

# Roger Dawe and the Text of Greek Tragedy

Patrick J. Finglass  
University of Bristol, UK

Roger Dawe, who died in February this year at the age of 85, made a unique and lasting contribution to Hellenic studies. In a publishing career that lasted just over half a century, his work on Greek texts ranged from Homer (A21, B13) and Stesichorus (A10) to Constantine Manasses (A20) and Nicetas Eugenianus (A31).<sup>1</sup> He also made several contributions to the history of classical scholarship, especially on scholars from his own Cambridge college, Trinity, where he was a Fellow for the best part of six decades (A17-19, M1; also A33-4, 41). But his main work was on tragedy. He produced fundamental studies of the manuscript traditions of Aeschylus (B1; cf. A1-2) and Sophocles (B3-4, B6). He did not actually edit Aeschylus, but prepared the way for the Oxford Classical Text of his teacher, Denys Page: partly through his book on the manuscript tradition, partly through his repertory of conjectures on the text made by previous scholars (B2; cf. A39). Page paid elegant tribute to his pupil's work in the preface to his Oxford Classical Text, a book which could scarcely have been completed without him.<sup>2</sup> Dawe did edit Sophocles – three times in

**1** Throughout this piece, 'B1', 'A1' etc. refer to the piece "R.D. Dawe: Academic Publications 1959-2010" published in this issue of *Lexis*, where publication details for all reviews cited here can also be found.

**2** Page, D.L. (1972). *Aeschyli septem quae supersunt tragoediae*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, v: "egomet nequaquam opus tantae difficultatis suscepissem, ni Rogerus Dawe, Alexandri Turyn monitis oboediens, fundamenta tam lata et solida iecisset ut iam demum quivis aedificium aliquatenus stabile superstruere conari posset. lectiones codicum sedecim plenissime et accuratissime exscripsit, traditionis naturam



Edizioni  
Ca' Foscari

Published 2020-12-21

## Open access

© 2020 | Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License



**Citation** Finglass, P.J. (2020). "Roger Dawe and the Text of Greek Tragedy". *Lexis*, 38 (n.s.), 2, 351-358.

**DOI** 10.30687/Lexis/2210-8823/2020/02/004

all (B5, B8; B11, B12; B15-21), along with two further editions, with commentary, of *Oedipus Rex* (B10, B23). ('Sophocles' here means the seven plays that have been transmitted to us largely complete; Dawe showed virtually no interest in fragmentary drama). Euripides he barely touched (A15), wisely leaving him for another of Page's pupils, his Cambridge colleague James Diggle, with whom he both co-edited a *Festschrift* for Page (B7, together with Pat Easterling as co-editor) and revised the typescript of *Further Greek Epigrams* (B9), Page's last, posthumous publication.

Dawe's abilities as a scholar are seen in sharpest focus in his studies of the manuscript traditions of Aeschylus (B1) and Sophocles (B3-4, B6). A previous Fellow of Trinity, Richard Porson, on applying for a grant in 1782 to collate manuscripts in Italy ahead of a prospective edition of Aeschylus, received a curt response from his Vice-Chancellor: "Let Mr Porson collect his manuscripts at home".<sup>3</sup> The more enlightened grant-giving policy which prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s allowed Dawe to consult manuscripts of tragedy across Europe. One might have thought, though, that between Porson's lifetime and Dawe's, classical scholars had already completed this task; alas, that was - and still is - far from the case, even for canonical authors like Aeschylus and Sophocles. Through painstaking work on many manuscripts - and having engaged with Sophoclean manuscripts myself I can say of Dawe's collations, as Diggle said of Barrett's, that they are "of almost superhuman accuracy"<sup>4</sup> - Dawe demonstrated that the careful stemmata drawn up by previous scholars did not withstand close scrutiny; "of the edifice with which we began", he writes at the end of the first chapter of *Studies*, "there is now scarcely one stone left standing upon another". His emphasis on cross-contamination between manuscripts, and his setting out of the complex patterns of manuscript behaviour on the basis of the data which he had collected, won him no friends among scholars committed to a strict-

---

indagavit definitivae, edendi rationem certissimis approbatam indicibus explicuit; mox idem Wecklinium secutus incredibili cum labore recentiorum coniecturas in unum coacervavit. rerum de quibus editor in praefatione disserere solet partem longe maximam praesumpsere viri doctissimi quos nominavi, ita ut superfluum esset hoc loco codicum historiam descriptionem affinitates iterum abundanter exponere. qui codices adeundi essent, imprimis ab A. Turyn et R. Dawe didici. qua essent natura, quibus affinitatibus, expositione plenissima docuit Dawe". The final line of the Praefatio reads (p. x) "restat ut Rogero Dawe quam maximas agam gratias, qui textus apparatusque critici perscrutationi laborem paene infinitum impendit".

