

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
SOPHOCLES

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Sophocles (496-406 B.C.E.)

Works

Ajax (444 B.C.E.)
Antigone (442 B.C.E.)
Women of Trachis (440 B.C.E.)
Oedipus Rex (429 B.C.E.)
Electra (410 B.C.E.)
Philoktetes (409 B.C.E.)
Oedipus at Colonus (401 B.C.E.)

Biography

Sophocles was born into a prosperous family, his father an arms manufacturer, and was highly educated as a child of the deme of Colonus—the same Colonus in which he placed his final Oedipus play, in 401. Born a few years before the Battle of Marathon (490 B.C.E.), Sophocles was of an age to grow straight into the classical moment of the Athenian fifth century—a moment of pride, military conquest, artistic genius, and excellence in the new sciences of philosophy and history.

Sophocles' first dramatic victory was in 468 B.C.E., when he won first prize from the dramatic master of the time, Aeschylus. (Odd circumstances surrounded this contest, with a deviation from the usual practice of choosing the judges by lot; Aeschylus, report goes, left Greece for Sicily shortly after this defeat, perhaps as a protest against supposed dirty practices.) In 480 B.C.E. Sophocles was chosen to lead the paean—a choral chant to a god—to celebrate the victory of the Greeks over the Persians in the Battle of Salamis; a public honor worthy of the grandeur of spirit Sophocles (as Aeschylus, earlier) was ready to bestow upon his state. The little we know of Sophocles' public life continues in the same vein: in 443 B.C.E., twenty years later, he was appointed to be one of the 'treasurers of Athena,' a kind of assistant treasurer to the government of the ascendant Pericles. In 441 (B.C.E.) he was chosen as one of the ten generals of the state, and in this role he fought in the Athenian campaign against Samos—In an effort to mediate between that island and the city of Miletus. Indeed throughout his life Sophocles combined amazing literary depth with public service presence—such as that of (413 B.C.E.) commissioner to help deal with the dreadful destructions of the Athenian fleet during the Peloponnesian War.

The last years of his powerful and tireless creative life show us a Sophocles mythologized by his fame: scrutinized even in his death, for which credit was given to a variety of causes, from the strain of reciting a too long passage from his *Antigone*, to the joy of winning his final victory in the City Dionysia.

Achievements

Third Actor Sophocles is credited (by Aristotle, a century later) with having introduced the third actor, on stage in what was initially a far less populated *theatron*. While the archaic form of tragedy contented itself with a single actor, the first Thespian, Aeschylus introduced a second actor on stage—besides the chorus—and Sophocles introduced a third on stage actor, at the same time diminishing the role of the chorus, which in the earliest tragedies, of say the seventh century B.C.E., was the center of the dramatic action. Brilliant drama is created, say in *Oedipus Rex*, by the interactions of chorus with Teiresias and Oedipus on stage, locked in the bitter *stichomythia* dialogues at which Sophocles is a master.

The Depth of Characterization In addition to—and clearly related to—the introduction of a third actor, who opens the path to deep and complex situations, comes of course the peculiar depth of Sophocles' characterization, in contrast with which the major characters in Aeschylus' work (think Orestes, Creon, or Electra) seem stiffly extracted from a ritual culture. When one reviews the seven extant plays of Sophocles—he composed more than a hundred—one sees that (with perhaps the exception of *The Women of Trachis*)—he has dug into deep and challenging character portrayals, in which the pressure of circumstantial crisis has necessitated forceful character in action. None of these extant plays, with the possible exception of the last, *Oedipus at Colonus*, can claim even an exalting conclusion—the tragedy falling, for the most part, over very dark places in the protagonist's life. But the end-of-play darkness, that brings loneliness, pain, and death upon its protagonists, is one enriched by the internal struggles—Antigone over her moral dilemma; Philoctetes over whether to trust or disbelieve the strangers; Oedipus over whether to accept or reject the glowing truth—which fate generates inside them. Aeschylus, to reinforce that instructive point—gives us dilemma ridden Orestes and Electra, but presses them rapidly into action; murder or dilemma ridden Oedipus, whom he then presses into the vortex of knowledge, through which action is the only escape.

Sophocles' characters

By and large, Sophocles builds characters whose motivation is honor. In some cases this honor is of the traditional male/mythical incumbency: as in the cases of **Philoctetes**, **Oedipus**, **Ajax**, all of whom are facing resistance to their dignity. **Antigone** and **Electra** both face profound challenges to the honor of their family—the honor of a beloved brother, in Antigone's case, the honor of a father, in Electra's case. **Creon**, the bureaucrat-ruler of Thebes, has put his honor behind the edict banning any burial of enemy forces, the edict Antigone refuses to respect. Has **Teiresias**, the seer and prophet, honor? Of course, he stakes his honor on the reputability of his predictions!

Philoctetes and **Ajax** have both been dissed by the establishment, and are sulking dangerously at a considerable distance from the fray. Ajax has not been awarded the armor of Achilles, which he believed was his due, and he is as a warrior hero so wounded that he becomes suicidal, eventually dying on his sword. Philoctetes, exiled largely by the pressure of Odysseus, on the way to the Trojan War, is holed up on the isolated island of Lemnos, staying close to his bow, which is his weapon for food-gathering, as well as, it turns out, the cherished victory-tool wanted by the Greek forces. Both Philoctetes and Ajax are driven by isolation and exile, into painful corners of existence.

Oedipus stakes his honor—indeed his life—on his ability to lift the plague which is decimating his city of Thebes. Little does he realize that he is the guilty source of the plague, and that he too—like Philoctetes and Ajax—must sacrifice himself for his lost honor.

Sophocles creates, into **Antigone** and **Electra**, furious and thwarted women, whose family honor has been trampled in the dust. They are driven to extreme acts—the burying of a defiled corpse; the murdering of a treacherous mother—in the name of honor.

Creon, the ruler of Thebes, is driven by the fallen honor of self-respect. He wishes to be obeyed, as he enacts his own state legislation. He is the little man in a terrible tizzy. Teiresias, no high-ritual figure from noble myth, but a spooky seer who speaks in riddles, stakes his honor on a correct theory of Oedipus' guilt. Teiresias is proven right, and honorable.