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Sophocles (496–406 BCE)

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Sophocles (496–406 BCE)

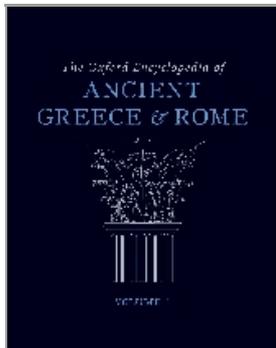
Abstract

Sophocles' plays stand out for their portraits of isolation. They showcase characters cut off from others by their difficult personalities and by the circumstances of disease, disgrace, criminality, defiance of authority, exile, bereavement, and early death. Yet from what we can tell, these conditions were quite unlike Sophocles' own experience. Though the ancient biographies of poets are late and often unreliable, our evidence supports the summary given by Sophocles' biographer of an enviable life: "he was illustrious both in life and in poetry, he was well educated and raised in comfortable circumstances, and he was chosen for political offices and embassies."

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Sophocles

(496–406 BCE), Athenian tragedian.

Sophocles' plays stand out for their portraits of isolation. They showcase characters cut off from others by their difficult personalities and by the circumstances of disease, disgrace, criminality, defiance of authority, exile, bereavement, and early death. Yet from what we can tell, these conditions were quite unlike Sophocles' own experience. Though the ancient biographies of poets are late and often unreliable, our evidence supports the summary given by Sophocles' biographer of an enviable life: "he was illustrious both in life and in poetry, he was well educated and raised in comfortable circumstances, and he was chosen for political offices and embassies."

Life and Career.

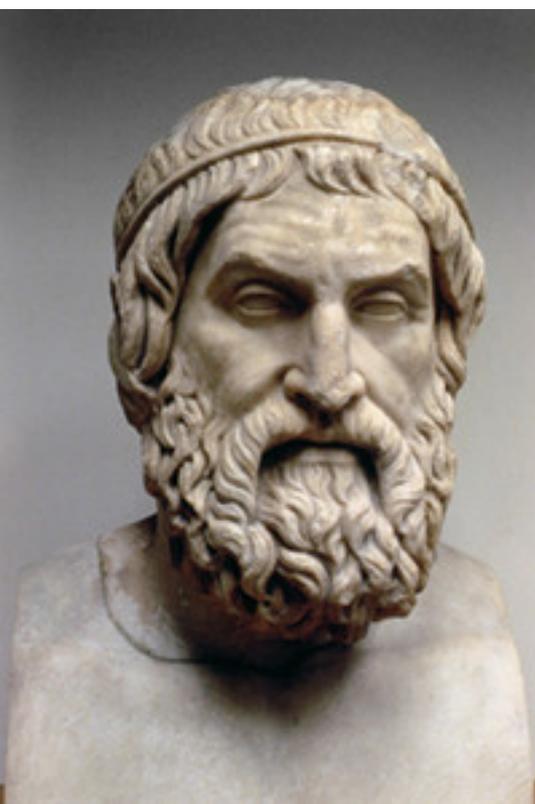
Sophocles' long life coincided with the emergence of Athens as the political and cultural leader of the Greek world. He was born in Colonus, a suburb of Athens, probably in 496, into a prominent family; his father, Sophillus, may have been an arms manufacturer. He excelled in the gymnastic and musical studies that constituted elite education in Classical Athens and led the group of boys who performed a paean in honor of the Athenian victory at Salamis in 480. Over his lifetime he held several public positions of particular trust: in 443–442, *hellēnotamias*, or financial administrator of the Delian League; in 441–440, general along with Pericles, helping to suppress a revolt against the league by Samos; and after Athens' defeat in the Sicilian expedition in 413, one of a group of ten men selected as *symbouloi* (advisers) to deal with the crisis. The fullest surviving anecdote portrays him as a genial guest at a dinner party: he flirts with the wine server, engages in learned banter on literary topics, and makes self-deprecating remarks about his military skill.

Sophocles was also the most successful tragedian of the Greek world. He was selected repeatedly to

compete in the annual tragic competitions at the Great Dionysia, beginning in 468 when he defeated Aeschylus, and his productions there won first prize eighteen times, with seventy-two plays, presented in groups of four. His plays also won first prize in other festivals, and they never came in worse than second place. Both his son Iophon and one of his grandsons, also named Sophocles, were tragedians. It was the latter who produced Sophocles' last play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, five years after his death in 406. In 405, Aristophanes composed the *Frogs*, a comedy about tragedy in which Sophocles figures as standing above a vigorous competition between Aeschylus and Euripides and is characterized as *eukolos* or good-tempered.

