Brill’s Companion to Sophocles

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(MIS)REPRESENTATIONS OF SOPHOCLES’ PLAYS?

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Even in earlier eras when scholars viewed most visual representations of classical drama as strictly dependent on the canonical texts, the plays of Sophocles seem to have received little attention. Unlike Aeschylus and Euripides, he has only had articles, never a monograph, written about visual depictions of his plays. It is not just that so few of his plays have survived—we have the same number for Aeschylus—but also that what he wrote was apparently of little interest to artists. Moreover, when we do have images of his subjects, they tend either to antedate Sophocles’ plays or to contradict substantially the texts we have. At the same time the few objects that may depict Sophoclean versions are poorly preserved or add little to what we already know about Sophocles. Nonetheless, these objects encompass many of the problems we face in understanding how art and text relate to each other. I briefly consider at least one attributed representation of each of Sophocles’ extant plays and two examples from plays that have not survived. This survey is not meant to be all-inclusive for either the extant or lost plays. Note that the objects are primarily Southern Italian vases of the fourth century BC and Etruscan images of the Hellenistic period.

It is important at the outset to realize that, because we need texts to understand classical images, does not mean that they did in antiquity. I suspect that most then knew the myths in the same way we know, for instance, ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, one of the most widespread folktales in Europe and North America. Most of us cannot remember where or when we first came across Little Red Riding Hood. Was it read to us? Or did we read it to ourselves? Why assume a text at all? Could it not have been someone just telling us the story? At least in this case, we can be sure it was not a Disney cartoon like Sleeping Beauty. No matter. We tend to agree on certain

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1 I am deeply grateful to Susan Woodford and H. Anne Weis for their comments and suggestions which have much improved this essay. (Note: Much of my essay depends on Small 1981 and Small 2003, both of which should be consulted for fuller discussions and bibliography for the topics here.)

elements: child, red hood, forest, wolf, and grandmother. Most of us know versions where the wolf is bested, but we disagree on who and how. Was it a tailor, woodcutter, huntsman or someone else who freed Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother? The attraction of such tales is their very flexibility. James Thurber changed the tale by having Little Red Riding Hood whip out a gun to shoot the wolf. No one is offended by such a change in the story. In fact, that Thurber plugged in a very modern liberated little girl charms us.

The three great Athenian tragedians viewed their stories the same way as Thurber did Little Red Riding Hood. Each dramatist felt free to manipulate elements, including characters and plot, to produce variations of why and how particular events occurred. This malleability complicates the modern scholar’s work. Since Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (not to speak of a slew of other playwrights) often wrote plays on the same theme, such as the Theban Cycle, and with much the same cast of characters, it is often very difficult to decide which play is being represented in a given image, or even whether it is a play at all.

The issues of sources and transmission are compounded when images and texts are considered together. It is not just that texts are not readily available, especially during the period when most of the objects considered here were made; it is also that images did not actually accompany texts, as far as the extant evidence shows, until the middle of the Hellenistic period and even then they were rudimentary and occurred in scientific, not literary, works.\(^3\) The idea of illustrating text was not obvious, as it seems to us today, and took a very long time to develop.\(^4\) Remember that for most of the period under consideration here the actual ‘display’ of text itself ran the words together with few, if any, internal markings. If writers did not fully understand the possibilities of the written word during much of classical antiquity, then how can we expect artists to have leapfrogged over the writers to depict wondrous versions of those texts? The artists might depict something they saw in a performance—a kind of oral version of text—but were unlikely to illustrate a text when those texts had no provision of space for pictures. The texts and the objects were produced independently of each other. The closest we may come to “illustrated” texts occur on Hellenistic relief bowls, sometimes called ‘Homeric’ or ‘Megarian’ bowls in the earlier scholarly literature. Even on these objects the relationship between text

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\(^3\) Small (1997) 41–47.

and image is often loose. They do, however, often include labelled figures and sometimes even the ‘author’s’ name. They exemplify not so much texts with pictures as pictures with texts. Here I discuss two examples with Sophoclean connections.

