

of his questions to Rawls is, "Do we feel that Nora's expressions of dishonor and outrage at the state of her so-called marriage require that she be prepared to show why certain institutions (here the institution of marriage) are unjust or how others have injured her?" (p. 109). This is a direct question to Rawls's assertion, "Those who express resentment must be prepared to show why certain institutions are unjust or how others have injured them." That the husband in *A Doll's House* thinks he knows what is best for his wife, that he understands and upholds the institution of marriage better than she—these are exactly what constitute part of the sense of violation. Cavell senses that Rawls's insistence on the disadvantaged providing justification for their complaints does not seem to address fully the ways in which the conversation of justice can become deformed—get out of hand—to the extent that one party feels that injustice has gone beyond the bounds of talking it out.

While the current glut of books on ethics perhaps indicates how much society has lost its bearings, as some have suggested, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* wants to say that even in one's uncertainty, one ought to have hope. Self-reliance can mean leaving the new ethics books aside on the hunch that having a rigorous, programmatic ethics does not necessarily make one ethical. Similarly, the absence of an ethics textbook in one's hand ought to make the ethicists wonder whether they are being continually rebuked.

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Sophocles' Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction, by Frederick Ahl; xiv & 297 pp. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, \$41.50 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

In landmark studies of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Cedric Whitman and Bernard Knox had emphasized the towering humanism and dignity of its hero. The pride they found in him is exalted even if reckless, and his search for the truth exemplary even if invincibly misguided. In Ahl's challenge to traditional readings, Oedipus is at the other end of the spectrum: a self-deluded, self-convicted, egocentric paranoid, "the very embodiment of Plato's tyrannical soul," himself "the disease that lies heavy on the city regardless of whether he really killed his father and married his mother," tragically predisposed to trust unsubstantiated evidence of his guilt, despite weighty grounds for doubt, including his own first-hand experience. Ahl's analysis purports to demonstrate by a close, passage-by-passage reading, that Oedipus does not discover that he has murdered his father and committed incest with his mother, but that he convinces

himself that he has done so, by trusting the reports of those who "exploit, often cynically, the multivalence of language for their own personal benefit."

The result is not only a drastically revised Oedipus, but revised versions of other characters, the expedient exploiters of language: Tiresias ("a respected, professional seer, offended by Oedipus' amateur and single success"), Creon ("a demagogue whose power lies in dissimulation and double-talk"), the Corinthian ("a shepherd who sees a chance to live his remaining years in comfort"), Laius' servant ("a cowardly slave who will say what he has to say to preserve his life"). Ahl's reading produces even more startling (and to my mind less convincing) implications for two other characters. Jocasta's frantic final exit may be motivated, Ahl suggests, not by the realization that Oedipus is her son, but by her mounting despair of ever dissuading Oedipus from the Corinthian's misconstruction of his past. And the speech of the *exangellos* is dissected to offer grounds for suspecting that Jocasta may not actually be dead.

Ahl's methodology of suspicion is a refreshing antidote to several flawed approaches to Sophocles' play: (1) the view that "the myth" or "tradition" more or less determines what the poet can or cannot have Oedipus do; (2) the view that what dramatic characters say represents the facts unless the plot *explicitly* signals deception, conjecture, or fallible recollection; and (3) the view that so-called contradictions and inconsistencies are to be ascribed at worst to sloppy composition, at best to "dramatic economy," rather than to a deliberate representation of conflicting evidence. Ahl's is a microscopic reading and, as it happens with microscopes, the inevitable distortion of the customary produces a view some may find too unsettling to sustain. Also it could be argued that Ahl's otherwise intelligent representation is blemished by overfocus. One example: on p. 166, Ahl reads as callous what, I suppose, most readers would consider Oedipus' quite natural immediate expression of relief at news of Polybus' death; on p. 204, we are told that "he rejoiced at the death of Polybus . . . and wished that his mother Merope was dead"; by p. 261, this has become "ghoulish delight in Polybus' death."

Considerable attention is paid to wordplay of a kind that drew mixed reactions from reviewers of Ahl's earlier *Metaformations: Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets* (1985). Ahl is on sure footing and far more inventive than his predecessors with, to cite but two examples, the textual play on Oedipus' name and the verbal lambdacism that conjures a relationship between fictional Creon and historical Cleon. Other instances are less convincing, as when he sees the name of the river Halys, boundary between Lydians and Persians (Herodotus 1.72), in the well-known prophecy that Lydian Croesus "would destroy (*kat'ALYSein*) a great empire" (Herodotus 1.53), citing as analogy Chaucer's prophetic wordplay that "Calkas knewe by calkulynge" that "Troie sholde destroyed be" (*Troilus and Criseyde* 71, 68). Still, were half of such purported relationships jettisoned, Ahl's provocative and original reading would remain to be reckoned with. One is made to wonder, however, how Ahl can any longer,

as he does, call this play a tragedy, with a central character who survives his reading with so little sympathy.

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Acts of Literature, by Jacques Derrida; edited by Derek Attridge; xiii & 456 pp. New York: Routledge, 1992, \$49.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

Acts of Literature is a valuable gathering of Jacques Derrida's intricate reflections on literature and criticism, and on the institutions in which (and through which) literary/critical activity occurs. Derek Attridge has edited this volume with care and precision, choosing excerpts from a number of Derrida's major books, including *Of Grammatology*, *Dissemination*, and *Signéponge/Signsponge*, and integrating them with essays that Derrida has contributed over the years to collections and anthologies. Attridge has also provided a cogent introduction, useful bibliography, and—best of all—the edited transcript of an interview he conducted with Derrida in April 1989 on “this strange institution called literature.” The interview precedes the reprinted texts, and serves as Derrida's own introduction to them and survey of his investment in literary forms, genres, and tropes.

Yet it is a strange, somewhat disconcerting experience to peruse *Acts of Literature*. On one level, it supplies a superb intellectual workout for readers willing to be tested by Derrida's stylistic demands. But on another level, *Acts of Literature* is so intensely self-conscious and relentlessly determined to qualify, question, and undercut its brief moments of firm statement, that it doesn't always reward the efforts from readers that it requires.

All of the texts here are alternately enlightening and exasperating, supremely original and maddeningly coy. In them Derrida treats such authors as Rousseau, Mallarmé, Joyce, Kafka, Shakespeare, and Celan, yet it would be a mistake to presume that he intends to grant anything like the ideas and insights that conventional acts of literary criticism afford. Reading *Acts of Literature* will make you a sharper thinker, but it probably will not shift or enlarge your knowledge about the authors whose work Derrida appears to fasten upon.

Perhaps another way to make the point is to note that this book is highly specialized. It isn't connected to literary criticism or philosophical inquiry as projects designed to advance the understanding of primary figures and the texts they composed. Its real connection is to the mobile, compelling, evocative, mystifying and mystified world of Derridean writing. In this respect, Derrida