Works.

Of Sophocles' more than 120 plays, seven tragedies survive, all from the second half of his career. Like most Greek tragedies, they draw their subject matter from mythology and foreground situations of extreme violence and suffering, their characters facing bitter conflicts, unintended crimes, and unforeseen reversals of fortune. Two plays dramatize events from the later phases of the Trojan War: *Ajax*, which depicts the madness, suicide, and contested burial of Ajax after the arms of Achilles are awarded to Odysseus instead of to him, and *Philoctetes*, which concerns the efforts of Odysseus and Achilles' son Neoptolemus to induce Philoctetes, abandoned with an infected foot on the island of Lemnos, to rejoin the army and bring with him the bow that is destined to take Troy. *Electra* deals with the subject, treated in surviving plays by all three major tragedians, of Electra and Orestes' killing of their mother Clytemnestra to avenge her murder of their father, Agamemnon. *The Women of Trachis* concerns the death of Heracles at the hands of his jealous, misguided wife, Deianeira: when he sends home a conquered concubine, she responds with a love charm that is really a corrosive poison.



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Sophocles. Marble portrait bust, fifth century BCE.

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Sophocles' three most famous plays concern the story of Oedipus: *Oedipus the King*, which presents Oedipus' shattering discovery that he has, despite all his efforts, fulfilled the destiny foretold for him and polluted the city of Thebes by killing his father and marrying his mother; *Oedipus at Colonus*, which presents Oedipus' arrival at Athens after years of exile, his acceptance there, and his exceptional death, with permanent benefits to Athens; and *Antigone*, in which Oedipus' daughter Antigone defies her uncle Creon's prohibition against burying her brother Polynices, who has died leading an attack on Thebes. Despite their related events, the Theban plays did not constitute a connected trilogy, a form used by Aeschylus but not, so far as we know, by Sophocles. Most of Sophocles' surviving plays cannot be dated. *Ajax* and *Antigone* are believed to belong to the 440s, and *Philoctetes* (409) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (produced posthumously) are known to be late; the other three are assumed to fit somewhere in between.

What we know of the lost plays suggests that this sample is largely representative. Of the three major tragedians, Sophocles made the most use of the Trojan legend. Ancient critics considered him to be the most Homeric, although that may be a judgment of his stature rather than a comment on his subject matter; his Trojan plays do not draw directly on the *Iliad*, and only in one or two cases do they draw on the *Odyssey*. Some of his lost plays included more exotic settings and

more fantastic effects than are found in the surviving ones—for example, the appearance of Achilles' ghost in the *Polyxena* and the transformation of all the main characters into birds in the *Tereus*. Of the satyr plays that he, like every tragedian, also composed we have an extensive fragment of one, *The Trackers*, a burlesque version of the myth told in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, along with titles and short quotations from others.

Sophocles' nondramatic works, all lost, included some epigrams and a famous paeon to the god Asclepius; this paeon may have expressed the close connection to Asclepius described in several anecdotes about the god visiting Sophocles, or it may itself have given rise to those anecdotes. He is also said to have written a treatise *On the Chorus*, possibly a general treatment of drama, because plays were viewed in Classical Athens as forms of choral performance.

The Dramatization of Pathos.

Our sources claim that Sophocles made several innovations to tragic form, which was still evolving from its roots in nondramatic poetry. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle underscores Sophocles' preeminence among tragedians by making him the figure who brought tragedy to its definitive state, and he credits Sophocles with the invention of scene painting and with an increase in the number of actors from two to three. Both were significant steps toward a more dramatic presentation, with more enactment and less dependence on narrative by a chorus or by a chorus combined with one or two actors. Without ranking the tragedians or accepting the ancient sources unquestioningly, we can certainly recognize Sophocles' mastery of the dramatic potential of the genre.

