

Eleftheria A. Bernidaki-Aldous

Blindness in a Culture of Light

Especially the Case of "Oedipus at Colonus" of Sophocles.

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**New York, Bern, Frankfurt/M., Paris, 1990. XIV, 243 pp,
American University Studies: Series 17, Classical Languages and Literature. Vol. 8
ISBN 0-8204-1024-1**

This book examines the paradox: sight in blindness in Ancient Greek culture. Deprivation of light is almost as undesirable as death, yet blindness bestows a status of distinction in a culture where choice between light and honor is difficult. Blindness is punishment for breaking the limits of human knowledge, yet it is also the means to insight (truth-vision of metaphysical light). The (polluted) blind seers and poets enjoy the highest religious, social and political powers.

In the first part of the text, solutions to this paradox are provided through an examination of attitudes towards blindness in an analytical survey of Greek Literature. In the second part (an analysis of the Oedipus Coloneus), Oedipus' blindness is viewed as the key for unraveling the mystery of the drama and of the hero's fate. Oedipus is viewed as supreme seer, and his presentation indicative of Sophocles' ideas, since Sophocles is fascinated with blindness, especially the blind poets and seers - the epitome of the paradox: sight-in-blindness in a culture of light.

«A splendidly searching study of the meaning of blindness in a culture that, from Homer onwards, was pervaded by a love of light felt to be one with life itself. The author provides an invaluable compendium of ancient Greek attitudes as they get into literature and as literature transforms and revalues them. The second part of this study is an incisively detailed analysis of Sophocles' 'Oedipus at Colonus', showing how the idea of blindness operates to express the poet's cyclical sense of tragedy and the "enfolded opposite" of human existence. Professor Bernidaki-Aldous' book will be welcomed by all those who find in Greek drama the texts of our Western humanity.»

William Arrowsmith
Boston University

“Two biographical features of the author are noteworthy here. First, Eleftheria Bernidaki-Aldous has been blind since the age of three, and second, she is originally from Crete. The latter characteristic puts her in an enviable position to appreciate the perennial importance of light in Greek culture. The former characteristic, if not enviable, nonetheless enables her to have privileged access to the ambivalent ancient Greek attitude toward blindness. ... (T)his book should be of interest to ... classicists who are interested in the Oedipus plays, to literary scholars or theatre historians who are interested in a non-Freudian interpretation of Oedipus psychology, and to philosophers who are interested in responding to Rottry and the other deconstructionists who have criticized the supposed dominance – ever since the Greeks – of visual metaphors in the history of philosophy.”

Daniel A. Dombrowski
The Classical Review

New Scholarly Books

New Scholarly Books

Compiled by NINA C. AYOUB

The following list has been compiled from information provided by the publishers. Most of the books are scheduled for release this month, but publication dates—as well as prices and numbers of pages—are sometimes approximate and are subject to change without notice. Some publishers offer discounts to scholars and to people who order in bulk.

ANTHROPOLOGY

Hearn (MIT Press; 312 pages; \$29.95 hardcover, \$14.95 paperback). Edition, with commentary, of writings by the 19th-century French architect, a major influence on such American architects as Frank Furness, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright.

The Cornucopian Mind and the Baroque Unity of the Arts, by Giancarlo Maiorino (Pennsylvania State University Press; 224 pages; \$29.95). Discusses the artist Michelangelo, the philosopher Giordano Bruno, and the writers Cervantes and Montaigne as "founding fathers" of Baroque culture.

Writing Architecture: Fantomas Fragments Fictions: An Architectural Journey Through the 20th Century, by Roger Conah (MIT Press; 456 pages; \$75). Draws on the theories of the contemporary Finnish architect Reima Pietila in a study of

Mobility in Large Corporations, by Hugh Downs (Basil Blackwell; 324 pages; \$45.00).

CLASSICAL STUDIES

Blindness in a Culture of Light: Especially the Case of "Oedipus at Colonus" of Sophocles, by Eleftheria A. Bernidaki-Aldous (Peter Lang Publishing; 243 pages; \$40.50). Uses literary works to explore the meaning of blindness and the role of blind poets and oracles in the culture of ancient Greece.

