Nor is this verdict of antiquity likely to be reversed by modern criticism. The object of the present article, however, is not to praise Sophocles, but rather to describe him. And it is time to turn from Alexandrian or Byzantine fancies and judgments to the poet’s extant works.

His minor poems, elegies, pæans, &c., have all perished; and of his hundred and odd dramas only seven remain. These all belong to the period of his maturity (he had no decline) ; and not only the titles (as Lessing said) but some scanty fragments of more than ninety others have been preserved. Several of these were, of course, satyric dramas. And this recalls a point of some importance, which has been urged on the authority of Suidas, who says that “ Sophocles began the practice of pitting play against play, instead of the tetralogy.” If it were meant that Sophocles did not exhibit tetralogies, this statement would have simply to be rejected. For the word of Suidas (950 a.d.) has no weight against quotations from the lists of tragic victories (*διδασκαλίαι*) "which there is no other reason for discrediting. The remark might be due to the impression made on some critics by the greater complexity and completeness of a play of Sophocles—say the *Œdipus Tyrannus* or *Antigone—*as compared, say, with the *Persæ* or the *Septem contra Thebas.* It is distinctly asserted, for example, on the authority of the *διδασκαλίαι*, that the *Bacchæ* of Euripides, certainly as late as any play of Sopho­cles, was one of a trilogy or tetralogy. And if the custom was thus maintained for so long it was clearly impossible for any single competitor to break through it. But it seems probable that the trilogy had ceased to be the continuous development of one legend or cycle of legends,—“pre­senting Thebes or Pelops’ line,”—if, indeed, it ever was so exclusively ; and if, as Schöll and others have suggested, a Sophoclean tetralogy was still linked together by some subtle bond of tragic thought or feeling, this would not affect the criticism of each play considered as an artistic whole. At the same time it appears that the satyric drama lost its grosser features and became more or less assimilated to the milder form of tragedy. And these changes, or something like them, may have given rise to the statement in Suidas.@@1

If the diction of Sophocles sometimes reminds his readers of the *Odyssey,* the subjects of his plays were more frequently chosen from those later epics which subse­quently came to be embodied in the epic cycle,—such as the *Æthiopis,* the *Little Iliad,* the *Ilvupersis,* the *Cypria,* the *Nosti,* the *Telegonia* (all revolving round the tale of Troy), the *Thebaica,* the *Οἰχαλίας ἅλωσις*, and others, in­cluding probably, though there is no mention of such a thing, some early version of the Argonautic story. In one or other of these heroic poems the legends of all the great cities of Hellas were by this time embodied ; and, though there must also have been a cloud of oral tradition floating over many a sacred spot, the dramatic poet does not seem, unless in the *Œdipus Coloneus,* to have directly drawn from this. He was content to quarry from the epic rhapsodies the materials for his more concentrated art, much as Shakespeare made use of Hollingshed or Plutarch, or as the subjects of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* have been taken from Sir Thomas Malory. As Sophocles has been accused of narrowing the range of tragic sympathy from Hellas to Athens, it deserves mention here that, of some hundred subjects of plays attributed to him, fifteen only are connected with Attica, while exactly the same

number belong to the tale of Argos, twelve are Argonautic, and thirty Trojan. Even Corinthian heroes (Bellerophon, Polyidus) are not left out. It seems probable on the whole that, within the limits allowed by convention, Sophocles was guided simply by his instinctive perception of the tragic capabilities of a particular fable. This was evidently Lessing’s view, and may be confirmed by quoting his striking remarks upon the subject of one of the lost tragedies, the *Thyestes at Sicyon :—*

“ Nach der abscheulichen Mahlzeit, die ihm sein Bruder bereitete, flog er nach Sicyon. Und hier war es wo er, auf Befragung des Orakels, wie er sich an seinem Bruder rächen sollte, die Antwort bekam, er sollte seine eigne Tochter entehren. Er überfiel dies auch unbekannter Weise; und aus diesem Beischlafe ward Ægisth, der den Atreus hernach umbrachte, erzeugt. Die Verzweiflung einer geschändeten Prinzessin! Von einem Unbekannten! In welchem sie endlich ihren Vater erkennt! Eine von ihrem Vater entehrte Tochter! Und aus Rache entehrt! Geschändet, einen Mörder zu gebären ! Welche Situationen! welche Scenen! ”

To say that subsidiary or collateral motives were never present to Sophocles in the selection of a subject would, however, be beyond the mark. His first drama, the *Triptolemus,* must have been full of local colouring ; the *Ajax* appealed powerfully to the national pride ; and in the *Œdipus Coloneus* some faint echoes even of oligarch­ical partisanship may be possibly discerned. But, even where they existed, such motives *were* collateral and subsidiary ; they were never primary. All else was sub­ordinated to the dramatic, or, in other words, the purely human, interest of the fable. This central interest is even more dominant and pervading in Sophocles than the otherwise supreme influence of religious and ethical ideas. The idea of destiny, for example, was of course inseparable from Greek tragedy. Its prevalence was one of the conditions which presided over the art from its birth, and, unlike Æschylus, who wrestles with gods, our poet simply accepts it, both as a *datum* of tradition and a fact of life. But in the free handling of Sophocles even fate and providence are adminicular to tragic art. They are instruments through which sympathetic emotion is awakened, deepened, intensified. And, while the vision of the eternal and unwritten laws was holier yet, for it was not the creation of any former age, but rose and culminated with the Sophoclean drama, still to the poet and his Periclean audience this was no abstract notion, but was inseparable from their impassioned contemplation of the life of man—so great and yet so helpless, aiming so high and falling down so far, a plaything of the gods and yet essentially divine. This lofty vision subdued with the serenity of awe the terror and pity of the scene, but from neither could it take a single tremor or a single tear. Emotion was the element in which Greek tragedy lived and moved, albeit an emotion that was curbed to a serene stillness through its very depth and intensity.

The final estimate of Sophoclean tragedy must largely depend upon the mode in which his treatment of destiny is conceived. That Æschylus had risen on the wings of faith to a height of prophetic vision, from whence he *saw* the triumph of equity and the defeat of wrong as an eternal process moving on toward one divine event,—that he realized sin, retribution, responsibility, as no other ancient did,—may be gladly conceded. But it has been argued@@2 that because Sophocles is saddened by glancing down again at actual life,—because in the fatalism of the old fables he finds the reflexion of a truth,—he in so far takes a step backward as a tragic artist. Now is this altogether just? His value for what is highest in man is none the less because he strips it of earthly rewards, nor is his reverence for eternal law less deep because he knows that its workings are sometimes pitiless. Nor, once more,

@@@l The advantages and defects of the trilogy as a dramatic form are admirably stated by G. Günther, *Grundzüge der Tragischen Kunst,* Berlin, 1885. The srnall number of victories attributed to Sophocles, in proportion to the number of his plays, is only intelligible on the supposition that these were presented in groups.

@@@2 Günther, op. cit.