Although violent events mostly stayed offstage in Athenian tragedy, Sophocles' extant plays include some remarkable direct presentations of trauma, among them the agonizing onslaughts of pain experienced by Philoctetes and the one onstage death in surviving tragedy, the suicide of Ajax. Sophocles also devised memorable ways of manifesting the effects of an offstage event, such as Oedipus' appearance to the shocked chorus after blinding himself and Creon's return from his futile attempt to undo his mistakes, carrying the body of his dead son. Sophocles also developed the theatrical possibilities of onstage communication of offstage events. He composed evocative messenger's speeches, such as the one recounting the death of Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and presented tragic pathos as a cognitive event, capturing the way disasters are truly realized at the moment they are apprehended.

Sophocles' characters experience catastrophe through disorienting confrontations with unexpected information. Most striking is Oedipus, for whom the news of his true identity horribly alters the import of his past actions and his present condition. But Sophocles' plays regularly offer the spectacle of characters forced to face devastating truths: for Ajax, that Athena has consigned him to unbearable shame by at once revealing and thwarting his vengeful plot against the Greek leaders; for Philoctetes, that Neoptolemus has tricked him for the sake of his bow; for Deianeira, that her attempt to win back Heracles' love has made her the deadly agent of his enemy, the Centaur Nessus; for Creon, that his treatment of Polynices and Antigone is not sound policy but an offense to the gods.

Sophocles also excels at showing the emotional investments and blind spots that keep people from seeing the truth until too late: Oedipus' self-confidence and determination to act nobly, Ajax's wounded pride and drive for vengeance, Deianeira's longing to regain Heracles' love, and Creon's commitment to his role as leader. Sophoclean characters are vulnerable both to self-deception and to others' deceptive schemes, which figure in several plays, including *Philoctetes*, where Neoptolemus gains Philoctetes' trust by pretending that he will take him home, and *Electra*, where Orestes infiltrates the house of Atreus with a fake story of his

own death. The limits of human understanding are dramatized in the literal blindness of the most far-seeing characters, the prophet Tiresias and, after his self-punishment, Oedipus, one of many sources of irony in Sophocles' plays.

Revelation through Dialogue.

Sophocles is a master of dramatic dialogue, especially the rapid exchanges of single lines known as *stichomythia*. He reveals his speakers' characters and emotional states through a distinctive idiom marked by concision, formality, and use of abstractions. His technique can be illustrated through the following exchange from *Electra*. Electra is quarreling with her sister, Chrysothemis, because Chrysothemis rejects Electra's proposal that they should seize the initiative and kill their mother.

EL. I envy you your sense, your cowardice makes me hate you. CHR. I will bear it just as well when I hear you say I was right. EL. You won't ever suffer that from me. CHR. There is a lot of time ahead before that's decided. EL. Go away. There's no usefulness in you. CHR. There is. But in you no mindfulness of it. EL. Go and tell all this to your mother. CHR. I don't hate you with a hatred like that. EL. But you should know how much contempt you show. CHR. Contempt, no. Concern for you. EL. I should follow your idea of what is just? CHR. When you start thinking clearly, you'll lead us both. EL. It's a terrible thing when someone speaks cleverly but has it wrong. CHR. You've described exactly the trouble you are in. EL. What? You don't think I speak with justice? CHR. But it can happen that even justice brings harm. EL. These are not rules I want to live by. CHR. But if you do what you intend, you will one day commend me. (lines 1027-1044)

These terse lines, filled with abstract nouns, aphorisms, and wordplay, evoke the sisters' different temperaments and strained relationship. Single words and brief phrases suffice to convey a complex situation, and much is implied between the lines. For example, Electra's exasperated reference to "your mother" epitomizes their different positions: Chrysothemis hates what Clytemnestra has done but still has dealings with her, while Electra repudiates her absolutely; for Electra this makes the sisters enemies, but not for Chrysothemis. Chrysothemis echoes Electra's words to make her point that their difference is superficial, created only by Electra's wrong-headedness. The "usefulness" (*ōphelēsis*) that Electra denies in Chrysothemis is really there, but it is obscured by Electra's lack of "mindfulness" (*mathēsis*). What Electra experiences as "contempt" (*atimias*), Chrysothemis renames "concern" (*promēthias*).

