

SOPHOCLES

Introduction *Sin and Wisdom in an Hellenic Perspective.* Sophocles, contemporary to Euripedes, seems to later readers to have captured the essence of the spirit of classical drama: serenity, balance, tragic sense, discipline. The two Sophocles plays we are reading support such useful general perceptions. Oedipus, you might say, is the perfect murder mystery. The detective turns out to be the guilty person he is seeking. Given that thrilling dramatic invention, Sophocles plays ingeniously on the issue of Oedipus' awakening to his guilt. Each seemingly serendipitous turn in the plot reveals a new element of guilt. The audience will have suffered and groaned with each revelation, for though Oedipus has his flaws—chiefly a rash temper—he is also an Everyman, a representative of the fatal entrapments we all know in some degree from our own lives. Please imagine this life and death dramatic situation played out in stylized costumes, on an altar-like stage, and to lines of hewn verse which are the perfection of Greek. Don't forget the ever present element of the chorus! And kindly add to your reflections the reading of *Antigone*, another play in which the inevitable process toward conclusion holds the watcher in awed suspense.

Sophocles as master dramatist. Sophocles (496-406 B.C.), often considered the greatest master of the Greek tragic form, died a half century after Aeschylus, leaving a legacy of seven extant dramas—well over a hundred plays in fragmentary condition, or simply 'referred to' by others-- and an unmatched record of successes in the annual theatrical contests at Athens. Sophocles competed in thirty annual competitions, and won twenty four-- defeating Aeschylus himself in more than one instance--while Aeschylus won fourteen times and Euripides, the third of the great tragedians extant to us, won only four times. (Yes, victory in these contests was a 'popularity contest,' but the fifth century Athenian theater goer, adult male citizens, was the central figure in a polity of unrivalled brilliance; no usual Broadway habitu , but heir to an already rich mythical/thematic tradition, and to a language which many centuries had by now polished.) You will see, this week, what was the ineffable secret of Sophocles' greatness: his Olympian perspective, his intricate plots focusing on a single crucial event, his irony, and in the end, while retaining his skepticism about the universe, his granting to Fate a dignity, and spirit of justice, which ennoble even violent and beaten protagonists. We will read two plays, the early play *Antigone* (hard to date exactly) and the mature *Oedipus the King* (401 B.C.), which are arguably Sophocles' greatest works, and which both concern tragic events in the royal House of Thebes.

A word on the historical setting of Sophocles. Sophocles created his plays during the second half of the fifth century B.C., while Aeschylus, as we have seen, created his during the first half. (We are playing a little loose with dates, but you can quickly Wikipedia out the relevant details, so far as we know them.) You will have seen, from your *Ancient Greece* by Martin, that both the highest brilliance, and the gradual unraveling of Athens take place in the second half of the fifth century B.C. Whereas the first half of the century saw the rapid development of political democracy, individualism in lyric and theater (Aeschylus), and above all the astonishing victories over the huge Persian Empire, the second half of the century was dominated by intra polis conflict on the Greek mainland, the breaking down of traditional values during the Sophist intervention in Athens, and above all the long-lasting Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.), with its devastating consequences for economic and social development. (I am putting a burden of history reading on you; if possible, give yourself time to read about the Sicilian Expedition, 415-413, which shows the fatal recklessness which was gripping Athenian 'foreign policy' at the time.) It was in this turbulent—if brilliant—second half of the great century that Sophocles created his masterpieces. And what do you know? They are masterpieces of classical *serenity*!

What to look for in reading Sophocles. Please continue to keep the chorus in mind. From the spectator's point of view, watching from the banked stone seats of the Theater of Dionysus in Athens, the dance—turn, counterturn, standstill: intricate dance steps meshing with the highly refined prosody of the language--and the stilted, costumed appearance of the all male actors—all this would have exercised a

startling operatic effect. (Mental reconstruction is essential here. The same with the classical Temple, like the Parthenon, which was brightly painted in its time, but from which the colors have all faded away, leaving the beautiful but misleading surface of gleaming marble, which we now associate with the public buildings of ancient Greece and Rome.) Above all, of course, look for the central theme or crisis, around which the drama is thrillingly disposed: the struggle, in *Antigone*, between tradition (traditional burial practice, so central to archaic culture) and the Realpolitik of state government (Creon's province); the terrifying struggle of Oedipus to locate a polluting murderer who he himself is, and eventually, horribly, discovers.

Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 1. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--Sophocles, *Book 1, pp. 891-951.*

The Complete Plays of Sophocles, translated by Robert Bagg and James Scully (New York, 2011). (We will read *Antigone* and *Oedipus The King*. If you can add *Oedipus at Colonus*, you will have read the entire Sophoclean treatment of the House of Thebes.)

Discussion Topics

Idea: Dark Themes - Have we anything like these brilliantly packaged, tragic art forms with us today? Why did the democratic, and life affirming, Athenians take pleasure in such dark themes as we see here? Does Sophocles want us to learn from these plays, or just to feel awe at them?

Idea: Sins of the Fathers - Describe the mythic story of the House of Thebes and the idea of a generational curse, and payment for the sins of fathers. How do the characters in the play attempt to escape the fates predicted for them? How do their choices and talents lead them to the predestined conclusion?

Theme: Growth - Trace how Oedipus goes from having a firm belief in his own innocence to suspicion and fear, and then to the moment of recognition and self awareness of his own guilt. What does Oedipus most want? What means are he willing to use to achieve it? What are the most obvious traits of his character?

In his *Poetics* (350 B.C.) Aristotle develops a (subsequently much debated about) theory of *catharsis*, by which he means the effect proper to the experience of high classical Greek drama—and especially to the experience of Sophocles' Theban plays. In some sense the catharsis in question must have been like a spiritual purging, arousing certain feelings, then driving them out, leaving the soul cleansed. Does this say anything to you? Do you feel 'exalted' by a play like *Oedipus the King*, despite its lethal conclusion?