ECONOMICS

The Economics of Mutual Fund Markets: Competition Versus Regulation, by William J. Baumol and others (Kluwer Academic Publishers; 256 pages; \$55). Discusses the economic, legal, and regulatory history of the mutual-fund industry.

Essays on the Foundations of Game Theory, by Ken Binmore (Basil Blackwell; 256 pages; \$45). Includes previously unpublished

William Arrowsmith, Boston University

«A splendidly searching study of the meaning of blindness in a culture that, from Homer onwards, was pervaded by a love of light felt to be one with life itself. The author provides an invaluable compendium of ancient Greek attitudes as they get into literature and as literature transforms and revalues them. The second part of this study is an incisively detailed analysis of Sophocles' 'Oedipus at Colonus', showing how the idea of blindness operates to express the poet's cyclical sense of tragedy and the "enfolded opposite" of human existence. Professor

Bernidaki-Aldous' book will be welcomed by all those who find in Greek drama the texts of our Western humanity.»

**Daniel A. Dombrowski, The Classical Review, p15
Published for the classical association by Oxford University Press**

**THE BLINDNESS OF OEDIPUS
ELEFThERIA A. BERNIDAKI-ALDOUS: *Blindness in a Culture of Light: Especially the Case of Oedipus at Colonus of Sophocles.* (American University Studies, 17; Classical Languages and Literature, 8.) Pp. xiv + 243. New York, Berne, Frankfurt and Paris: Peter Lang, 1990. \$40.50.**

The thesis of the second half of this book (p. 215) is that blindness is one of the most important issues of Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus and provides a key for the understanding of what happens to the hero, especially during his mysterious end. The author admits that there are other features which are indispensable for an understanding of this drama, but any interpretation which does not acknowledge significantly the hero's blindness is bound to be incomplete, at best, or simply wrong, at worst. Further, it is held that although Oedipus' blindness is often acknowledged by critics (as in Jebb's commentary) it has not, for the most part, been the focus of attention as it has been in interpretations of Oedipus the King. This thesis is ably defended through a careful consideration of the development of Oedipus' heroism along with a consideration of the topos at Colonus for such development.

The first half of the book deals in a more general way with blindness and the blind in Greek culture. Two biographical features of the author are noteworthy here. First, Eleftheria Bernidaki-Aldous has been blind since the age of three, and second, she is originally from Crete. The latter characteristic puts her in an enviable position to appreciate the perennial importance of light in Greek culture. The former characteristic, if not enviable, nonetheless enables her to have privileged access to the ambivalent ancient Greek attitude toward blindness. On the one hand, blindness (especially when combined with old age) was seen as a condition of helplessness, dependence, and misfortune; indeed, it was seen as a punishment or as a condition of ignorance. On the other hand, Greek culture in general was in agreement with Sophocles and Plato that there were things to be seen with the mind's eye which most of us miss. That is, the blind were believed to have prophetic abilities which the rest of us lack.

This clearly written book is especially helpful in deepening our understanding of the Greek fascination for *logos* (p. 211). The blind, freed from dependence on sight (from the distractions of sight), were endowed with two significant abilities - memory and skill at dialectic - which made them ideal vehicles through which to convey the idea of the superiority of spiritual powers. The complexity of *logos*, however (as well as blindness as a handicap), becomes apparent when we notice Sophocles' frequent use of the verb *oida* ('I know' or 'I see'), especially at key turning points in the play. These uses cannot be accidental or incidental, as B.-A. indicates (p. 148). Hence it is understandable (p. 138) that Sophocles has Oedipus introduce himself to the Chorus by saying 'I am he who *sees by means of voice* that which has been decreed' (*οδ' ἐκεῖνος ἐγὼ φωνῇ γάρ ὁρῶ τὸ φατιζόμενον*).

One of the particular virtues of this book is that it puts us in a singular way *inside* Oedipus. The drama of which he is a part is not a predictable, stagnant form but is characterized by a flowing and constant change. Oedipus gradually and progressively becomes aware of his prophetic powers (and this largely because of his coming to terms with his blindness), as is indicated best by his own language in the curses. At first his curse (of Polynices) is only a wish, in the end it is a certain

chresmos. And Oedipus' 'heroization' or 'deification' is a gradual process that occurs not because he suffers but because he learns to suffer well, with nobility.