This dialogue underscores the contrasting personalities of the sisters. Electra is, like many of Sophocles' most memorable characters, magnificent in her passion, conviction, and willingness to act whatever the consequences, but also blinkered, dogmatic, and dismissive. Both her initiative and her closed-mindedness are illustrated by her leading role in this dialogue. She is the one who brings up the key issues (their mother, justice, the loyalty expected of a sister), but each new topic is also a way of changing the subject when Chrysothemis answers with unwavering allegiance to her own point of view. Though Electra makes the more powerful impression, her sister is not simply a pallid foil for her. Electra's own wording puts Chrysothemis' "cowardice" next to "sense," and Chrysothemis' conviction that over time Electra will see her situation differently matches what Sophoclean plots repeatedly show. So does her insight that Electra's change of heart will surely bring grief—that it will be something to bear, not something to rejoice in.

In general, Sophocles' fascination with outsize heroic personalities is complemented by sympathetic portrayals of milder, more circumspect figures, like Chrysothemis and Antigone's similar sister, Ismene. Several plays portray young men trying to act reasonably and honorably while caught between conflicting loyalties: Neoptolemus in *Philoctetes*, caught between Odysseus, with his plan for taking Troy, and Philoctetes, who must be deceived if the plan is to work; Haemon in *Antigone*, caught between his father, Creon, and Antigone, his own fiancée and Creon's defiant challenger; Hyllus in *The Women of Trachis*,

caught between his mother, Deianeira, and his father, Heracles, whom Deianeira has unwittingly murdered.

Character and Thought.

Debating their peculiar circumstances, Electra and Chrysothemis reach for broader principles to defend their positions. They contest the meaning of “the just” (*to dikaion*) and “justice” (*dikē*) and, like many Sophoclean characters, underscore their points with maxims: “it's terrible to speak well and be wrong,” “even justice brings harm.” But these nuggets of wisdom solve nothing. The speakers disagree about which of them the first applies to, and Electra dismisses the second as a rule not worth living by. Sophocles often dramatizes the ways in which people arrive at ideas to explain their actions and circumstances. He shows the appeal of ideas without endorsing them, and it has never been easy to pin him down to a specific set of beliefs or lessons. His characters take their stances in situations that cannot be universalized and that, as Chrysothemis predicts to Electra, look different over time.

This point is illustrated by Antigone, for many modern readers an inspiring model of adherence to principle, but portrayed with more complexity by Sophocles. The play traces Antigone's evolution from instinctive conviction to the articulation of broader claims. When she first appears, she is simply certain that she must act to bury her brother despite Creon's decree, and she presents this to Ismene as the noble course. In response to Ismene's protests, she adds that her action is favored by the gods and properly expresses a sister's love, but only later does she formulate these considerations as principles. When she has to answer Creon's complaint that she has broken the law, she aligns her action with “unwritten and inalterable laws of the gods” (454–455). When she is faced with death, she explains the logic by which a brother merits this sacrifice: a brother is irreplaceable as a husband or a son would not be. These rationalizations are not inapposite or insincere, but they are hard to reconcile with each other (would the unwritten divine laws not compel Antigone to bury a dead son if there were no one else to do it?) and are generated after the fact.

Social and Political Roles.

Although Antigone speaks in terms of universal rules, her particular commitments are linked to her gender. She fulfills Classical ideas of women being especially identified with the dead and care for the dead, with religious observance, and with ties of blood. In turn, Creon's responses show that his deafness to her claims is linked to his masculinity. He is not prepared for resistance from a woman, especially not from a woman from his own household: to accept her viewpoint would be a demeaning departure from the natural order. When his son Haemon suggests that he take Antigone seriously, Creon can only conclude that Haemon has been bewitched by female seductiveness.

Sophocles' dialogue clarifies the connections between his characters' responses to demanding circumstances and their roles within the family and the city. Of the three major tragedians, Sophocles responds least directly to the vicissitudes of fifth-century Athenian politics. Nonetheless he uses the social settings of heroic myth, such as the army camp and the royal family, to address indirectly the institutions of his own day. If the distant setting allows him to avoid pointed political commentary, there is still a contemporary ring to his portrayal of human institutions as unable to ward off disasters and often implicated in them.

In *The Women of Trachis*, for example, the mutual destruction of husband and wife occurs through the sensational events of tragedy—Heracles' envelopment in a burning robe and Deianeira's suicide with Heracles' sword—but the dynamics of the relationship resonate with fifth-century Athenian marriages. The

connection is strengthened by Sophocles' choice to characterize the murderous wife as modest, well-intentioned, and hesitant to act, more like a contemporaneous ideal than like Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, whose action hers echoes. Deianeira stays at home, fulfills her role by bearing children, and is entirely dependent on her husband, whereas Heracles is often away, engages with a wider world of conflict and violence, and enjoys a sexual freedom impossible for a respectable woman. Heracles' act of sending home a captured concubine and Deianeira's resort to magic to keep her husband's love grow out of these underlying conditions, which must have seemed familiar to a fifth-century audience.

