

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on October 1, 2013, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Bernard Macgregor Walker Knox was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

BERNARD MACGREGOR WALKER KNOX

BORN: November 24, 1914

DIED: July 22, 2010

Bernard MacGregor Walker Knox, Professor of Greek, *Emeritus*, was born in England on November 24, 1914, but he lived most of his professional life as a citizen of the United States, where he died on July 22, 2010. In 1961 Knox was recruited from Yale to become the founding director of Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, D.C. He took up his post in the fall of 1962 (Michael Putnam having served as acting director in the Center's first year) and held it until his retirement in 1985. During Knox's tenure the Center was the temporary home for almost two hundred "Junior Fellows" from two dozen countries.

Bernard and his wife, Bianca, lived a glittering life on Whitehaven Street. The Director's Residence hosted almost as many notable Washington figures as it did visiting classicists. Bernard was a worldly host and a master raconteur; "his" Junior Fellows will recall the anecdotes. Harrowing wartime experiences were crystallized into brilliant tales, typically featuring a stroke of good (or bad) luck. But Knox was also a profoundly literate intellectual and a serious, productive scholar. Many of his most influential books and essays were written at the Center.

As a scholar and critic Bernard meant different things to different people, but his best-known and most enduring legacy remains his work on the concept of the tragic hero in the dramas of Sophocles. Knox's two books on Sophocles were published half a century ago, *Oedipus at Thebes* in 1957 by Yale University Press and his Sather Classical Lectures of 1963 the following year by the University of California Press under the title *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*.

The earlier book begins with a polite but scathing refutation of what Knox refers to as Freud's "fundamental misconception that Oedipus is a tragedy of fate" (p. 3). The five chapters of the book are given titles that consist of a single word each, namely "Hero," "Athens," "Man," "God," and again "Hero." The order is significant for understanding the rationale behind Bernard's interpretation of the Oedipus Tyrannus. The play is about a

tragic hero whose identity undergoes a complete reversal. The hero who is sent back into the palace a broken man at the end of the drama is diametrically opposed to the godlike king who is the dominant figure in the opening scene. It is the conflict between man and god, between Apollo's oracles and Oedipus' attempts to circumvent them, that drives the action of the drama and decides Oedipus' fate.

Bernard juxtaposes the Thebes of the Oedipus Tyrannus with the historical Athens of Sophocles's own time, rather than with the mythical Athens of tragedy, and sees the two not as polar opposites but as mirror images. In his own words "the play is a tragic vision of Athens' splendor, vigor, and inevitable defeat, a defeat which contemplates no possibility of escape—the defeat is imminent in the splendor" (p. 105). As a critic Bernard was as keenly interested in history as he was in myth. He regarded tragedy's recourse to the mythical past as a metaphor for the vicissitudes of Athens in the 5th century. In order to achieve as great a precision as possible in seeing the Oedipus Tyrannus against the background of its time, he even wrote an article on the date of the play, which he concluded was performed in 425 BCE. Few other scholars have been confident enough to date the play with such accuracy.

It could be argued that much of Knox's work on the Oedipus Tyrannus is designed to set the record straight and to restore the Greek Oedipus to his pristine pre-Freudian condition. But there is more to the question why Oedipus looms so extraordinarily large in Knox's oeuvre. The answer has as much to do with Sophocles and the Greeks as with Bernard's personal life and academic career.

Bernard's Sather Lectures build on and expand his earlier book on Oedipus at Thebes and define tragic heroes like Antigone and Philoctetes in terms of their "heroic temper," that is, their inner disposition in dealing with men and gods alike. In his reading, Sophoclean heroes are irascible, obstinate, and committed to their cause. Their fate is intertwined with the life of their cities even beyond death through hero cult. Needless to say, Oedipus is the most illustrious example of the Sophoclean hero. As a critic Bernard was in the final count always a humanist, and he tends to envision the Sophoclean hero as a troubled and even tortured paradigm of the human condition.

Like other classicists who went through the ordeal of warfare, Bernard's view of life and literature was influenced by his war experience. He came to Yale in 1947 as a graduate student after he saw combat on the anti-Franco side in the Spanish Civil War and, later, in the ranks of the United States forces fighting in Normandy and Italy during World War II. He earned his doctorate in 1948.

In the academic year of 1951–52 he participated in a Yale lecture series on tragedy from Sophocles to T. S. Eliot, which was published in 1955 as *Tragic Themes in Western Literature*. According to the editor's preface the lectures "dramatize the ultimate oneness of man." The humanistic motivation of the endeavor is unmistakable. Bernard's lecture bears

the unassuming title “Sophocles’ Oedipus” and it anticipates all the major themes and discoveries of his first book and, to a lesser extent, of his second. It starts on a solemn note that sees Sophoclean tragedy as a microcosm of the human condition and characterizes his Oedipus as “a symbol of human aspiration and despair before the characteristic dilemma of western civilization—the problem of man’s true nature, his proper place in the universe” (p. 96).

Knox’s conspicuous success as an interpreter of Sophoclean tragedy derives its momentum from that illuminating tension between his admirable attention to the texts of Greek tragedy and his aspirations as a humanist who refused to separate scholarship from life.

Respectfully submitted,

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