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PAUL ROCHE

**THE OEDIPUS PLAYS OF
SOPHOCLES**

THE COMPLETE TEXTS OF

**OEDIPUS THE KING
OEDIPUS AT COLONUS
ANTIGONE**



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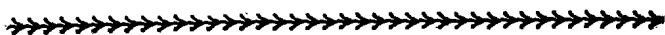
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THE OEDIPUS PLAYS OF Sophocles



OEDIPUS THE KING

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

ANTIGONE

In a new translation by

PAUL ROCHE



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ΞΟΦΟΚΛΕΟΥΣ ΑΝΤΙΓΟΝΗ

Ω ΚΟΙΝΟΝ ΑΥΤΑΔΕΛΦΟΝ ΙΣΜΗΝ ΕΚΑΡΑ
ΑΡΧΙΣΘΟΤΙΖΕΥΣ ΤΩ ΝΑΠΟΙΔΙΠΟΥ ΚΑΚΩΝ
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ΤΩΝ ΞΩΝ ΤΕ ΚΑΜΩΝ ΟΥ ΚΟΠΩ ΠΕΓΩ ΚΑΚΩΝ

Foreword



THE GREAT ENCOUNTER

Sophocles, who died at the age of nearly ninety, two thousand three hundred and sixty-four years ago, was one of the world's greatest poets and dramatists, and he speaks to us today with a message no less necessary and elevating than it was to the Greeks of the fifth century B.C. We too need to be told that man is but a limited and contingent creature, subject to sudden disrupting forces. Success is not finally to be measured by fame or material prosperity. Human greatness consists ultimately in nobly accepting the responsibility of being what we are; human freedom, in the personal working out of our fate in terms appropriate to ourselves. Though we may be innocent, we are all potentially guilty, because of the germ of self-sufficiency and arrogance in our nature. We must remember always that we are only man and be modest in our own conceits. Our place in the total pattern of the cosmos is only finite. That is not to say that it may not be glorious. Whatever our circumstances, we can achieve and endure through to essential greatness. It is not what fate has in store for us that matters, but what we do with it when it comes. There may be suffering, but no abiding hopelessness. No power, no imposition, no catastrophe, can uproot the personal dignity of each human being. The seeming caprice and unfairness of life, striking some down and pampering others, is only the beginning of the Great Encounter. Both the choice and the destiny are ours.

Smith College
Northampton
May 1, 1958

Paul Roche

CONTENTS

FOREWORD: The Great Encounter	vi
INTRODUCTION: The Theban Trilogy	ix
OEDIPUS THE KING	23
OEDIPUS AT COLONUS	87
ANTIGONE	165
APPENDIX:	
Production and Acting	211
Notes	214
Glossary of Classical Names	216
Acknowledgments	224

Introduction



THE THEBAN TRILOGY

The story of Oedipus King of Thebes, his success, his fall, his awed and hallowed end—in brief, the Theban Legend—was already old in the time of Sophocles. Perhaps it stood to the great poet and dramatist in something of the same light that the legend of King Arthur and the Holy Grail stood to the poet Tennyson: a legend celebrated by several hundred years of song and poetry.

But, whereas Tennyson looked back on a dreamlike world of chivalry, and helped to sustain the dream of courtly romance, Sophocles looked back on an elemental world of human frailty, pride and punishment, and helped to sustain the dreadful inevitability of a family moving towards catastrophe. The world of King Arthur seemed beautifully impossible and Tennyson left it so; the world of King Oedipus seemed thankfully improbable but Sophocles left it terrifyingly possible.

In each of the three plays that comprise his Theban Trilogy—*Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and the *Antigone*—Sophocles shows us a character pursued to and pursuing its end amid the full illusion both of freedom and of destiny and so to a gloriously headstrong doom. It is true that the downfall of the House of Oedipus was foretold by the gods even before Oedipus was born, but it was foretold because it was going to happen; it was not going to happen because it was foretold. 1?