As political communities, the self-contained army and the monarchical city do not duplicate the democratic Athens; rather they present in sharpened form the issues concerning leadership that were equally pressing there. Attempts to identify Sophoclean characters with particular Athenian leaders—Oedipus with Pericles or Alcibiades, Ajax with Themistocles—have never been fully convincing. But that Athenian history provides some possible candidates shows that democracy did not eliminate the issue of the prominent, exceptional individual.

Several of Sophocles' plays foreground the ambiguity of leadership, showing how the qualities that distinguish a community's benefactor can also make him its destroyer. In *Ajax*, where a Trojan War setting is used to evoke the warrior heroism of Homer, the physical strength, capacity for rage, and drive to self-assertion that have made Ajax so effective against the Trojans also make it difficult for him to accept the authority of others or to recognize their claims, and so to function within the community he protects. Only after he is dead can he be integrated into the community; his more flexible rival Odysseus brings about a consensus that Ajax should receive a proper burial for his role as a mainstay of the army. In a different setting, Oedipus in *Oedipus the King* has become king by rescuing Thebes from an oppressive monster, the Sphinx, and is called on again to save the city from a plague. He responds with exemplary initiative, public spirit, and eagerness for answers, only to be tripped up by a series of baffling discoveries about himself: he is the polluting murderer whom he zealously pursues, and the life story of conspicuous success and noble behavior that underlies his confidence is simultaneously a criminal record of parricide and incest. As Oedipus is drawn into a consuming and confounding quest for his own identity, his role as savior slips away.

Like their fifth-century audiences, Sophocles' characters define themselves and their actions within the structures and values of the city. But their self-definitions are never wholly stable or adequate to the unexpected force of tragic events. In his quest for Laius' murderer, Oedipus aligns himself with the prosecution of justice: his words and actions echo those of a fifth-century judicial inquiry. In prohibiting the burial of Polynices, Creon relies on a political conception of friend and enemy. But public roles are undermined by personal factors in a way brought out by tragedy's focus on the mythological ruling house. Not only is Oedipus a prosecutor; he also has come to his position of prominence by killing the victim he champions, who is also his father. Not only is Polynices the leader of an army that attacks Thebes from outside; he also is a member of the ruling family on a mission to recover his birthright. Both are caught up in the conflicts and attachments of the family, the underlying structure that the city seeks to supersede but never escapes.

The Chorus.

Sophocles' use of the chorus contributes to the fifth-century civic resonance of his mythic plots. Of the major tragedians, Sophocles most often presents a chorus of male citizens. *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* all have choruses of city-dwelling citizens, while the choruses of *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* represent groups of men closely allied with a military leader. (In *Ajax* the Salaminian sailors are reminiscent of an important segment of the Athenian military.) Even in *Electra*, which, along with *The Women of Trachis*,

has a female chorus and a domestic plot, the chorus is defined as *politides* (female citizens), whose speech suggests that events within the house of Atreus have ramifications for a larger community. The fluctuating fortunes of Sophoclean heroes are measured in their changing relations with their choruses and, by extension, the larger groups those choruses represent: transient moments of flourishing are marked by an ideal equilibrium between leaders and followers.

In *Oedipus the King* that equilibrium exists only in the past: responding to the plague, the chorus turns to Oedipus with worshipful dependence, but when his dark history is revealed, the chorus wishes that it had never seen him and cannot stand to look at him. In *Ajax* a satisfactory role for the chorus arrives only with its leader's death. When Ajax falls into disgrace, the chorus feels itself to be destroyed with him, but after his death it rallies and plays a quiet role in the debate over his burial. In *Antigone* the limits to Creon's authority are marked when the chorus persuades him to respond to Tiresias' report of the pollution brought about by his policy. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Theseus' decision to accept Oedipus into Athens is carried out with authority ceded to him by the chorus. At key points in several plays the chorus functions as the silent but influential auditor of a debate, dramatizing the essential role of ordinary citizens in a democracy.

