

What is a classic from the start?

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. P.E. Easterling presents a brief description of the life of Sophocles according to which he was “evidently a classic from the start.” I note a concern about the description, that all classics would seem to be classics from the start.

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P.E. Easterling’s “Sophocles: The First Thousand Years” early on presents us with a somewhat familiar biography of Sophocles. Easterling writes:

Sophocles was evidently a classic from the start: his plays were outstandingly successful in the drama competitions of Athens in his lifetime, and some were securely established in the ‘international’ repertoire after his death, even if Euripides did gradually overtake him in the popularity stakes. (2006: 1)

I like this expression “a classic from the start.” However, I find the concept of a classic from the start difficult to make sense of. I suppose if something is a classic, then it can stand the test of time. But if that is a necessary and a sufficient condition, then is it not the case that all classics are classics from the start? It is just that perhaps this is not known in some cases. In which case, the concept of a classic from the start does not seem of much use.

So this is the puzzle:

- (1) If the concept of a classic from the start is to have value, then it must apply to some classics and not others.
- (2) A classic is a work that can stand the test of time.
- (3) All classics have this quality from when they appear.

Perhaps there is an alternative idea of a classic as accepted by “people of that kind.” And people of that kind, whatever the details, accepted Sophocles from the performance of his first play. But if they do not accept some works at one stage and do later, there is a question of whether they should determine what a classic is. (I am not saying that he was not a classic from the start. I am just puzzling over this notion. Some works take time to digest. Is the crucial word for Easterling “evidently”? Evidently a classic from the start versus not evidently a classic from the start, rather than classic from the start versus not classic from the start. I am not sure that helps! Who are these classics-determiners, by the way?)

Even without this alternative (2) seems wrong, or in need of reformulation, if we are close to the end of history. I shall leave the complicated investigation of that for another occasion.

Reference

Easterling, P. 2006. Sophocles: the first thousand years. *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies. Supplement 87*: 1-15.