The tragedy of King Oedipus was not only that he suffered the improbabilities of murdering his father and marrying his mother—both were mistakes anyway—the tragedy was that having murdered his father and married his mother he made the fully responsible mistake of find-

ing it out. As he was an upright man, but proud, the gods allowed him to make the first mistake; as he was a headstrong man, but overweening in self-confidence, he allowed himself to make the second. Zeal mysteriously worked with destiny to trip him up on his self-righteousness and then reveal an arrogance which pressed forward to calamity.

But even fallen pride need not remain prostrate. In the second play, the *Oedipus at Colonus*, we are shown an old man, blinded, beaten, hunted through the years, rise to a new dignity by the very fact of his being the recognized vehicle of divine justice. We now know the worst that can happen to man, but it can only happen through a foolish stepping outside from the stream of man's right relationship to God. Now we see Oedipus, by his magnanimous acceptance of Fate, step back again. He is both cursed and blessed, and a living testimony to the vindication of man through suffering: not of course suffering in the Christian sense—for the horror and recalcitrance are still there—but suffering in that it is a lesson, a proud and acknowledged testimony to the truth.

In the last play, the *Antigone*, Sophocles returns to the theme of the first and shows us again what happens when the ostensibly good man succumbs to pride. This time, however, there is an added poignancy: Creon, who is the protagonist rather than Antigone, and who is a kind of second Oedipus in his ruthless pursuit of what he thinks is right, brings final ruin to the House of Oedipus, destroying not only himself, his wife, his son, the love of these for him, but the very person his son is going to marry and the one who is most dedicated to the right—Antigone.

So must always be the end of man without God, even religious man—for both Oedipus and Creon thought that they were religious. [The horror for us, as it was for the Greeks, is precisely to see that an Oedipus or a Creon can so easily be ourselves.] Both display the glory and the weakness (the fatal flaw) of self-sufficient man. And

when Oedipus, the once upright, is dragged piecemeal, by his own doing, from wealth and power, is stripped of reputation, made to wallow in a bed of murder, incest, suicide, even personal disfigurement, the audience passes through such territories of fear and pity that the human heart is altogether purged.

THE RE-CREATION

[If it is true that dramatic poetry is the language of speech, but speech made perfect, and true that poetry gives to plot its feeling, then my aim in this new translation of Sophocles is to make that speech as real as possible without ever letting it cease to be poetry.] The difficulty of doing this for Sophocles is that he was no ordinary poetic genius. All great poets can rise to an occasion; but Sophocles does not need an occasion: he achieves his magical effects at will. He makes the simplest words and phrases sound like the loftiest epic utterance, and he makes the loftiest epic utterance sound as natural as everyday speech. With Sophocles dramatic poetry is the language of speech made perfect and the perfection of language made speech.

Herein lies the challenge to the translator: after he has captured the sense of that perfect speech how does he proceed to capture the magic of its sound? For if poetry lies somewhere between meaning and music, sense and sound, it is obvious that when meanings cross the barrier of different tongues they do not take their music with them: they have to assume new sounds and these new sounds may not be the aesthetic equivalent of the original. This is true of any two languages. "La plume de ma tante" is obviously not the same as "My aunt's pen," though who shall say exactly where the difference lies?

We need not, however, go further than our own language to see that different sounds can have the same meaning and yet a quite dissimilar feeling. "Lamp" is not the aesthetic equivalent of "light," nor "daybreak"

of "early morning." "Highroad" does not have the same feeling to it as "main road" nor "chair" as "seat." The differences here are subtle but they are there. Sometimes the differences are crude and obvious: no one (even in his cups) would get up from a meal saying: "Well, I've never had better cutlets of dead calf or swallowed mellowed fermented grape juice."

