

Themes in Sophocles

Politics

Preface. Politics, in Aristotle's definition, is the business of the polis, the Greek city state. Politics thus deals with public matters, movements of power and governance, people control and people instruction. Since man is a political animal, *zoon politikon*, and since the state is essential to the very existence of the individual within it, it is to be expected that any account, of the way the individual functions, will be an account of his/her relation to other members of the society. Anyone who lacks those bonds to others is, in Aristotle's words, 'either a bad man or above humanity.' Sophocles, as a deep student of human nature, penetrates into the individual until he reaches that point where the individual exists as part of the social whole. He thus works with us toward a deeper view of the political than we are accustomed to in contemporary parlance or thought.

Philoctetes. Philoctetes lives in the greatest isolation known to an ancient Greek. (Simply physically speaking, the Greek of the pre Christian era had little access to remote places or isolated settings.) He is tucked away on the island of Lemnos, where his fellow sailors abandoned him on their way to the Trojan War; the stench from his gangrenous leg was too much for them. His home is a cave overlooking the Aegean Sea, his companions are animals and birds, as is his food. He has with him a powerful bow, with which he can provide for himself. In spite of this isolation, however, Philoctetes is deeply a part of the human community, for as the play will reveal, he is urgently needed, he and his bow, as major players in the war. (Before long, in the play, Odysseus and Neoptolemus will arrive on Lemnos, as a deputation to Philoctetes; their plan being to trick him into giving up his bow.) Far from the war, years in, isolation, Philoctetes is still very much part of the human community.

Ajax. Ajax, unlike Philoctetes, is not physically isolated from the community, but he is spiritually cut off from that community by the decision of Agamemnon and Menelaus to award the armor of Achilles to Odysseus, rather than to Ajax himself. Cut off from the honors of the community that defines him, Ajax has no identity remaining to him, and is only temporarily rescued by Athena, who saves him from the calamity of killing his leaders. The hallucinatory sequence to this tale of loss is the slaughter of the captured cattle, a humiliating act in which Ajax finds that he has lost his grounding in society—a state of affairs in which even identity-loss threatens—not to mention life itself, which because it is no longer valuable he removes from himself.

Antigone. The polis supports us, and makes us part of it, even when we least envisage its demand. In the case of Antigone's burial of her brother, against the edicts of Creon, the young woman appears to follow the dictates of her deepest beliefs. She willingly follows her conscience, by cutting off her actions into a private sphere of piety. In the course of this self-willed, and beautiful action, she inevitably pays the price of 'society,' which will see to her imprisonment, loss of marriage, and death. Society counts on the adherence of its members, and in their refusals finds pretexts for heavy social punishment.

Oedipus at Colonus. Oedipus has deeply violated the tolerance of society, by killing his father, and marrying his mother. One might say that he has virtually removed himself from the ground rules of society. Ironically, though, the development of his narrative, after the punitive self-blinding, is to bring him back into the network of society with its extensive mesh. Accompanied by his daughter, Antigone, he makes his way from Thebes out into the neighbor deme of Colonus. There, ironically enough, he finds himself caught up in the quarrel between Creon and Theseus, Thebes and Athens, over the possession of his body—his corpse to be.