.}, 268.
Yet, this trend is not necessarily to be understood as something that was limited to nineteenth-century interpretations. More recent scholars have also felt the need to reiterate their scepticism about it, as, for instance, Greengard (1987) in her introduction to her book on *Philoctetes*, where she thinks that Sophocles is ‘a conscientiously political author’. She notes (*ibid.*):

In this I depart from the canonical view. For example, the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* accords Sophocles the distinction of being the one truly apolitical tragedian. ‘In Sophocles, indeed, there is little discernible allusion to contemporary issues, and he keeps wholly within the limits of his heroic plot’ (*OCD* Trag. 11). I find such statements puzzling and perhaps best understood as anachronistic projection.

We will have to ask ourselves whether the seemingly ‘ideal’ aspects of Sophocles’ works meant that it is really impossible or even wrong to look for elements that were linked to the context in which his tragedies were produced and performed for the first time, or, in other words, whether applying Winckelmann’s concept of Classical art as being ‘ideal’ to Classical tragedy necessarily excludes all other interpretations. We will come back to this question in the last section of this paper.

The conception of Sophocles’ plays as being detached from their context of performance engendered interpretations which mainly focused on their general meaning for mankind, on the meaning of mythological stories they were referring to, on the tragic pathos, on their purely aesthetical value, or on possible psychological interpretations, as they are well known for, e.g., *Oedipus Tyrannus*, or *Electra*.

**b) Stage 2**

In a second stage, scholars paid more attention to the fact that plays did not ‘fall from the sky’ but were a cultural product of their time and were addressed to a specific audience, at a specific time and in a particular place. Various elements indeed clearly demonstrate that the reaction of the spectators mattered to the poets who composed those tragedies. We have to remember that tragedies, in the Classical period, were performed in the context of wide-scale festivals and were always taking place as part of theatrical competitions. Tragedies were judged in order to decide which poet would be declared the winner, and, although part of the complex process of judging the plays performed included sortition, judges nonetheless took into account the reactions of the audience, which was in no way a quiet one. Even for Sophocles, scholars thus eventually realized that a careful study of the context of the plays could help in understanding the texts and considerably enrich their interpretation.

The first step in this attempt to factor the context of production and performance into the interpretation of the plays was to highlight the passages supposedly alluding to contemporary events or political figures. It was a fashionable trend in the 1950s and 1960s, with the works of, among others, Victor Ehrenberg (1954), Eric R. Dodds (1960), or Anthony J. Podlecki (1966), and still has its advocates more recently, as, e.g., 

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19 For a recent example of this trend, see, e.g., Vidal-Naquet (2002), 45.
20 See also Goff (1995), 21.
21 For a short summary of the main elements of *Philoctetes* where Sophocles engages with contemporary concerns, see Paillard (2017b).
22 See Allan and Kelly (2013), 88 and n. 40 for further references.
Michael Vickers (e.g., 2008). Oedipus in the *OT* is identified with Pericles, for example, or even with Athens itself, according to Knox (1957). 23

However, at this stage, the audience was still mostly seen and treated as a homogenous block, composed mainly of Athenian élite citizens. No attention was paid to others who might attend the performances. The attention of scholars was mainly focused on the Athenian élite perhaps for a very straightforward historiographical reason: it was the social group that was best known to us from ancient sources, and this is an important point to which we will come back later.

As a consequence, the interpretations of Sophocles focused almost exclusively on his élite/royal characters: they were deemed the most interesting, both from a tragic/poetic point of view and for the message they carried to their élite audience. At this stage, lower-status characters are still merely conceived as ‘accessory persons’—as they were in nineteenth-century scholarship—whose roles in the play do not deserve to be particularly studied. 24 Since this audience was understood as homogeneously composed of élite Athenian citizens, it made sense to primarily, if not exclusively, study characters who could teach something to this particular audience.

Perhaps the most famous example is to be found in the works of B. Knox with his concept of the tragic hero. In *The Heroic Temper*, he indeed shows that the characterizations of Sophoclean heroes always follow the same pattern: among other features, they are depicted as ‘above’ the others, outside the norms of society.

c) Stage 3

Most recently, in the last few decades, the audience of the Great Dionysia was finally considered as what it was: a very diverse body of people. It encompassed Athenians, from diverse socio-political background, non-Athenians, some non-Greeks, perhaps women, perhaps slaves, perhaps a number of children — whether seated in the theatre itself or above, beyond its limits, as Roselli (2011) proposes.