It is, then, not merely differences of meaning that control differences of feeling, but also differences of sound. "Thou odoriferous stench, sound rottenness," is not at all the same as "You sweet smell, healthy decay," though who will say the meaning is different? "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree" bears almost no emotional resemblance to, "Kubla Khan decided upon a fine fun dome in Xanadu." It is precisely these different values of sound that guide and indicate the changes of feeling in any language. It is the balance of sounds in an infinitely complex interplay of rhythms and cadences that creates all those shifting associations of meaning and feeling, those allusions, hints and half-meanings, that constitute the pattern of living speech.

This is what makes translating poetry so exacting. It is not merely meanings that a translator has to match but feelings, and for this there are no rules that he can follow—he can only depend upon his ear. And to do this he must be a poet. If he cannot tell that "my Italy" has not the same ring to it as "Italia mia," that "chez moi" is not quite the same as "home," and that the "alpha and the omega" is the same and yet utterly different from "A to Z," then he had better leave the business of translating poetry alone. He might possibly end up by rendering Tennyson's famous lines: "Break, break, break on thy cold grey stones O sea" into "Cassez-vous, cassez-vous, cassez-vous sur vos froids gris cailloux O mer,"* which would be equivalent aesthetically to someone's translating the glorious cry of Xenophon's Ten Thousand: "Thalassa! Thalassa!" (The Sea! The Sea!) into "A vast ex-

* I am indebted to Miss Edith Hamilton for this witty example.

panse of salt water! A vast expanse of salt water!" Perfectly accurate of course.

It does not do then in poetry to forget sound. All feeling is controlled by the shape of sounds—their differences of cadence and rhythm. It is not simply that different sounds have different meanings, but that the same meanings have different sounds. Words are unbelievably sensitive. And in poetry mere clarity has very little to do with feeling. An increase of clarity can even spell the end of feeling; for poetry being half music has the power of making itself felt long before it has made itself fully understood.

I fled him down the nights and down the days,
I fled him down the arches of the years . . .

can be made far more straightforward and clear (and valueless): "For many years I made great efforts to avoid him." The health has gone from it.

These things being so, I took it as my principle that the translator of poetry must never rest satisfied with simply rendering the correct meaning of the words. This is only half his duty. The other half is to search out and to organize from the paucity or the abundance of words in his own language those words which can conjure up a similar feeling. He must rework the original words into a new system of sounds and rhythms that are so true to the nuances of his own language that they might almost seem to have been first created in that language to express the original feelings. He must therefore be aware of the essential differences between his own language and the original and yet be able to see constant analogies between them. For it is only by relating the known to the less known that a transformation takes place. Re-creation, not imitation, is what is called for.

Suppose, for instance, that the translator of Sophocles decides to cast his lines in hexameters simply because the Greek trimeter is also a six-measured line. He will find at once that he has not got the aesthetic equivalent: the

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Greek trimeter is light and quick, the English hexameter dawdles and hesitates.

Suppose he goes to the other extreme and far from trying to imitate the Greek he ignores it and casts his lines in English rhymed tetrameter. He may get lightness and speed all right but now he will have something as foreign in feeling to the original as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is to the Book of Job.

The poet-translator, then, must keep his eyes and ears on each of the languages: never imitating the one but seizing every chance for a parallel effect with the other. Compared to Anglo-Saxon poetry Greek poetry is spare in metaphor but rich in sound. He must somehow resolve this difference so that the Greek sparsity of ornament does not come out in English as bald uninspiring sound. Compared to Anglo-Saxon poetry Greek poetry is often direct and primitive in emotion but condenses great complexity of expression in a single compound epithet: the translator must somehow contrive to find a bond between the two so that the Greek compressed simplicity does not come out in English as verbiage or naïveté.