<sup>3</sup> Clarke, M. (1937). *Richard Porson. A Biographical Essay*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 15-16; cf. Stray, C. (2007). "The Rise and Fall of Porsonism". *Cambridge Classical Journal*, 53, 40-71, at 41 = *Classics in Britain. Scholarship, Education, and Publishing 1800-2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 82-107, at 83.

<sup>4</sup> Diggle, J. (1983). "Five Late Manuscripts of Euripides, *Hippolytus*". *Classical Quarterly*, n.s. 33, 34-43, at 35 fn. 11 = *Euripidea. Collected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, 239-49, at 240 fn. 10.

ly stemmatic analysis; the closing words of Jean Irigoin's review of *Aeschylus* read "Refusant les données de l'histoire, récusant Lachmann et ses suppôts, Dawe est un partisan de l'éclectisme généralisé". But Dawe's approach was recognised as pathbreaking at the time – and continues to be foundational for all subsequent editions of these two poets.

"Why is it that textual critics write so well and literary critics so abominably?", asks W. M. Calder III, in a review of a later book by Dawe. Calder is not necessarily the aptest judge, though, and other reviewers had harsher words for Dawe's scholarly idiolect, especially in his first book: "irritating", "boastful and aggressive", "exaggerated rhetoric", "rodomontade". But reviewers who disliked Dawe's style nevertheless repeatedly acknowledged the value of his scholarship. So Hugh Lloyd-Jones criticises the tone of *Aeschylus*, but finishes: "For all scholars seriously interested in the text of Aeschylus it is indispensable, and by itself assures its author of a place of honour in the history of Aeschylean studies". Lloyd-Jones later had the following to say about the first two volumes of *Studies*:

The labour of collating so many manuscripts as Dawe has dealt with must have been most exacting, and the benefit to the text is considerable... for on every page there are cases where the new information makes a difference. But the editor's knowledge and intelligence are still more impressive than his industry. He has subjected the text to a radical rethinking in the light of the extended apparatus, bringing to bear on every problem a critical acumen which is now, as it was not in his earlier work, valuable though that was, controlled by a sober and mature judgment... He stops a long way short of the rash <textual> violence of [some past scholars]... But he is an acute and vigilant critic, always ready to draw attention to an anomaly, and he has drawn attention to many not before discerned. Many of his solutions to problems are likely to find general acceptance, including a number of new suggestions of his own. The notes on individual passages... do not pretend to be a commentary of the highest class, and that work and the text together constitute an indispensable instrument of study for the critical reader of the poet. In his preface he makes appreciative mention of the two members of his college who have done great services to Sophocles. His own contribution is not likely to be forgotten so long as the text of the poet continues to be seriously studied.

With regard to the first volume of the edition, Lloyd-Jones wrote "my review of this magnificent piece of work must end not in complaint but in congratulation". Connoisseurs of Lloyd-Jones's reviewing style will note the unusually positive tone, something all the more remark-

able for the dispute between the two men played out in the letters page of the *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* in 1969. (There Dawe is clearly right, and hilarious with it, and Lloyd-Jones is clearly wrong; but there is an art to disagreeing with more senior scholars which Dawe never wholly mastered). Nor was Lloyd-Jones alone in such assessments. Martin West wrote of *Studies*: “It is an important book, in the best traditions of British empiricism, built on hard work and common sense, argued without preconceptions πρὸς δογματικούς, clearly and wittily written, accurately printed”. The depth, too, of these and other reviews is remarkable. Notices by Nigel Wilson and Tom Stinton, for example, as well as by Lloyd-Jones and West (four lengthy reviews in all, of *Studies* and the Sophocles edition), are major pieces of scholarship in their own right, indispensable for readers of Aeschylus and Sophocles today. The reader thus gets to see the interaction between some of the greatest scholars of tragedy of any era, in a manner that consistently generates light rather than heat – and that itself is a tribute to the significance of Dawe’s work.

Dawe’s ability to convey complex ideas about manuscripts in a way that is comprehensible to a non-specialist audience and that conveys the importance of the topic as a whole is evident from the introduction to his *Oedipus Rex* commentary (B10/23):

Even the highly abbreviated *apparatus criticus* printed in this edition will suffice to show how confusingly the various manuscripts can shift their affiliations, and how valuable old readings can filter down to us in only one or two manuscripts. There is thus no mechanical way of constituting the text of Sophocles; guesswork has still a large rôle to play, and that editor will guess best who has immersed himself for a long time in his author’s style, and who has built up by constant study a kind of intuition into the behaviour of the various manuscripts on which his text is based. It is not so much a question of tabling variants, and choosing one, or emending where none is satisfactory, but rather of continually asking oneself the question “What is it that all of these scribes are trying to tell me?” and on the basis of the answer striving to get as close as possible to the poetic mind of Sophocles.