From this conception of the audience emerged a trend to work on ‘the other’ (women, non-citizens), and on what was ‘political’ in general in the plays of Sophocles, that is, what they were saying about the ‘living together’ of all those categories of people. Macleod’s work in the 1980s marked a turning point: his point of view was that tragedy indeed addressed ‘political’ questions, not by referring to small-scale local events and debates, but by exploring how different characters/people could better live together in the same city. 25 The works of the French team around Jean-Pierre Vernant, in the 1970s, was seminal to the emergence of this new trend. Using theoretical tools provided by the structuralist paradigm, French social anthropologists began to examine ancient Greek plays not as isolated literary texts anymore but as what they really were, i.e. products of a given society addressed to the members of this society. 26

From those two trends stems a number of still ongoing debates: was tragedy questioning democracy or reinforcing its values (a debate that crystallized in a vivid

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23 For passages thought in antiquity to be referring to contemporary events, see Bowie (1997), 44. For a list of modern works that pinpoint political references in Greek dramatic plays, see Ober and Strauss (1990), 248 n. 30.

24 For the expression ‘numerous accessory persons’ to describe all ‘minor’ characters of dramatic plays, see Symonds (1902), 429.


26 See the collection of essays in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1972).
exchange between Goldhill and Griffin in the 1990s)? Was tragedy typically addressing Athenian democratic concerns or was it working at a more general level?

However, paradoxically, scholarship had thus distanced itself from a focus on the Athenian part of the audience, thus missing a whole area of investigation: what had the plays to say to non-élite Athenian citizens.

In the last decade, one can thus identify an emerging fourth stage, where scholars begin to take into account the socio-political heterogeneity of the audience and pay attention to the presence in the theatre of Athenian citizens who were members of lower socio-political groups. In other words, one starts to consider vertical diversity (i.e., a diversity in socio-political status) instead of ‘horizontal’ diversity (i.e. whether there were ‘others’, non-Athenians, foreigners, non-citizens).

Allan and Kelly, for example, examine tragedy from this point of view and state that ‘the polyphony of the Athenian audience, and the ways in which it is managed in societal terms, are mirrored in the polyphony of the drama’. Tragedy is typically a literary genre that lacks an authorial voice, allowing the audience (be it the ancient spectators or the modern interpreters) to choose (and change) which part or parts of the message it wants to pay attention to. Different sections of the audience can also perceive the play or its elements in a different way, and, as Griffith (1995) has demonstrated, some tragedies clearly contain ‘something for everyone’, as the poets tried to provide content for the various people who would be attending the performance of their plays. This is why the knowledge of the composition of the primary audience is crucial. What were Sophocles’ tragedies saying to whom? It would of course be impossible to account for everything that was transmitted in the original performance of a particular tragedy, but awareness of this diversity is important. And lower-status citizens had until recently been left somewhat out of the scope of modern scholarship.

As Roselli has clearly demonstrated in 2011, even poor and lower-status citizens could attend performances. If they were unable to pay the entry fee to attend them from within the theatre, they could watch the performances from outside, from a space situated above the limits of where the seats of the theatre had been, on the hill of the acropolis. As for slightly better-off citizens, it is likely that some sort of theoric distribution (i.e. distribution of money or tokens to access the theatre for free or at a reduced price) took place in the fifth century. Sophoclean tragedies also had something to tell those people, and the way in which lower-status characters are depicted in his plays has only very recently become a topic of interest to scholars. While of course less grandiose than their heroic counterparts, their treatment and characterization in the plays clearly demonstrate that tragedy was not only preoccupied with reflecting and putting on a stage ‘the ideal’.

So, was it entirely wrong to follow Winckelmann’s idea that Classical art represents ‘the ideal’? Given the now demonstrated presence of a large percentage of non-élite people in the original audience of Classical tragedies, it was at least a mistake to

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28 A number of works, mainly published in the 1990s and the early 2000s, focus on these two issues. See, e.g., Euben (1986); Winkler and Zeitlin (1990); Sommerstein et al. (1993); Goff (1995); Silk (1996); Pelling (1997); Boedeker and Raaflaub (1998); Goldhill and Osborne (1999); Davidson et al. (2006); Kraus et al. (2007); Osborne (2007).

29 Rhodes (2003) and Carter (2004 and 2007) still both focus on the importance of this ‘horizontal diversity’, arguing that the intended audience of Classical tragedies was not exclusively made of Athenian citizens.

