

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Sophocles

Obsession

PREFACE. Eighteenth century Hellenism—think Goethe, Schiller, Winckelman—was enticed by the notion of the quiet, noble harmony of the ancient Greek experience. This perspective—which took its impulse from the great works of Greek sculpture and architecture, which were attracting widespread awe in Europe; works pervaded, as Winckelmann saw it, with ‘eine edle Einfalt und eine stille Groesse,’ ‘a noble unity and a quiet grandeur.’ At the same time, however, western scholars, and soon writers – Shelley, Byron, Hoelderlin, Pushkin—were celebrating the turmoil and passion of Hellenism, and taking their inspiration from the fighting on the ground, as the Greek War of Independence took shape in the 1820’s. It was this passionate view of Hellenism that opened classical studies, in the nineteenth century, to the discoveries of the intensity of ancient Greek tragedy. Translations of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides abounded from the mid nineteenth century, until today we are ready to penetrate to a depth, in Greek drama, that addresses our own tumultuous world.

AJAX. Sophocles’ *Ajax* is the first of the playwright’s seven remaining plays. The leaders of the Greek army at Troy have decided to award the armor of the dead Achilles to Odysseus, instead of Ajax. Enraged and maddened by this decision, Ajax decides to kill the Greek leaders, Agamemnon and Menelaus. At this point the goddess Athena intervenes, substituting for the Greek leaders a huge flock of sheep the Greeks have captured in the war. In his madness Ajax slaughters the sheep. Upon waking, he is so deeply humiliated by what he has done that he kills himself. His obsession with his right to the armor of Achilles is too overwhelming for him.

ELECTRA. Each of the three major dramatists dwells on the tale of the House of Atreus, and tracks its woes. Aeschylus sees divine destiny behind the inevitable murder, by Orestes and Electra, of their mother, who had herself murdered her husband Agamemnon, on his return from the War. For Euripides, in his *Orestes*, it is the latter who takes the initiative, upon returning to his home in Argos, to slaughter Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. In Sophocles, distinctively, it is Electra who plans and thinks through the execution of the double murder; it is her obsession which drives forward the events of the play. It is she, living as she does as a mere servant to her mother, who has not passed a day—in the lengthy absence of her brother, and in the presence of her insipid sister, Chrysothemis—without brooding constantly on the wrongs done by her mother.

OEDIPUS THE KING. Ajax and Electra both direct their obsessions to righting a specific wrong, but Oedipus is obsessed both with a specific crisis, the plague that is destroying Thebes, and the truth about his own personal life. Ultimately this obsession is not double but single, for the solution to the plague seems to lie in the understanding by the ruler of Thebes, Oedipus, that he, in his impetuosity, brought the plague onto Thebes by his killing of his father, marriage to his mother, and unwillingness, to the present moment, to bring himself under the lens of his own understanding. Stubborn and obsessed with a calamitous plague, Oedipus is precluded from dispelling it by his own driven nature.

ANTIGONE. Ajax, Electra, and Oedipus are all driven people, obsessed with finding a key to their own relief. Antigone is looking to relieve the risk of guilt, that would follow on leaving her brother unburied. She knows she has no choice other than to undertake a forbidden act. Knowing this she is obsessed by the desire to find a way to meet the demands of her conscience. She must find a way to act. She is quite aware that taking the road forward will lead to her loss of a marriage, to imprisonment, and probably to death. But she has no choice.