In conclusion, this book should be of interest to several classes of scholars: to classicists who are interested in the Oedipus plays, to literary scholars or theatre historians who are interested in a non-Freudian interpretation of Oedipus' psychology, and to philosophers who are interested in responding to Rorty and the other deconstructionists who have criticized the supposed dominance - ever since the Greeks - of visual metaphors in the history of philosophy.

Seattle University DANIEL A. DOMBROWSKI

JOHN E. REXINE, Colgate University, Hamilton, New York

Originally offered as a Ph.D. thesis at the Johns Hopkins University under the inspiration and direction of **William Anrowsmith**, *Blindness in a Culture of Light* is a remarkable book, written by a classicist from Creighton University who is herself blind and so has both a professional and personal interest and competence in this subject. The book aims "to examine and understand Greek thought on the subject of blindness and how they presented the blind in their literature" —thoughts which "generally reflect rather accurately the society which created them" (p. 5). Among the Greeks "The blind have been consistently assigned the ultimate religious, moral, social and political powers, especially in their roles as poets and seersTM and this study powerfully focuses on "the meaning of blindness and the role of the blind seer and poet in the (sic) Greek culture characterized... as a "culture of light" (p. 3). The book surveys blindness and the blind in Greek culture in Part I (pp. 11-131), concentrating on attitudes towards blindness and the blind and the importance of light in Greek culture; blindness combines with old age and the condition of utter helplessness, dependence, and misfortune; blindness as ignorance and seeing as light, truth, and moral goodness; blindness as punishment; and differences in attitudes toward blindness, with a consideration of Sophoclean drama as a microcosm of Greek society. Part II (pp. 135-192) focuses on Oedipus at Colonus and deals with the significance of Oedipus' blindness; sight imagery: the light-darkness motif; identification with the topos; human recognitions and their effect on the hero; the development of the hero and the development of the drama, with appropriate conclusions. An epilogue on Oedipus and Demeter (pp. 193-212) finds a parallelism between Oedipus life and Demeter's, while an appendix on "Criticism on the Oedipus at Colonus: Premises Accepted in This Study" (pp. 213-232) offers the reader a selective critique of Sophoclean scholarship. There is a good "Selected Bibliography" of ancient authors and modern scholarship but no index.

In this fascinating study, blindness is underlined as the deprivation of light which leads to dependence, loss of freedom of movement, and loss of direction. As a negative condition, it has been associated with ignorance and moral vice, but metaphorically with insight and spiritual illumination. As punishment, it has been related to trespass of any kind but especially sexual trespass and violation of the laws of *xenia*, and in general, for transgressing human limits with respect to knowledge, but the powers of prophecy as compensation for the suffering, which blindness is, may result (Teiresias comes to mind). Sophoclean heroes all warn us that greatness is a dangerous thing, and Sophocles was very much concerned with the exploration of human limitations and tragedy, with constant emphasis on the pattern of *insight in blindness*. Eleftheria Bemidaki-Aldous notes that "knowledge is somehow represented by the metaphor of eyesight; that physical blindness is the metaphor, and its loss the penalty, for supernatural knowledge" (p. 71). She astutely observes that Sophocles "is preoccupied with the fate of great transgressors everywhere and is especially attracted to the fate of great sufferers who are blind" (p. 76).