30 Allan and Kelly (2013), 95.

31 See Paillard (2017); Yoon (2012).
consider fifth-century theatre as some sort of disconnected art form that was produced for the intellectual pleasure of the élite, both then and now. Theatrical performances in the ancient Greek world definitely had other functions, and, apart from its religious aspects, theatre was also very much a product of its time, addressing contemporary concerns — which does not deprive it of its noble beauty and timeless relevance, as Winckelmann would have put it.

II. REASONS FOR THIS FOCUS AND DEVELOPMENT

The final section of this paper is devoted to exploring some of the reasons behind the ideal picture that Winckelmann painted of Classical art, and to discussing how Classical scholarship reacted to it in the past and how it could do so in the future.

The idea that Classical tragedy, and especially Sophocles', represented the most ideal form of theatre predates Winckelmann. We can trace it back at least to Aristotle, who observed that fifth-century tragedies seemed to follow a series of similar patterns in the development of their plots, and that Sophocles was the best one at tailoring his plots to fit these regular 'formulas'. However, Aristotle does not make of these regularities anything like rules: when he compares tragedy and epics, in the Poetics (1449b 12–13), he speaks of tendencies: ἔτι δὲ τῷ μήκει· ἡ μὲν ὅτι μάλιστα πειρᾶται ὑπὸ μίαν περίοδον ἥλιου εἶναι ἕ μικρόν ἐξαλλάττειν,' (They also differ in length: tragedy tends so far as possible to stay within a single revolution of the sun, or close to it). It is only later that his observations, for example, that the plots of tragedies tend to limit themselves to events that took place on one single day, were transformed into normative rules (as we see it in French tragedians of the time of Racine, for example). Thus, seeing Classical tragedy as an ideal art form, whose structure must be imitated, and which must be studied as an ideal work of art disconnected from its context of production and performance, was already a trend on which Winckelmann could build his own idea of Classical art as visualizing ideal beauty.

One also has to remember that for a very long time, Greek art was only to be seen through the eyes of the Romans (ironically, almost all ‘Greek’ works described and admired by Winckelmann were in fact Roman copies or adaptations of — lost — Greek originals!). This is also true for Greek theatre. Romans made of Greek theatre (and perhaps of tragedy especially) a supreme cultural creation, infinitely superior to their own, more popular, forms of entertainment, idealized by a learned élite who had lost the knowledge of the fact that theatre, in the Greek Classical period, had a strong social, religious, practical, and political function. The importance of those ritual aspects and of the dimension of mass communication was entirely lost by the time of Winckelmann, and as those worldly functions disappeared, all that remained was the work of art in itself, detached from its context, ready to be perceived as a material reflection of an immaterial ideal beauty. Classical scholars seem only to have rediscovered in the last decades that: ‘As far as Attic society is concerned, the (perhaps typically bourgeois) opposition between “art” and “politics” is radically inapplicable, for the two do not have fundamentally separate spheres or discourses. Two other elements of history might have been at the origin of Winckelmann’s idealized view of Classical art. The first is the fact that what we know of life in ancient Greece is mostly based, as far as literary sources are concerned, on an élite point of

33 Wilson (2000), 137.
view. We see Classical Greece through the eyes of its élite, and not much is left of popular culture, art, or beliefs.

The second and last point that is worth mentioning here, in this exploration of the reasons that might have led to the creation of a normative Winckelmannian ideal through which Classical theatre was to be looked at, is the fact that time has acted as a filter. The influence of a long-term selection process on the works that we possess cannot be overestimated: we, and this was even more true for Winckelmann, only have access to the best works of art, to the best tragedies (or rather what the Hellenistic and Roman periods considered to be the best), to the ones that survived because they were deemed good enough (be it for educational purposes, because of their aesthetic value, or for other various reasons) to be transmitted, exported, copied, adapted to later cultural contexts (with some exceptions, of course). Of the forty-two tragedies that Sophocles might have composed during his lifetime, only seven are extant, plus a series of frustratingly short fragments. Were all the other plays as good, as ‘ideal’, as the seven we have? It is far from certain. Were all the plays composed by the hundreds of poets who created tragedies for theatrical contests during the Classical period as good, as ‘ideal’, as the ones we have from the three so-called great tragedians? It is almost certain that they were not.