Scholarly writing like this – clear, unpretentious, modest – suggests why so many of Dawe’s pupils whom I have met have spoken so highly of him as a supervisor.

In response to a German scholar reproaching him for over-reliance on a personal feeling for Greek style, Dawe replied “Greek scholars exist, or used to exist, largely for the express purpose of building up their ‘persönliche Stilgefühl’, and this instinct cannot and should not be wholly repressed” (A14: 87). And while that *Stilgefühl* did sometimes lead him to adopt eccentric positions, and to make emendations

which have not subsequently commanded wide support, there are many occasions where he grasps a point which had eluded everyone else who had written on it. That is no small matter, especially in an author who has received as much scholarly scrutiny as Sophocles has.

Perhaps surprisingly, given his reputation as an emender, Dawe's quality as a Hellenist is perhaps most evident not in his diagnoses of textual problems, but in his defence of a transmitted reading against tampering from others. So at *Antigone* 700, Haemon's words read in the manuscripts τοιάδ' ἔρεμνὴ σῖγ' ἐπέρχεται φάτις. Lloyd-Jones and Wilson emend the verb to ὑπέρχεται, a specious alteration involving positing the misreading of just one letter, and which supposedly yields the sense 'secretly' which would make sense in this context. But Dawe points out that the parallels cited for ὑπέρχεται "are all of emotions which steal over some one", which is not the same as a rumour making its way through a city; and that the ἐπ- prefix works perfectly, giving the sense "the criticisms do the rounds" (A36: 14 = B24: 360). This determination to maintain a good text against unnecessary emendation is maintained right up until his final publication. In their ode after the discovery of the truth, the chorus of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* sing ὅστις καθ' ὑπερβολὰν | τοξεύσας ἐκράτησας τοῦ πάντ' εὐδαίμονος ὄλβου ("You who, on hitting the mark with surpassing skill, mastered a prosperity wholly blessed by the gods", 1196-7). Moved by metrical considerations which are in fact not a problem, the editors of the Oxford Classical Text emend the transmitted text, printing ἐκράτησας οὐ ("mastered a prosperity not wholly blessed by the gods"). As Dawe rightly notes, however, this text creates "a piece of understatement that has no place here: for Sophocles... the contrast has to be between the absolute heights of prosperity and the uttermost depths of human life" (B41: 261). Scarcely can a change so small have had such a deleterious effect on the sense of a passage; scarcely has a passage been so effectively but briefly vindicated against careless editorial intervention.

Dawe's sensitivity to the meaning of a prefix demonstrated in his discussion of the *Antigone* passage can be observed elsewhere, as when he says (in his commentary, B10/23) of *OR* 1311 ἰὼ δαῖμον, ἴν' ἐξήλου ("*I*ō god, where you have leapt to!"), that the prefix is ἐξ-, not ἐν- or εἰς- as in other passages, because "Oedipus is speaking here not of something that has swooped down on his head, but of some extravagant departure from the norm". He could capture the resonance of a word or phrase, as with *OR* 399-400 ὄν δὴ σὺ πειράξ ἐκβαλεῖν, δοκῶν θρόνοις | παραστατήσιν τοῖς Κρεοντείοις πέλας ("That is the man whom you are attempting to cast out, thinking that you will stand beside the throne of Creon"), where of Κρεοντείοις replacing the expected Κρέοντος, he remarked "the suspicious mind of Oedipus seems already to have manufactured a political faction of 'Creontics'"; or at 810-13 οὐ μὴν ἴσην γ' ἔτεισεν, ἀλλὰ συντόμως | σκίηπτρω τυπεῖς ἐκ

τῆσδε χειρὸς ὕπτιος | μέσης ἀπήνης εὐθύς ἐκκυλίνδεται· | κτείνω δὲ  
 τοὺς ξύμπαντας (“It was no equal penalty that he paid, but, in short,  
 he was struck by a sceptre from this hand and straightaway rolled  
 prone right out of the wagon. I slew them all”), where in μέσης “the  
 apparent safety of the middle of the chariot is contrasted with the way  
 the πρέσβυς is pitched out of it”. Such sensitivity to nuance is not nec-  
 essarily the first thing that comes to mind when we consider Dawe’s  
 scholarship, which includes many other literary judgments that go  
 awry; but it is represented throughout his output. The scholar who  
 could observe the slightest variations in a scribe’s handwriting was  
 attuned to significant details in the language of Greek tragedy, too.

