

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Themes in Sophocles

## Suffering.

PREFACE. Aeschylus remarks, in a chorus, of *The Agamemnon*, that 'suffering is wisdom,' 'pathei athos.' He insists on suffering as the iron necessity that clutches all people, and that cannot be sidestepped. All the tragedians follow him in stressing the endurance we must all bring to the carrying through of a life which deals with the suffering inside it. Starting with Prometheus, nailed to a rock in the Caucasus, his liver chewed out from him, the writers of tragedy, like the authors of Job and Jeremiah, commended a mankind disciplined and flexible enough to survive the hard twists of personal destiny. Let's look at three varied Sophoclean pictures of suffering and human response to it.

PHILOCTETES. On his way to support the Greek forces in the Trojan war, Philoctetes was poisoned by snake bite, and developed gangrene in his leg. The smell was intolerable to the fighting heroes traveling with him, and they found themselves obliged to dump him on the island of Lemnos, where the unlucky warrior spent ten years by himself—in a cave, with only the passing birds for company. Suffering enough this might seem to be, and the wails and moans of the gangrene sufferer were ample evidence. The fact is that this suffering might have seemed enough, but that Sophocles reserved even further refinement, sending a deputation of Greeks to the island, not to take pity on Philoctetes but to attempt to steal away the powerful bow the sufferer possessed, and which the Greeks now desperately needed for their war effort. This was a cynical visit, especially as the leader of it, Odysseus, had no feeling for Philoctetes as an individual. But by a *deus ex machina* intervention, the god Heracles intervenes, just as Philoctetes is being returned to Greece, and restores him to his battlefield honor, a fighting champion once again. It is as though suffering had created its own antidote.

OEDIPUS THE KING. The suffering of Oedipus ultimately draws him, as it does Philoctetes, back into the human community—that is, in this case, into the spiritual transcendence he will find in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the last play of Sophocles' Theban trilogy. (There Oedipus will stand alone in a magical grove, in communion with his new peace and wisdom. (Suffering, however, has been the necessary path Oedipus must take, before he can be redeemed, so to speak, for previous arrogance—the killing of his father Laius, the bull headed hybris with which he has charged into the labyrinth of clues, to the mystery of the plague in Thebes.). Whereas Philoctetes had to suffer gangrene, Oedipus had to suffer the stench of his own naivete, as one by one he pulled away the layers hiding from him the fact that he was himself the murderer he was seeking. His suffering grew greater with each discovery, such as the evidence the shepherd introduces, of having exposed this particular child on the mountains. Suffering may indeed have led to wisdom, in the cases of Oedipus and Philoctetes, but it has been a heavy burden, the former having sought out his own punishment, the latter having had to cope with destiny.

WOMEN OF TRACHIS. The god Heracles (as well as his ignored wife) becomes the great sufferer of this play. Deianira is married to the god, but is unhappy because of his frequent absence, and indifference to his son, Hyllus. At her point of greatest frustration Heracles returns home with a group of war prisoners in tow, one of whom is his lover, Iole. (He is bringing her in incognito.) Deianira is so appalled by the thought that Heracles has taken another woman, that she decides to make a love potion which will hold her husband. She has been assured that by dipping a robe in blood, then giving that robe to Heracles to wear, she will make him hers forever. So it turns out, but not in the way she wishes, for the blood in which the robe has been dyed is pervaded by the poisonous blood of a centaur. When Heracles puts on the robe it incinerates him. Heracles dies in excruciating suffering, while killing the messenger who brought him the robe. He is burned alive. Deianira, shamed beyond endurance by the death she has inflicted on her husband, kills herself.