

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Sophocles

Alienation

PREFACE. Just as the ancient Greeks were uncomfortable with loneliness or isolation, and rarely investigate those feelings in their arts, so they shy away from alienation, the sense of being out of sync with others in one's society, not understanding them or not being understood by them. In this cultural disposition, the Greeks resemble members of communal societies today—say Greeks or Nigerians—who seek to congregate with others as often as possible, to share memories and values, to rally together in times of stress. (Iowans will help one another rebuilding a new barn, or bringing in harvest, if calamity strikes; but in the long cold winters, in farm and village, they manage quite well alone, just mom and dad and the cows.)

AJAX. When Ajax was not given the armor of Achilles—but was looked over in favor of Odysseus—he was deprived of inclusion in the highest level of ancient Hellenic military society; he became alienated in one blow, and found that his own life was threatened. Arguably the loss of the critical inclusion prize, and the gift of that prize to a particular rival of his—which Odysseus was—was enough to deprive his own life of value to him. His first reaction to the news was even more extreme than suicide—it was to murder Agamemnon and Menelaus—but fortunately Athena saved him from that folly by an hallucination, if only to leave him alone with his own humiliation, when he discovered that he had killed cattle instead of the leaders of his peer group.

PHILOCTETES. Philoctetes, like Robinson Crusoe, found himself suddenly in isolation on a desert island, the ultimate, for a Greek hero, in alienation from his defining group. Unlike Ajax, whose alienation was imposed, as it were, by a natural rival, Odysseus, Philoctetes was the victim of group intolerance, as his stench drove his comrades to abandon him. Thus the alienation of Philoctetes was free of the bitter bite of personal rivalry, and he was better able, than Ajax, to adjust to alienation. His manner of adjustment was to live on the seafowl he could shoot down with his bow, to value the natural setting that sheltered him, and—Sophocles gives us little detail here—to survive in nature, no small challenge for the citizen of a deeply communal culture.

ANTIGONE. When Creon forbids all citizens from respecting the corpses of the dead, around the walls of Thebes, Antigone is cut off from the social responses deeply embedded in her. Her community, as a living presence inside her, insists that she should bury her brother's body, if only to cover it with honoring dust, but the secular law, imposed by Creon, the ruler of Thebes, insists that any burying action by Antigone will isolate her from the secular laws of her community. Sanction from her own culture is staring her in the face, but she walks right into that threat, for to her the law of her spirit, which she has imbibed from her community, takes precedent over any secular law. Secular law alienates her from herself.

OEDIPUS THE KING. Oedipus comes on stage alienated from himself, the worst form of isolation. He does not know who he is—an incestuous killer—but only that his city is falling apart from plague, and that it is his responsibility to find some cure. Until he finds out who he is—which would imply 'what he is'—he is helpless to make his city whole. In the end, his alienation is overcome in the extreme revelations triggered by Teiresias and the shepherd—who had found him exposed on the mountains, as an infant. For Oedipus overcoming his alienation from himself means learning the full truth about himself. As we know from the case of Ajax, the price of becoming one with yourself can on occasion be death (or self-blinding.)