The author inevitably deals with more than the Oedipus at Colonus, a work in which a blind person is prominent, though fixed in position, throughout the entire play. She deals with the Oedipus Tyrannus as well. Oedipus metaphorically blinded by what he sees and blinds himself for what he knows. Blindness, in the Greek tradition, is a source of intense suffering and helplessness, but also a means to and cause of insight, understanding, and inspiration. In Oedipus, his understanding and endurance of his suffering qualify him for heroization and even deification, a recognition of the fact that he has suffered well, with endurance, with nobility, and for a long time. Oedipus goes from beggar to friend of a king, from suppliant to savior, from a pitiful old man to an admired deity, from a blind, old man to a renewed and renewing force of nature. Blindness helps Oedipus see the truth of his own nature. Through the suffering that his own blindness brings, Oedipus, realizes the nobility of his own humanity, acknowledges his own natural powers, and achieves, his final destination of union with nature, which is, in effect, union with the divine. The author of this study appropriately and succinctly observes that "The hero is the paradox of *physis* and divinity combined" (p. 185). She summarizes the significance of Sophocles Oedipus by saying "The hero in the Oedipus at Colonus is a human being subjected to utter suffering, a visible and powerful manifestation of which is his blindness. Through such suffering he realizes his humanity, Humanity, in Sophoclean terms, means the natural rule of experiencing everything which is natural to human beings" (p. 190). The hero realizes his humanity through a series of paradoxical pairs of opposites (birth-death-birth, love-hate-love, happiness-misfortune-bliss, rest-turmoil-peace, honor-humiliation-recognition, possession-loss-recovery).

Blindness in a Culture of Light provides the reader with some exceptionally good insights into ancient Greek, culture in general and Sophocles in particular. Despite some occasional unidiomatic expressions in English, this book is generally very well written with a clarity of expression and interpretation that strongly recommends it as an exceptionally useful, perceptive and sensible resource for teaching Sophocles and making available to all readers an aspect of Greek culture that has needed fuller and more appropriate illumination.

JOHN E. REXINE
Colgate University
Hamilton, New York

L' Année Philologique

1. Bernidaki-Aldous E.A. – *Blindness in a culture of light, especially the case of the Oedipus at Colonus of Sophocles*. The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, 1985. 299p. DA XLVI 1985 1616A
2. Bernidaki-Aldous Eleftheria A. – *Blindness in a culture of light especially the case of the Oedipus at Colonus of Sophocles*
 - New York: Lang, 1990. XIV & 243p (Amer. Univ. Stud. Ser. 17;8)
 - CR XLI 1991 15-16 Dombrowski
 - Platon 44 1992 182-184 J.E. Rexine
3. Bernidaki-Aldous Eleftheria. – *The power of the evil eye in the blind: Oedipus Tyrannus 1306 and Oedipus at Colonus 149-156*. Text and presentation. 8:39-48

Rochelle Snee
Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, WA 98447

BLINDNESS IN A CULTURE OF LIGHT: ESPECIALLY THE CASE OF OEDIPUS AT COLONUS OF SOPHOCLES. By Eleftheria A. Bernidaki-Aldous. New York: Peter Lang, 1990. Pp. xiv 4- 243. \$40.50.
Examines the paradoxical Greek attitude toward blindness in a culture for which life was equated

with light. Seers and poets punished by the gods with blindness were yet granted extraordinary powers of insight. A thorough review of literature, particularly drama, in Part One reveals "the suffering which blindness is" (the author herself is blind). It is associated as condition and metaphor with old age, helplessness, dependence, misfortune, ignorance, pollution. Prophecy was compensation for that suffering and, especially in Sophocles, could raise the blind seer to the level of tragic hero. Bernidaki-Aldous believes that Oedipus's miasma was "caused by his blindness no less than by his patricide and incest." Part Two presents a well-argued case for blindness as a primary theme in the *Colonus*. Oedipus is transformed from accursed to benefactor "because he suffered well". In the grove of the Eumenides, those dark powers of the earth, he becomes part of a cyclical process that is at one with nature. He passes "from happiness to misfortune to bliss, from honor to humiliation to recognition as from birth to death to birth." An epilogue discusses imagery and language drawn from the Eleusinian Mysteries. This is a useful study, despite some awkward organization and documentation. In the bibliography one misses Kamerbeek's commentary on the O.C. (Teubner, 1984). Considerable Greek is untranslated, particularly in the notes.