Moreover, Dawe often selected a decisive parallel that previous  
 editors had missed. In his note on *OR* 1303-6 φεῦ φεῦ δύστην’, ἀλλ’  
 οὐδ’ ἐσιδεῖν | δύναμαι σ’, ἐθέλων πόλλ’ ἀνερέσθαι, | πολλὰ πυθέσθαι,  
 πολλὰ δ’ ἀθρῆσαι· | τοίαν φρίκην παρέχεις μοι (“*Pheu pheu*, wretched  
 man, I cannot look upon you, although there is much I want to ask,  
 much to learn, much to behold. Such is the trembling that you cause  
 me”), he notes the key parallel for the chorus’s conflict of emotions,  
 from Plato’s account of Leontinus, who αἰσθόμενος νεκροῦς παρὰ  
 τῷ δημίῳ κειμένους, ἅμα μὲν ἰδεῖν ἐπιθυμοῖ, ἅμα δὲ αὖ δυσχεραῖνοι  
 καὶ ἀποτρέποι ἑαυτόν, καὶ τέως μὲν μάχοιτό τε καὶ παρακαλύπτοιτο·  
 κρατούμενος δ’ οὖν ὑπὸ τῆς ἐπιθυμίας, διελκύσας τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς,  
 προσδραμὼν πρὸς τοὺς νεκρούς, “ἰδοὺ ὑμῖν,” ἔφη, “ὧ κακοδαίμονες,  
 ἐμπλήσθητε τοῦ καλοῦ θεάματος” (*Republic* 439e-440a). This was not  
 an editor content to import all his parallels from previous commen-  
 taries, but one whose wide reading informed his own reaction to the  
 text.

After 1982, Dawe’s work is of less significance. The preparation  
 of the third Sophoclean edition (B15-21), which involved many more  
 changes from the second edition than the second had from the first,  
 led to a new series of Sophoclean articles, some justifying his choic-  
 es, some rethinking problems beyond even those and coming up with  
 new hypotheses. In particular, the ending of *Oedipus the King* under-  
 went renewed scrutiny, and his interventions have stimulated several  
 more studies.<sup>5</sup> A polemical article attacking the new Oxford Classical  
 Text of Sophocles is certainly entertaining – I remember the mischie-

<sup>5</sup> A25: 113-14, A30, B23. 2009. See Kovacs, D. (2009). “Do We Have the End of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*?”. *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 129, 53-70; “The End of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*: The Sceptical Case Restated”. *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 134, 2014, 56-65; *Sophocles: Oedipus the King. A New Verse Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020; Sommerstein, A.H. (2011). “Once More the End of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*”. *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 131, 85-93; Finglass, P.J. (2009). “The Ending of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*”. *Philologus*, 153, 42-62; *Sophocles. Oedipus the King* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 539-42; *Sophocles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 104-5.

vous glint in Martin West's eye when he alerted me to its appearance – though ultimately unsatisfying. A book-length study on the text of Sophocles, taking account of the new Oxford Classical Text and other developments since his *Studies* in the 1970s, would have been a better project to undertake; nevertheless, the article does contain many important discussions, such as the analysis of the *Antigone* passage discussed above.

Dawe's articles during the final part of his career appear largely in Italian publications and particularly in this journal; it was appropriate that his Collected Papers should be edited by two Italian scholars, Federico Boschetti and Vittorio Citti. Citti's conservative approach to textual criticism is obviously different from Dawe's, but that did not impede their good relations, and it is evident that Dawe's work continues to impact the Italian project to edit all of Aeschylus' plays: for example, Enrico Medda frequently cites it in his monumental, three-volume edition of *Agamemnon* (2017). I may add that Dawe showed great kindness to me ever since we were introduced by Martin West in December 2002, always encouraged me in my work, and never took offence when I disagreed with him.

In the humanities we are more used to a publishing model where by scholars produce their most important work some way into their career. Dawe's pattern of publication is especially unusual given that his first book appeared in 1965, at a time when pressure to publish was virtually absent for scholars of any age. But while we may regret that Dawe did not undertake further major works of scholarship after the 1970s – whether on the manuscript traditions of other authors, say, or on the editor's craft as a topic of study in its own right (something that his brief remarks in his *Oedipus Rex* commentary suggest that he would have been superlatively good at) – that does not detract from the achievement marked by what he did produce. Anyone who reads Aeschylus or Sophocles today, in any edition published from the 1970s onwards, reads a text that is closer to Sophocles' original, and which offers a much improved picture of the evidential basis for any particular textual reading, thanks to Dawe's work. His repertory of conjectures on Aeschylus, too, has proved essential to efforts by a team of Italian scholars to produce a new digital repertory.<sup>6</sup> Yet just as the chorus of *Agamemnon* chant that human prosperity never produces satiety, that no-one refuses wealth entry to a house that is already prosperous (1331-4), so too we who derive benefit from a scholar's achievement will always be tempted to wish for more. Let us rather be grateful for what we do have, and render due thanks for the scholarship of Dr Roger Dawe.

---

<sup>6</sup> Taufer, M. (2008). "A New Repertory of Conjectures on Aeschylus". *Quaderni Urbini di Cultura Classica*, n.s., 90, 105-9.