Sophocles uses the chorus in other ways as well, sometimes to sharpen the blow of tragic events. On several occasions a chorus is caught up in false hopes for a good outcome and breaks out in jubilant singing and dancing: in *Ajax* when the chorus believes that Ajax has decided not to kill himself, in *The Women of Trachis* when the chorus hears the news of Heracles' return and foresees a happy reunion of husband and wife, and in *Oedipus the King* when the chorus imagines that Oedipus' mysterious origins make him the child of a god.

Other choral songs expand the audience's understanding, preparing the way for the characters' confrontations or summoning up a wider store of human experience and the ever-present gods. The chorus of *Antigone* enters with a song of thanksgiving for the bright day of Thebes' victory against its attackers, and so establishes the atmosphere of recent danger in which the plot unfolds. The chorus of *Oedipus at Colonus* sings of Colonus (Sophocles' own birthplace), the fitting site of Oedipus' death: "white Colonus, where the clear-voiced nightingale often sings in green thickets, making a home in the wine-dark ivy and the berry-filled branches, inviolable haunt of a god, sheltered from the sun and the wind of every storm" (670-678). As *Antigone* unfolds, the chorus finds a variety of frameworks for what it witnesses: the news that Polynices has been buried inspires a famous meditation on human daring and resourcefulness, "wonders are many, but none so wonderful as man" (332-333); Haemon's attempt to reconcile his father to Antigone provokes an ode on the unsettling power of Eros, god of love; as Antigone is about to die, the chorus recalls other victims of harsh fates.

Mortals and Gods.

Singing of mankind's mastery of seafaring, agriculture, hunting, horsemanship, language, and statecraft, the chorus of *Antigone* reflects the currents of fifth-century thought, which involved scientific inquiry into ethnography, history, and medicine, as well as worldviews centered on humans rather than gods. These ideas are echoed throughout Sophocles' plays. Philoctetes' primitive life on Lemnos is indebted to contemporaneous speculation about the evolution of society and technology. Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus* praises his loyal daughters with a parallel from Herodotus' account of the topsy-turvy customs of Egypt, where men stay home while women go out to work. Oedipus in the opening scenes of *Oedipus the King* embodies fifth-century humanism in his confidence, self-sufficiency, and reliance on his skills of counting, measuring, and judging. So does his wife and mother, Jocasta, when she finds in her own experience a basis for skepticism about oracles. Here again we see the link between the characters' situations and their ideas:

Oedipus is understandably buoyed up by his own achievements and powers, Jocasta is understandably eager to discount oracles predicting that Laius would be killed by his own son.

In these ways, then, Sophocles conveys the excitement, freedom, and reassurance of a humanistic viewpoint. But in his universe nothing stays the same, and people neither control nor fully understand their circumstances. Humans are overmatched by the gods, whose power and presence are made known in the unexpected twists and turns of individual destinies. Sophocles reaffirms the supremacy of the gods as they unsettle the lives of his characters, working in ways that are usually recognized only in retrospect. The gods' signals come in cryptic forms, like oracles, prophecies, and the words of seers, and humans are too caught up in their own desires and self-understandings to read them well. The gulf between mortals and immortals is such that it is nearly impossible to be human and accept the gods' messages: how could Oedipus learn that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother and not try to do otherwise?

Even when recognized, the gods' interventions are hard to understand in human terms. Assertive figures like Ajax, Heracles, Creon, and Oedipus seem to court their own downfalls by their god-defying excesses, but other, more modest characters like Deianeira or Haemon suffer just as much. Antigone champions the gods' unwritten laws, and the gods seem to endorse her position by rejecting the city's sacrifices, but she still dies. In *Electra*, Orestes tries to become an instrument of divine justice by soliciting the oracle's support, but he asks a leading question about how, not whether, he should avenge his father's murder, and his success is shadowed by uncertainty about whether he acted well. At the end of *The Women of Trachis*, Hyllus is shocked that the gods "who are called our fathers" can bear to see the sufferings they cause (1268–1269). In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus' privileged status does not correlate with familiar concepts of exoneration or redemption: his newfound power is linked to his ongoing criminality and pollution and his untamed rage.



