

Themes in Sophocles

Justice

Preface. There is the broad sense, in ancient Greek culture, that justice consists of balance. Extremes—of behavior, of appetite, of self-care—are to be avoided, and moderations—in walk, in speech, in self-enrichment—should be our targets. Aristotle insists in his *Nicomachean Ethics* on the importance of moderation, in walking at the ‘normal pace,’ eating moderately—the Okinawans try to leave twenty percent of their dinner uneaten on the plate—and keeping a low voice. When it comes to moral issues, which the tragedians dissected regularly in their tragedies, justice will tend to consist in moderation: no Nietzscheans, no Alexander Popes, no Martin Luther Kings.

Electra. Electra, in Sophocles, has been living for ages with the burden of others’ guilt on her—the guilt of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, the guilt of her father for the murder of his daughter Iphigenia, which murder was itself backwards entangled into the crimes of Tantalus, then Pelops...and ultimately back to Zeus. The wearisome burden of inherited guilt, on the representative individual—for the figures of Greek myth act out as mortals in universal situations—begs to be overthrown, releasing the bearer; that is the path by which we may take revenge, which is the path Electra follows, but by this path one cannot expunge the violence done in the past. Electra cannot free herself of her burden by revenge; she runs into the limit inherent to her culture’s system of justice. We find her, at the end of the play, victorious in local vengeance, but more involved than ever in the skein of guilt.

Oedipus. Oedipus seeks for justice, as he envisages his city shattered by plague, and trembling nervously over the brink of oncoming calamity. There must be some level of justice to balance the unsteady onrush of disasters. That justice, for the headlong driving Oedipus, will have to consist in an overall clarification, which balances the reigning narrative of the calamities of the House of Thebes. (He too, like Electra, needs to restore balance and harmony to an ancient family narrative which enshrines guilt and revenge at the center of the effort for balance.) Justice seems to come down to the compromise between the evil Oedipus has committed, and the redeeming truth he actively allows himself to accept. Oedipus’s guilt, when once discovered within him, goes some distance to make him whole, and establishes a saving balance.

Ajax. We have hinted at the central role revenge plays in certain cases, like that of Electra, in which getting rid of your progenitor might seem the clearest path to restoring justice. Now we have added the example of Oedipus, who had to learn to ‘see life steadily and see life whole’ before he could restore justice and balance to his life. Ajax very specifically wants justice as a counterbalance to what he sees as a serious injustice to himself, the refusal of the Greek commanders to give him the armor of Achilles. In his search for the justice that balance will bring, Ajax thinks first of ways to act out—first, to kill the Greek commanders, then later, after the humiliation of the cattle killing, to kill himself, which he does with the usual unfortunate results. Revenge and self-knowledge, the paths of Electra and Oedipus toward justice, are not available solutions for Ajax.

Philoctetes. Philoctetes is one of the rare figures in Greek literature who gives us glimpses of the search for justice by interiorization. He has been unjustly dumped on an island, with nothing to support him except his awesome bow-- with which he can kill his food-- his prospect out over the ocean, and whatever comfort wild nature can provide him. There is no available way for Philoctetes to obtain justice for his wrongs; all he can do is to accommodate himself to the situation in which he finds himself. Prior to the arrival of his fellow Greeks—whose overall plan is to steal his bow-- he has no recourse except a hard won peace, which for an ancient Greek in search of justice is an unusual path.