Our task is further complicated because plays are both textual and oral throughout their existence. While the dramatist wrote down his play, most would have known the play primarily through performance. Today, however, most of us know the tragedies through reading them. The result is that we ‘measure the accuracy’ of an image by its resemblance to a text rather than to a performance. Artists, especially in the fourth century BC, were just as likely, if not more likely, to have seen a performance than to have had access to its text. Yet we know very little about actual performances. The physical stage, the props, not to speak of the styles of acting are all contested by scholars. Moreover, staging may have varied from place to place and over time. Does an image from southern Italy, then, reflect a local performance in the fourth century BC, its Athenian antecedent, or even a more recent Athenian revival? The variations in staging today lend a cautionary note to interpreting the images. In short, we have no established model against which to judge whether images show an actual performance, embellish on a memory of a performance, or ‘merely’ represent the plot of a particular play, known through attendance at the play itself, reading the text, or by hearsay. What about indications of an actual stage in the representation? Presumably such elements indicate a performance, but then we return to the question of which performance where and when, as well as whether the artist was striving for fidelity to an actual performance or merely the gist or idea of a performance.

Nor is our ‘woe upon woe’ quite finished. Each medium follows its own conventions, so that what may work in an actual performance or text will not necessarily work in an image. Does heroic nudity—common in images—automatically separate images from a theatrical source where actors are always clothed? Are ‘extra’ figures, not present in original performance, added to images for the sake of narrative clarity? Does the artist indicate when he is depicting a scene from a play from just any old scene? Does the presence of a ‘messenger’ indicate a play or just any old messenger who occurs in any retelling of the tale? The protagonist, whether in an epic version or a play, generally needs to learn crucial information from

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5 I thank Susan Woodford for this elegant phrasing.
somebody. These are some of the issues that underlie any discussion of representations of plays and are particularly prominent in some of the images "based" on Sophocles' plays.

Representations of the Theban Cycle in classical art may seem like a good place to start, since three of Sophocles' seven extant plays are devoted to the subject. The problem is that we also have plays on the topic by Aeschylus and Euripides, as well as references to an earlier epic. Nor did literary reworkings cease after the classical era, for extensive treatments appear in Apollodorus, Diodorus Siculus, and Statius among others. In short, we do not lack textual treatments. Yet artistic examples are surprisingly few and our largest group was produced by the Etruscans. I grappled with this problem as a graduate student and came to the conclusion that the Etruscan anomaly was best explained by understanding how scholars worked.6

In the nineteenth century scholars had the gargantuan task of ordering and organizing classical art into stylistic and thematic groupings. Today we have the somewhat easier job of refining those categories, but the additional burden of understanding how our scholarly inheritance has affected our judgement. In particular, scholars assumed that if two unlabelled warriors were depicted in a duel, they must be Achilles and Hector. If a similar pair of warriors appeared in Etruscan art, they were identified as Eteocles and Polynoeices. If two women were shown on either side of the duellers, the division continued with Achilles and Memnon flanked by their mothers Thetis and Eos respectively (Greek) or Eteocles and Polyneices with Jocasta and Antigone (Etruscan). In short, scholarly convention made the Trojan Cycle appear more important in Greek art and the Theban Cycle in Etruscan art.7

Unfortunately it is often impossible to tell in scenes without labels which duellers were intended, or even whether an entirely different set of warriors was meant. In the extant cases where the duellers are clearly labelled as the two brothers, the representations do not depend on Sophocles. Specifically, a Hellenistic relief bowl (No. 1) is certainly drawing on Euripides' *Phoenissae* (845ff.), since it shows Creon learning from Teiresias that his son, Menoeceus, must 'devote' himself if the Theban side is to win.8