The style of Shakespeare and the style of the King James Bible (pillars of English literary form) could not be more different in sensibility from the style of Sophocles, and yet the poet-translator must find some analogy between them if he is to make a bridge between the two sensibilities. Luckily, there *are* analogies, likenesses, parallel feelings, for the design of words and the beauty of sound. The two languages do in fact pay attention to a great many of the same things: there is a preoccupation with cadence, which shows itself in a love of alliteration and assonance and the associative power of similar sound; there is an attention to rhythm, which shows itself in (among other things) the well-timed pause, the break in the middle of the line; a love of antithesis of sound and sense: there is a feeling for the symmetrical phrase as well as the asymmetrical as a means to emphasis; the use of repetition and parallelisms of speech for pointing up a

phrase or creating pathos; a predilection for twists of expression, telling paradoxes, oxymora, litotes, and a whole host of figures of speech that help to put salt on the tongue and tonic in the head. These are the powerful emotive devices that Greek shares with Anglo-Saxon. If a translator is deaf to them in the Greek he will be deaf to them in English and he will remain comparatively numb to the feelings they engender. It is just here, it seems to me, that the poet-translator has his chance of paralleling the force and beauty of the Greek without ever deserting the native genius of English. He will be respecting similarities without at the same time attempting to camouflage differences.

In my own efforts I have been careful to watch Sophocles. Where he has repeated a word I have repeated it; where he is rich in assonance and alliteration, I try to be; where he is harsh and staccato, I try to catch it; where he has a ringing tone, I try to ring.\* I have tried to walk and to run, to rise and to sit, with the Master, but never by imitation, only by analogy, transposition, re-creation. In translation there has to be a change of instruments, but the tune, the feelings as relayed through sound, must remain as quiet, as excited, as sublime, as intense, as in the original.

Such is the challenge. The poet-translator has as his ideal the creation of a pattern of sound which gets so close to the feeling of the original that it goes beneath the barrier of language and time, and lays bare the original creations of the Master. We ought not to have to remind ourselves that Oedipus, Antigone, Creon, Jocasta and the other characters of Sophoclean tragedy were first conceived as human beings. They have not changed since. They are in fact universal and timeless and we ought primarily to see them that way rather than as Greek characters in a Greek period piece.

\* The reverse of this, of course, is not necessarily true: if I have repeated a word, it may not always be that Sophocles has repeated it.



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The language of Sophocles is concentrated, vivid, spirited and powerful. Cardinal Newman calls it, "the sweet composure, the melodious fullness, the majesty and grace of Sophocles." But it was also free, molten, fusile with elements taken from the lofty poetry of the epic, the strains of the lyric, and the lowly commonplaces of the market square.* He was a careful craftsman but far from being a safety-first artist. Amazing agility and subtlety often consort with a quite conscious want of accuracy. He wrote in a Greek never quite heard before. He took risks with the language: coining words, inventing grammatical and syntactical constructions, condensing, eliding, twisting figures of speech inside out, and sometimes stretching the elasticity of the Greek language (that most lively of languages) to breaking point. But in the end, at least when it is given to the ear and not the eye alone to judge, he makes everything sound moderate, simple, and natural. In my efforts to follow him I have not scrupled to turn my back on the purely literary, the pedantic, and the circumspect in diction. I have used a language which I hope is contemporary but new, transcending if possible the mere aptness of a modern idiom. I daresay I have sometimes run the risk of looking 'not quite right,' but perhaps not more so than Sophocles himself might have looked to some of his contemporaries had they only seen his lines and never heard them. I have coined a construction here and there and, in the *Antigone*, a word, but always with only one end in view: a deepening of the fear, the pity, the love, the pathos, the hate, contained in the original. I have throughout thought more of the sequence of Sophocles' feelings and ideas than of the apparent grammatical connection of his words; remembering that Sophocles himself wrote at a time when the Greek language had not finally set. I have always asked myself not: is such and such a phrase rendered meta-

* There are echoes in Sophocles of the proverb, the cliché and (as far as we can tell) the colloquial phrase. I have not ostracized any of these where they have served dialogue and emotion.