CONCLUSION

With all that in mind, how can now Classical scholars, Winckelmann’s ‘victims’, or rather heirs, react? How should we work now with this ideal norm through which ancient tragedies have been studied for centuries? First of all, we seem to have artificially created an ‘ideal’ idea of what Winckelmann’s conception of Classical art as a reflection of the ideal was… as mentioned before, he almost exclusively dealt with sculpture, and he acknowledged that, had he looked at other artistic creations of the Classical period, for example paintings, his opinion might have been somewhat different. In the same section, he gives a list of modern paintings that he considers superior to what he has seen as ancient paintings (mainly badly preserved Roman frescoes).

To extend his considerations to all artistic creations of a whole historical period, and to this historical period itself, only looks like the artificial re-creation of a mythical Golden Age, for which Winckelmann was not necessarily entirely responsible. It is important to put Winckelmann back into his context, to avoid risking unjustly seeing him as the source of a norm that was extended much further than he had originally meant. Winckelmann’s perception of Classical art as directly linked with the ideal beauty is not isolated, and imitations of Greek Classical artworks did not wait for him to be created (it is enough to think of Roman imitations of Greek statues, or of some creations of the Renaissance). While it is true that his writings were perhaps among the most vehement reactions against the anti-classical baroque art of the second half of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century, one has to remain cautious not to attribute to him the creation ex nihilo of an aesthetical ‘norm’.

To go back to our examination of the way this norm has influenced scholars of ancient theatre, it is now time to ask ourselves whether it was really wrong to look at

34 Winckelmann (1756), 36. More generally, on the early idealization of the figure of Winckelmann, which lasted at least until after the Second World War, see Harloe (2013), 18–20.
35 For intellectual precursors of Winckelmann, and his relations to earlier connoisseurship, see Harloe (2013), Chapter 4.
tragedy with this concept of ideal characters in mind. As we have seen, even in Sophocles’ tragedies, not all characters are heroic or ideal in a restricted sense, and it is worth studying those that seem less so. Indeed, even little characters are portrayed as better than they would be in reality, as Aristotle had already noted in his Poetics, where he explains that Sophocles used stage characters who were better than real people. (Arist., Poet. 1448a 16–18): ἐν αὐτῇ δὲ τῇ διαφορᾷ καὶ ἡ τραγῳδία πρὸς τὴν κωμῳδίαν διέστηκεν· ἡ μὲν γὰρ χείρους ἡ δὲ βελτίους μιμεῖσθαι βούλεται τῶν νῦν. (This very distinction separates tragedy from comedy: the latter tends to represent people inferior, the former superior, to existing humans.) Aristotle here does not merely say that the poets of tragedy stage heroes (i.e. figures who are above real people). He also quotes Sophocles himself, who is thought to have said or written that he depicted characters as better than their model, i.e. as they ought to be rather than as they really were (as Euripides did) (Arist., Poet. 1460b 33–34): οἷον καὶ Σοφοκλῆς ἔφη αὐτὸς μὲν οἵους δεῖ ποιεῖν, Εὐριπίδην δὲ οἶοι εἰσίν. (just as Sophocles said he created characters as they ought to be, Euripides as they really are) In Sophoclean tragedy, guards, for example, or simple soldiers, are more often than not portrayed in an exemplary way, and without possessing any individualistic feature that might have prevented the audience to see in them the ‘idea’ of a guard rather than a particular guard. (Whenever a figure of this type is given specific or striking characteristics, one has to look for an explanation behind this phenomenon: the guard in the Antigone is a good example of a lower-status figure that is ‘less than ideal’, but his portrayal is demonstrably here to draw the attention of the audience on a specific point.) One of the acknowledged roles of the poets in ancient Greece was to be the ‘teachers’ of their audience (see, e.g., Aristophanes’ Frogs 1054–55). By portraying and putting on stage ‘ideal’ characters (which could also mean ‘ideally’ bad characters to serve as a counter-example, or ‘ideal’ lower-status figures) they served a very practical purpose: to teach their audience, which included non-élite spectators, how to become better themselves.

It had been a regrettable prejudice of early scholarship to restrict its interest to the aspects of Sophocles’ tragedies that appeared the most linked to an ideal grandeur, the closest to an imagined ‘heroic’ world and to an imagined Greek society only composed by élite members, the least linked to mundane realities, especially since Sophocles was so involved in the political life of his city. Historical knowledge can only be improved if one is ready and open to examining every aspects of those tragedies, including the smallest of the figures that appear in them, their contexts of performance, their audience. Yet, it would be a mistake to discard altogether the feeling that Sophoclean tragedies are a reflection of the ideal, possess a timeless value that make them as worthy to be studied nowadays as they were in Winckelmann’s time.

38 See Paillard (2017), 215–220.
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