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8 Each object discussed in the text is included in a numbered Checklist (List of Representations) at the end of the essay with further information about the object and references to photographs. Small (1981) 105–108.
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Nonetheless, Etruscan art still preserves more objects related to the Theban Cycle than Greek art. Temple A from Pyrgi (No. 2) depicts the rare scene of Athena bringing 'immortality' to her favourite Tydeus who is portrayed at the moment he is biting into the head of Melanippus to eat his brains. At which point Athena naturally lets him die. Gory and intriguing as this scene is it is not Sophoclean. Similarly the relative burst of popularity of the Theban Cycle in Hellenistic Etruria owes nothing to the Sophocles plays we possess. At that time a terracotta pediment from Talamone (No. 3) depicted the end of the attack by the Seven on Thebes. Here the chariots of Adrastus and Amphiarous fill the corners. In the centre Cepheus is storming up the ladder, while below him the two brothers have finished killing each other, as Oedipus, clearly blindered, is supported by a helper.

The original for this scene is generally attributed to the one reference we have to a painting of the Theban Cycle by a Greek artist, Onasias, in the Temple of Athena Area at Plataea (Paus. 9.4.2). Today we are more hesitant to equate what has survived with extant references to famous artists or famous plays, even if neither the original artistic work nor the play has survived. We may illustrate the older assumption by reference to Etruscan art. The pediment from Talamone simply cannot be an original Etruscan creation, runs the argument, because Greek art is always better. Only Greeks made originals; the Etruscans and Romans could only copy. In fact, the dearth of Greek representations makes it just as likely that an Etruscan artist created the design for the pediment, which in turn provided the model for various excerpts and reworkings on late Etruscan funerary urns from the Etruscan centres of Volterra, Chiusi, Perugia, and Tarquinia. In any case, the presence of Oedipus at the death of his sons contradicts a significant element of Sophocles' plot, in which he is long gone from Thebes when the Seven attack.

The scholarly preconception that only Greeks can make originals is related in turn to the idea that every representation must depend on a text, and specifically on a famous drama. Yet we have little concrete evidence that the artists of the fifth and fourth centuries BC were portraying Athenian tragedies. In fact, in the one case where we know the sources for a painting, the Illupersis in the Lesche of the Knidians at Delphi, recorded by Pausanias (10.25–31), we find that its painter, Polygnotus, relied on five different authors, as well as oral tradition and, significantly, himself. And, just as

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remarkably, like the scholar today, Pausanias takes great delight in figuring out what those sources are. In short, it seems only logical that, if the playwrights could make up variants and interpret myths, so could visual artists. If Etruscan artists knew what they were borrowing—and there is abundant evidence that they did—they were also capable of making up their own variants, as has happened so often with Little Red Riding Hood. The emphasis we place on the idea of the original is modern and not ancient; artists did not feel compelled to depict scenes from plays and especially those from Sophocles, who appears to have been the least popular of the ‘big three’ in classical antiquity.

That said, one fragmentary Sicilian calyx-krater (No. 4) by the Capodarso Painter and dating to 350–325 BC certainly depicts a scene from the theatre and may depict Sophocles’ Oedipus. Six figures are preserved standing on a stage (note the supports for its floor) in front of and between four columns (another likely indication of a stage). On the far left, an old man bearded and hunched, with a staff and eyebrows slanting up toward each other, faces the viewer. To the right stand two little girls separated by another bearded man with his left hand on his hip and his right fingerling his beard, as he looks toward the old man. On the far right behind the second girl stands a woman with her left hand wrapped in her mantle and raised to her face. The fragmentary scene is completed by a second adult woman with her back to the scene, but also with a similar gesture of concern with her right hand drawn to her face. The figures have been interpreted as the messenger or the old Corinthian (old man) revealing the truth about Oedipus (bearded man) with his daughters (Antigone and Ismene) and Jocasta completing the group. Yet according to Sophocles the daughters should not be present. The second adult woman is considered either as not part of the scene or, if a part of it, then as a servant, because we have no name to give her. Unfortunately, because of the preservation of this largish fragment, we simply cannot tell if the additional figures (daughters and possible servant) indicate another play or if they were thought artistically necessary to identify a scene without labels.