Rochelle

Pacific

Tacoma, WA 98447

Lutheran

Snee

University

Freiburger Universitätsblätter Energiebedarf und Kulturgeschichte

Eleftheria A. Bernidaki-Aldous, *Blindness in a culture of light Especially the Case of 'Oedipus at Colonus' of Sophocles. American University Studies. Peter Lang Verlag, Frankfurt, a.M. 1990.*

Dem Paradoxon, daß in einer Kultur wie der griechischen, die das Licht der Sonne mit dem Leben, den Tod aber mit dem Verlust des Lichtes, mit dem lichtlosen Hades identifiziert, der Blindheit eine außerordentliche Stellung und Wertschätzung zukommt, widmet die Verfasserin ihre Arbeit, die von anhaltendem und gelungen vermittelten Staunen über dieses Paradox Zeugnis ablegt. Sie bedient sich dazu herkömmlicher literaturwissenschaftlicher Methoden, eines hohen Maßes an Textpräsenz und hermeneutischer Interpretationen, um nach der Bedeutung der Blindheit zu fragen.

Die Arbeit ist zweiteilig angelegt. Im ersten Teil wird in fünf Ansätzen der Zusammenhang der Blindheit in der griechischen Kultur analysiert, wobei die Beobachtung der Identität von Licht und Leben am Anfang steht und das Paradoxon der Blindheit zwischen Strafe und Auszeichnung, Verlust und Gewinn, Verachtung und Verehrung erst ermöglicht. Indem sich die Analyse auf literarische Texte konzentriert und die soziale Stellung des Blinden im griechischen Alltag ausblendet, zeigt sie zuerst in einer Reihe von Sterbeszenen aus Sophokles und Euripides das Licht als den öffentlichen Raum des Lebens und dessen Aufgabe im Tod. Ein zweiter Aspekt beleuchtet die Mitleid erregende, auf Geleitz angewiesene, meist alte Erscheinung des Blinden auf der Bühne, wobei die tragischen Aspekte der Blendung Polyphems im »Kyklop« und insgesamt die Blendung als Mittel der Sympathienlenkung herausgearbeitet werden.

An Beispielen von Sophokles und Platon wird dann der metaphorische Gebrauch der Blindheit und der Zusammenhang von Wahrheit, Licht und Sonne erörtert. Ein viertes Moment thematisiert an verschiedenen mythischen Überlieferungen die Blindheit als Strafe für die Übertretung religiöser und sozialer Gesetze; psychoanalytische Erklärungsmodelle werden bewußt zugunsten von Anleihen bei Nietzsche oder Karl Reinhardt zurückgestellt. Schließlich versucht die Verfasserin, aus den unterschiedlichen Positionen, die bei Sophokles Held (Ödipus), Chor und der Vertreter von Staat (und Vernunft), Theseus bzw. Kreon, gegenüber der Blindheit einnehmen, einen Querschnitt durch die griechische Gesellschaft zu rekonstruieren, der in eine Apotheose der Blindheit ausläuft. -Im zweiten Teil steht dann das Mysterienspiel vom Tod des blinden Ödipus im Blick. Die Überwindung seines Leides mache ihn zum übermenschlichen Wesen, das am Ende in den

Kreislauf der Natur eingehe, der durch die Motivik von Licht und Dunkelheit, von Leben und Tod, Gesellschaft und Natur, Himmel und Erde repräsentiert ist. Ödipus rückt ganz in die Nähe Demeters, wenn sich am Ende Held, Natur und Götter versöhnen. Seine Ausnahmestellung gründet in seiner Blindheit: »his blindness leads him to the understanding of the world and the realization of his humanity, in the fullest. Oedipus at Colonus experiences and achieves a humanity which is capable of embracing all things« (S. 136). Eine Diskussion der Forschung beschließt die grundlegende Arbeit.