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Orestes and Electra Meet. Relief depicting the meeting of Orestes and Electra at the tomb of Agamemnon, fifth century BCE. MUSÉE DU LOUVRE, PARIS/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

To some extent the paradoxical conditions of Oedipus and other Sophoclean heroes can be approached through ancient religious institutions. Oedipus at the end of *Oedipus the King* is like the *pharmakos*, or scapegoat, a figure in Athenian religious life who was designated as polluted and then expelled from the city. Ajax and Oedipus are associated with the contemporary institution of cult heroism, through which transgressive, larger-than-life figures assumed at death a superhuman power located in their place of burial. *The Women of Trachis* implies the apotheosis that was part of the Heracles myth. But Sophocles, although often portrayed as exceptionally pious by both ancient and modern commentators, stops short of realizing these religious scenarios. *Oedipus the King* ends with uncertainty about whether Oedipus actually will be exiled, even though he wishes it. Oedipus' mysterious death does not fully replicate the conditions of cult

heroism, Ajax's heroization is only hinted at, and Heracles remains a mortal in pain at the end of *The Women of Trachis*. The relations of gods and mortals are so unmanageable and so unconsoling that some critics have seen Sophocles as the opposite of pious, as celebrating above all the courage and ambition of the human characters who defy the gods and suffer all the more for it. The debate over Sophocles' piety may be taken as a sign of his achievement in communicating a divine order that is all-determining and worthy of reverence, yet never really comprehensible.

Sophocles' characters come closest to understanding the gods when they acknowledge the force of time and with it the certainty of change. The chorus of *Oedipus the King* learns this from seeing Oedipus: "What man gains a greater measure of happiness than that it appears, and having appeared, slips away? With you as my model, you and your fate, wretched Oedipus, I count no one blessed" (1189–1196). The most generous gestures in Sophocles' plays stem from an appreciation of time's all-obliterating force, as when Odysseus in *Ajax* refuses to gloat over his disgraced rival because he sees in him his own condition and that of all mortals as "dim shapes ... and an insubstantial shadow" (126). In *Oedipus at Colonus*, as Oedipus' fortunes shift again, Ismene gives as clear an account of the gods' purposes as anyone can: "now the gods raise you up; before they destroyed you" (394). The gods' defining quality is their mastery of time, which they both escape and regulate: as Oedipus explains, "for the gods alone there is no age and no death; all-powerful time throws everything else into confusion" (607–609).

From a divine perspective the regularity of change is as stable as the gods' own serene existence, but to mortals trying to make the most of their brief day on earth, it is an unwelcome stumbling block that they would rather disregard. The mingled blindness and insight of Sophocles' characters converge on this point in the speech in which Ajax announces in veiled terms his decision to kill himself. Recognizing his death as a reversal of fortune, he characterizes it as yielding to the superior power of his enemies. But he dignifies his bow to necessity by comparing it to forms of yielding imposed by nature: winter to summer, night to day, storm to calm, and sleep to waking. Himself destined never to wake again, Ajax nonetheless draws strength from invoking the larger pattern within which people's lives unfold, but of which they experience just one uncertain fragment.

Afterlife.

Already considered classic in his own day, Sophocles has been admired and influential in every period in which tragedy has been important. His plays were reperformed in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, and *Oedipus the King* stands as a favored example in Aristotle's discussion of tragedy in the *Poetics*, especially for its presentation of crimes performed unwittingly and recognized only in retrospect. *Oedipus the King* formed the basis for one of Seneca's tragedies and in the Renaissance was the first play put on in Andrea Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza in 1585. A distinguished twentieth-century *Oedipus* is the opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex* with music by Igor Stravinsky and lyrics by Jean Cocteau (1927).

Antigone has inspired numerous plays with a political charge, such as Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* (1944), first performed during the Nazi occupation of Paris, and Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona's *The Island* (1973), in which inmates in South Africa's Robben Island prison enact their own stripped-down *Antigone*. Memorable recent versions of other plays include Lee Breuer and Bob Telson's *The Gospel at Colonus* (1985), which draws on the traditions of African American gospel singing, and *The Cure at Troy* (1990), an Irish-inflected reworking of *Philoctetes* by Seamus Heaney.

Sophocles has also been an important presence in modern thought. *Antigone* was a central text for the nineteenth-century German idealist G. W. F. Hegel, especially for its dramatization of the competing claims of family and state, and for many subsequent philosophers. *Oedipus the King* played a key role in Sigmund Freud's development of psychoanalysis, demonstrating both the particular complex of desires and the powerful will to deny them that Freud found in the human psyche.

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WAS THIS USEFUL? Yes No