While the interpretation as Sophocles’ Oedipus is reasonable if not conclusive, the nature of the scene raises some interesting questions. It actually depicts a performance, and, as such, is one of the most static representations of a mythological scene. That is, visual renderings of myth tend to focus on action. A play, however, may talk about action, but most of that occurs

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offstage. In other words, plays in and of themselves—even by the more popular Euripides—may not offer much to artists. Phlyax plays with their slapstick are another matter and not of direct concern here, other than to note that such scenes also have clearly identifiable stages. Billing (2008, 239) questions the idea that dramas, when performed, are static, as I interpret the figures on this vase. While I agree with him that a performance should not be static, the visual representations we are able to associate with tragedy (and even later medieval illustrations of Roman comedy) portray figures delivering their lines with little physical action. Hence either the artistic tradition is at variance with actual performances, or we must ask whether actors in classical antiquity were less “active” onstage than actors today. Certainly we recognize major differences in acting style between early films and contemporary ones.

Scholars deciding whether this or that depiction ‘illustrates’ a particular play may be divided into two groups: strict and loose interpreters. I prefer this more neutral phrasing to ‘iconocentrist’ and ‘philodramatist’. The former believe that if an element in a representation contradicts a significant part of the plot, then it cannot illustrate that play. Hence if Sophocles sends Oedipus to Colonus, then a depiction (like the Talamone pediment) of the Seven against Thebes with Oedipus at Thebes at the end of the battle cannot be said to illustrate Sophocles. The loose constructionists—most recently exemplified by Oliver Taplin (2007)—maintain that any depiction whose understanding is enhanced by knowledge of the play in question is related to that play in some form (‘may’, ‘might’, ‘apparently’, ‘just possibly’, ‘evidently’, ‘arguably’, ‘plausibly’, ‘possibly, but far from definitely’ in Taplin’s words). I find that standard too broad to be of much use and also disparaging to the artist, who is not allowed any creativity.

For example, we know that Sophocles wrote an Andromeda. The problem is that we do not know enough about Sophocles’ play to be able to tell if the depictions we have ‘illustrate’ or even refer to it loosely. In fact, the likelihood is against it, because the representations begin before Sophocles in the late sixth century BC, and the one point that is clear from the depictions—how Andromeda is exposed—is actually not known for Sophocles’ play. Moreover, Andromeda may be bound to stakes or to a cliff.

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12 Compare Green (2008) 133.
and the Darius Painter of the fourth century BC depicted her both ways. That the Darius Painter would show two different versions is no different from the dramatists writing more than one play about the same subject that contradict each other.\(^{16}\) In addition, scholarly arguments are often circular. Of all the possible plays about Andromeda, we know that both Sophocles and Euripides wrote at least two. The depictions we have are then divvied up between the two of them. And once that is done, we conclude that we now have a better idea of the lost play when nothing could be farther from the truth.

At this point let us broaden the discussion to consider some of the other examples sometimes related to Sophocles. Taplin, who is perhaps the most ardent of current supporters of a strong relationship between text and picture, discusses nine vases with a Sophoclean connection.\(^{17}\) While he does not claim that he has included all of the attributed examples for any particular playwright, nonetheless, he has chosen vases popular among scholars and ‘plausibly’ related to Sophocles. Yet of his group of nine, he eliminates two in his discussion. Of the remaining seven, he associates three with lost plays, which means that we have insufficient information to judge whether they are Sophoclean or not. Just as art judged to be of high quality is often attributed to Greek artists or at the very least Greek models, so the extant objects are assigned to the most famous playwright who wrote a play on the subject, as I have already mentioned. We are thus left with a total of four possible vases, of which I have already treated the best candidate by the Capodarso Painter. Of the remaining three, one (No. 5) is labelled ‘Teiresias and a king, possibly related to Sophocles’ Oedipus (Tyrannus) or Antigone, but not directly’. In short, only three of the nine are ‘plausibly’ related to Sophocles. A Lucanian bell-krater (No. 6) portrays three figures. The first of the two nude youths, on the left, offers a hydria to a woman on the right. The scene has been identified as Pylades and Orestes, with the urn purportedly containing his ashes, meeting Electra from Sophocles’ Electra. The interpretation is reasonable, though I am not sure that the woman is anxious so much as pensive. She cradles her right arm in her left hand, as she raises her right hand to her chin. Billing remarks about another vase that actors would never appear nude.\(^{18}\) Therefore this hydria should not depend on Sophocles’ play. Yet it is possible that an artist followed