Die Verfasserin ist selbst seit ihrem dritten Lebensjahr erblindet und hat unter extrem erschwerten Umständen ihr durchaus fesselndes Buch geschrieben. Dessen Rang als hermeneutische Interpretation, der es auf methodische Innovation nicht ankommt, ist indessen unbestritten, auch wenn ungeklärt bleibt, ob nicht 1. die beabsichtigte Analyse des blinden Sehers ihr geeigneteres Objekt in Teiresias gefunden hätte, 2. der Weg Ödipus' vom Beginn bis zur Blendung hatte berücksichtigt werden müssen, 3. zwischen den beiden Ödipus-Dramen stärker hätte differenziert werden müssen, und 4. schließlich etliche Ergebnisse schon bei Albert Esser, »Das Antlitz der Blindheit in der Antike« Leiden 1961, deutlicher entwickelt worden waren. - Vermutlich noch nicht vorgelegen hat Rebecca W. Bushneils »Prophesying tragedy. Sign and Voice in Sophocles' Theban Plays« Ithaca 1988. Nicht zu Lasten der Verfasserin geht die Nachlässigkeit der Texteinrichtung (englische Silbentrennung, deutsche Litteraturangaben). - Das persönliche Engagement der Autorin macht das Buch zu einer lesenswerten, prononcierten Stellungnahme.

VOIR

Réalié et symbolisme de l'aveuglement

Michel Defossez

Blindness in a culture of light : especially the case of "Oedipus at Colonus" of Sophocles / Eleftheria A. Bernidaki-Aldous. - New York : Lang, 1990. - 243 p. -(American University Studies. Series XVII, Classical Languages and Literature; 8). - ISBN 0-8204-1024.

L'ouvrage de Mme Bernidaki, outre son agréable concision, presente le grand avantage de rassembler les sources antiques et modernes actuellement à la disposition de tout chercheur intrigue par les thèmes de la cécité, de l'aveuglement et de l'auto-aveuglement en Grèce antique.

L'auteur, aveugle depuis l'âge de trois ans a la suite d'un accident, laisse transparaitre une sensibilité particulièrement vive à la psychologie du non-voyant et à la manière dont il a pu être perçu à l'intérieur de la société grecque. Les pages consacrées aux diverses attitudes possibles face à la cécité (chap. 5) sont particulièrement éloquentes à ce sujet.

Le point fort de cette étude est sans conteste la partie consacrée à l'Œdipe à Colone de Sophocle, dont la clé d'interprétation doit être cherchée dans la fascination que la cécité exerçait sur Sophocle lui-même. Ce dernier a fait d'Œdipe un devin suprême, pénétré, à la suite de son automutilation, de la lumière intérieure de la connaissance lui révélant le drame de toute condition humaine.

Les résultats de l'enquête sur les thèmes de la cécité et du personnage de l'aveugle dans la littérature grecque nous semblent cependant moins pertinents. D'après l'auteur, la cécité serait perçue négativement par les Grecs, adeptes d'une culture de la lumière, et ce pour plusieurs raisons :

- importance accordée à la lumière et à la vision dans la littérature ;
- état de dépendance de l'aveugle, associé à une perte de capacités physiques ;
- interprétation de la cécité comme un châtiment divin.

Aucun texte ne précise clairement que l'état de cécité était considéré négativement par les Grecs. Cette affirmation est essentiellement induite :

- des regrets souvent émis par les futurs défunts en ce qui concerne la lumière et le soleil (chap. 1, pp. 11-19);
- du fait que la lumière soit source de joie en de nombreuses occasions (id., p. 19) ;
- de l'écœurement exprimé dans l' *Œdipe Roi* par la vision d'Œdipe mutilé (p. 33) et l'apitoiement engendré par la dépendance physique de l'aveugle (p. 36).

En considérant les deux premiers points, on a plutôt l'impression que les auteurs antiques ont simplement exploité une facile métaphore littéraire faisant de la lumière une source de vie et de joie, par opposition à l'Hadès froid, sombre et triste, royaume des morts errants. Mais on est loin d'une assimilation de l'état d'aveugle à celui de mort-vivant, surtout quand on sait qu'il est souvent le signe distinctif des devins et poètes !

En ce qui concerne Œdipe, si le chœur de l' *Œdipe Roi* de Sophocle exprime l'écœurement (v. 1297-1421), c'est en raison de son geste automutilatoire incompréhensible. Quoi qu'il en soit, les conclusions peu nuancées de cette partie de l'ouvrage sont largement compensées par les deux études complémentaires consacrées d'une part, aux relations d'Œdipe avec les diverses divinités grecques (notamment celles des mystères d'Eleusis), et d'autre part à la critique littéraire de l'œuvre de Sophocle.

Michel Defossez