HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Sophocles (496.B.C.-406 B.C.)

The Theban trilogy—*Oedipus*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus at Colonus* (401 B.C.).
Ajax, Women of Trachis, *Philoctetes* (409 B.C.)

Sophocles, 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, 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 habitué, but heir to an already rich mythical/thematic tradition, and to a language which many centuries had by now brought to a fine polish.) 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. This entry concerns 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. Above all this entry features the wide ranging trilogy concept which traces Oedipus' spiritual course from rage to grace, and deals frontally with the personal courage of the idealistic Antigone, and the challenge she raises to the political status quo represented by Creon.

The *Antigone* turns on the fateful decision of a young woman to bury her brother, in contravention of the city's laws. The forbidden burial is reported to the authorities by a guard:

I don't know. There was no sign of digging,
no marks of any pick axe or
mattock. *]*
The ground was dry and hard and very smooth,
without a wheel track. Whoever did it
left no trace. When the first man on day watch
revealed it to us, we were all amazed.
The corpse was hidden, but not in a tomb.
It was lightly covered up with dirt,
as if someone wanted to avert a curse.
There was no trace of a wild animal
or dogs who'd come to rip the corpse apart

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.) 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. 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. 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 at this 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 Realpolitk of state government (Creon's province); the terrifying struggle of Oedipus to locate a polluting murderer who he himself is, and eventually, horribly, discovers.

The Theban trilogy and the *Antigone* jump to the fore when we feel for the classic perfection of Sophoclean drama, in which plot and character fuse in the white heat of passion, generating that response of catharsis, of which Aristotle writes in the *Poetics* (#60), seeing that purging reaction as a mode of inspiration. The three plays highlighted in this entry are all notable for their portraits of 'heroic'—note the quotation marks—characters driven to the extremity of despair, and in two cases committing suicide. Were we to have the complete trilogies in which each of these plays was initially embedded, we would doubtless better understand the overarching theme in which these personal tragedies are embedded, and yet nothing can dilute the immediate tragic passion of these three dramatic events, drawn as almost always in Greek tragedy directly from Greek myth. (One exception: Aeschylus' *Persians*, which is based on 'current events.') We have to wonder, once again, at the capacity of that myth to transmit the deepest and most contemporarily relevant emotions.

We might say that the three tragic characters in question, here, are 'sensitives,' not men or women of state, not in the position to speechify to the polis, like Oedipus. Ajax has been deeply wounded in his amour proper, because the weapons of Achilles (as recounted in the Iliad) have been given to Odysseus instead of to himself. (To note: Homer's two epics continue to provide the raw material of Greek literature for centuries, and have in fact dominated both the profound achievements of mediaeval and modern Greek literature.) His wounded warrior's honor leads to his madness and self-destruction. Deianira, the female protagonist of The Women of Trachis, has prepared a love shirt for her husband Heracles, upon en ahis return from accomplishing his legendary Labors; unfortunately the love potion applied to the shirt has been mixed with a deadly poison which consumes Heracles's body, and drives Deianira to kill herself. Philoctetes has been abandoned on Lemnos, by the Greeks on their way to attack Troy—Philoctetes has a foul infection in his leg—and subsequently the Greeks learn that they can only take Troy by means of Philoktetes' bow. The heart of the play centers on the maddened rage of Philoktetes, isolated and abandoned, until finally Odysseus and company return to try to win the bow away from him.