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\(^{16}\) Moret (1975) 263–264.


Sophocles' version of the story—the fake urn—and adapted the figures to fit the conventions of art rather than of an actual performance. In other words, a particular depiction may be dependent on a tragedy for its 'concept', but not for its staging.

The other candidate, an Apulian calyx-krater (No. 7), is of higher quality and more complex. An old, white-haired, blind man sits in the middle of an altar flanked by two women with the one on the left somewhat more elaborately dressed. Behind her and slightly to our left, stands a bearded male figure holding a sceptre. He is complemented on the far right by a youth wearing a cloak and high-laced boots. Above him, half-reclining, is a winged female figure in similar boots and holding a sheathed sword in her left hand. Taplin, as well as others, interpret the scene as Oedipus at Colonus flanked by his daughters with Creon on the left and Polyneices on the right. The female figure is an Erinyes. Like the vase by the Capodarso Painter, this representation is also relatively static in its action. The figures are posed in a virtual group portrait.

One of the vases (No. 8) Taplin discusses as Sophoclean, only to reject it, depicts Philoctetes. The subject became relatively popular in later art with appearances on Etruscan and Roman objects. The examples on the urns exemplify the problems of identifying specific literary sources for specific images. All three of the great tragedians wrote plays about Philoctetes. Nor did literary treatments cease after these 'definitive' treatments. The result, as with the Theban Cycle, is an abundance of textual sources. The urns (Nos. 9–10) show two different scenes: the initial encounter between the 'emassy' and Philoctetes on Lemnos, and the theft of Philoctetes' weapons. In both cases, Philoctetes is in the centre of the scene within a cave-like structure with trees on either side. In turn, he is flanked by two figures on each side. The two figures on the ends are typical, stock supernumeraries and, as such, do not affect the meaning; artists often filled in space with 'extras' who had not appeared in the plays or even in literary texts. Of the two figures closest to Philoctetes, the one on the left is bearded and wears a pilos—obviously Odysseus. The problem is identity of the other figure. If it is Diomedes, then it is not the Sophoclean version; if it is Neoptolemus, then it is. We simply cannot tell. The ambiguity may even help make a sale.

Similar to the problems with representations of Philoctetes are those that may relate to Ajax and Trachinia. Representations of the suicide of Ajax go back to the sixth century BC, well before Sophocles' tragedy; likewise,

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19 Pipili, LIMC 7, s.v. Philoctetes is an excellent guide.
representations of the story of Heracles, Deianeira, and Nessos begin in the seventh century. Moreover, Heracles' death on the pyre also predates Sophocles. Even the one representation (No. 11) where Heracles receives the poisoned garment does not follow Sophocles, because it substitutes Deianeira for Lichas the herald.

Let us now turn to a fragment from a Hellenistic relief bowl (No. 12), which does provide us with one of the few 'secure' depictions of something from Sophocles. A small worn fragment shows the upper body of an old bearded man who stretches out his hands. The inscriptions are fragmentary, but the 'COΦΟ' has been reasonably interpreted as the first part of 'Sophokleous'. The action of the figure has led to the interpretation of Athamas as the old man about to receive into his care the infant Dionysus, whose initial Delta has survived. Unfortunately Sophocles' Athamas has not survived and the fragment does not tell us anything about what might have gone on in the play.

One unusual text that 'visually' describes a play possibly by Sophocles must be mentioned. Hero of Alexandria (Περὶ Ἀντιμαχώποτικῆς Π.20–30) writes about a stationary automaton that 'plays' a Nauplius in five scenes. Sophocles wrote two plays about Nauplius, and Marshall has argued that it is the Nauplius Pyrkaeus. As to be expected, problems abound. Hero lived in the first century AD. He is describing an automaton perhaps designed by Philon in the third century BC, representing a play possibly from the fifth century BC, since no playwright is mentioned in the text. Hero’s own outline (22.3–6) focuses more on the changes of scenes and stage effects than on the play itself. For example, Hero describes the end of the play: 'and a fire was lit above the stage, as though it were the flame of the torch. And when the theatre was closed and opened again, the wreck of the ships appeared, and Ajax swimming; [and Athena] was lifted on the crane above the stage, and with a peal of thunder a lightning bolt fell in the theatre itself, upon the figure of Ajax, which disappeared'. This description is perhaps not quite worthy of James Cameron’s Avatar but remarkable for its period.

This brief survey leads to the following conclusions that apply generally to representations of plays in art. First and most importantly, the artists

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resembled the dramatists in that they, too, freely invented their own variants. In turn, this means that the artists were like the dramatists also in ignoring the work of others. As the dramatists are never considered by scholars to be copying artists, so artists should not be considered to be only copying the dramatists. Just because we need texts to interpret visual representations does not mean that they did. This view implies that the artists were the equals of writers in representing myth. Next, if a significant contradiction of the plot of a text appears in a depiction, then we may conclude that the artist was not dependent on that text. At the same time, while obvious, we sometimes forget that different conventions and different constraints govern different media. And so artists may well depict their figures in heroic nudity, add supernumeraries, or depict actors standing passively to deliver their lines, all of which may not have occurred in actual performances. Therefore the representations must be used with caution as a source for our knowledge of actual performances. Similarly, the one representation that may depict the Sophocles’ Oedipus probably depends just as much, if not more, on an actual performance than on an artist reading the text before making his image. We need both text and picture of the same play or text to understand how the two relate to each other: otherwise we are engaging in speculation. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, with the few examples for which we have both picture and text, the two diverge so much from each other that we must be extremely wary of assuming a given relationship. In short, Sophocles’ plays remain the best evidence for Sophocles’ plays.

List of Representations

Note: The objects are listed in the order they are discussed in the text. Only basic information about the objects (location, date, etc.) is given. The bibliography is limited to scholarly commentaries I discuss in my essay and to a couple of references with photographs in accessible places. All images from the web were accessed in January 2010. Starred objects are illustrated in this essay.


Figure 1. Eteocles and Polyneices. Hellenistic relief bowl. London, British Museum Vase G104 (1894,0516.1). Drawing after JDAI 23 (1908) pl. 6.
Figure 2. Oedipus. Sicilian calyx-krater. Capodarso Painter. 350–325 BC.
Syracuse, Museo Archeologico Regionale "Paolo Orsi" 66557. From Syracuse, Necropoli dell'Osepdale Civile. Photograph: Museum.
Figure 3. Pylades, Orestes, and Electra. Lucanian bell-krater. Sydney Painter. ca. 360–350 BC. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum 689 (SK 195, 69). Drawing after Séchan (1926). 143 fig. 44.

Figure 4. Philoctetes. Volterra, Museo Guarnacci 332. Alabaster Etruscan funerary urn. ca. 150–100 BC. Drawing after Brunn/Koerte (1879–1916) I pl. 69 No. 2.
Bibliography

Note: Much of my essay depends on Small 1981 and Small 2003, both of which should be consulted for fuller discussions and bibliography for the topics here.


LIMC. Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (Zurich, Munich and Düsseldorf 1981-1997).


*Temple and Tomb*, (2008) *From the temple and the tomb. Etruscan treasures from Tuscany* (Dallas)

