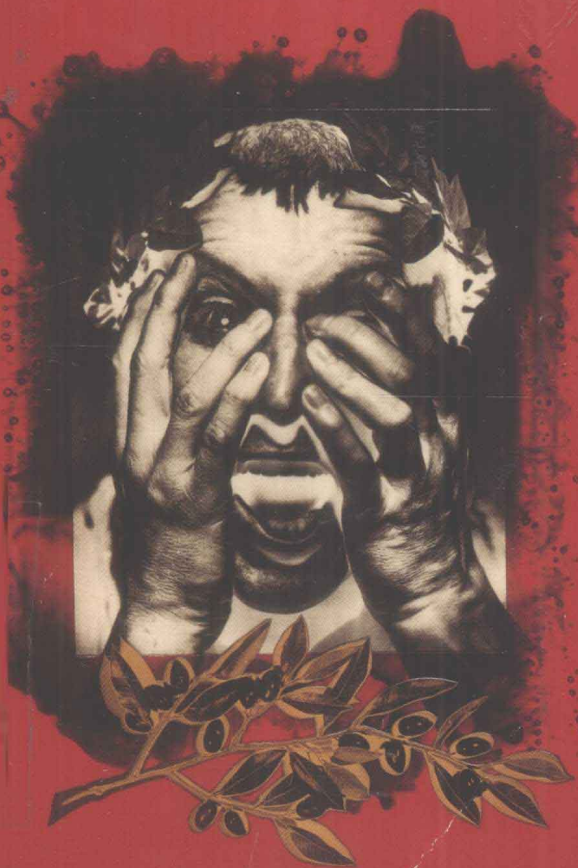


SOPHOCLES

Oedipus the King



E N R I C H E D C L A S S I C

Oedipus the King

Sophocles

Translated and Introduced by
Bernard Knox

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

This translation is an "acting version." It was made for those members of the Stratford Shakespearian Festival Company of Canada who performed in a series of four filmed lessons on the *Oedipus the King* of Sophocles in 1958. The films were made by the Council for a Television Course in the Humanities for Secondary Schools, and this edition of the translation was published for use by students studying the play with the aid of the films.

There are now many translations available, some of them written with performance in mind. But when the films were made, none of the existing versions met the demands of the situation. The films, which were aimed at students in their junior year of high school, required a version that would be immediately intelligible, in performance, to an audience which had had no previous acquaintance with Greek tragedy and little acquaintance with the theater in any form. The translation has to be clear, simple, direct—its only aim the creation and maintenance of dramatic excite-

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ment. To put it another way, it had to be a version which would place no obstacles between the modern audience and the dramatic power of the play.

There was one version that seemed, at first glance, to meet our needs, one by a great poet, William Butler Yeats. He had made it for performance in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, where it was produced in 1926. We actually began our work on the films using this text, but very soon realized that we would have to abandon it. In his superb versions of the choral odes, where Yeats used verse, he sometimes indulged his own poetic obsessions and produced images and phrases that have nothing to do with Sophocles—"the Delphic Sybil's trance," for example, or "For Death is all the fashion now, till even Death be dead." And though the prose of the dialogue scenes is strong and simple—"Lady Gregory and I," he wrote, "went through it all, altering every sentence that would not be intelligible on the Blasket Islands"—here, too, we were faced with a serious problem. For reasons he did not see fit to explain, Yeats cut the play in the same high-handed way he edited Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol* ("My work gave me that privilege"); what the result is in the case of Wilde I leave to others to judge, but in the case of Sophocles it is close to disastrous. In the last scene of the play, for example, he has omitted 90 of the 226 lines Sophocles wrote, and he has moved parts of speeches as much as a hundred lines away from their true position, not to mention the fact that at one point he has taken two lines from Oedipus, given them to the chorus, and slapped them into the middle of one of Oedipus' long speeches at a point

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where an interruption destroys the power of the speech. As if this were not enough, he has, in an earlier scene, omitted Jocasta's famous lines on chance, without which the play loses a great deal of its meaning.

So the play had to be translated again. I have used prose (though in some of the choral odes, where the words seem to fall naturally into short lines, I have printed them in that form to suggest the liturgical style of the choral performance. I do not claim that they are verse). The criteria for the prose were clarity and vigor, and in the hope of attaining these two objectives, I have sacrificed everything else. The result is not Sophocles, but I hope that it will give some impression of one dimension of the Sophoclean masterpiece—its dramatic power.

Since 1958 many new translations of the play, in both prose and verse, have made their appearance and found their readers. But the Oedipus films are still widely used in schools and, in any case, the steady demand for this version of the play warrants its reissue in a revised edition.

The text of the play is complete; the few minor omissions of words or phrases are all dictated by the canons of speed and simplicity. In the first scene, for example, Oedipus addresses Creon as "son of Menoeceus." Few people in college, let alone high school, know who Menoeceus was, and the momentary check the strange name gives the audience cuts them off for a moment from the forward movement of the play in which they should be relentlessly involved. So I have dropped Menoeceus and translated simply

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"Creon." I have heard it argued that even though classical names may be unfamiliar to the modern audience they have a certain dignity and traditional familiarity which creates "atmosphere," but many years of teaching Greek tragedy in translation have convinced me that to the ordinary American student the name Menoeceus contains no more dignity than the name Lobengula, and is no more familiar; Lobengula in fact has the advantage in that he can pronounce it.

So in many other details. Apollo is sometimes called Loxias in Greek tragedy, and for the Greek poet and audience the use of one name rather than the other sometimes had a point, but actors cannot explain what the point is. In this translation Apollo is always Apollo. And the Delphic oracle is always the Delphic oracle, even if in the Greek it happens to be Pytho. Where the chorus speculates about "enmity between the Labdacids and the son of Polybus," I have translated "Laius and Oedipus." The translation aims to involve in the dramatic impetus of the play an audience which will find it hard enough to acquire even the necessary minimum of basic information. If we have to choose, and I think we do, between making students feel the excitement of the play and making sure they know who Labdacus was, I have no doubt which to choose.

The stage directions all envisage a modern production, not a reconstruction of the original performance. I have taken the liberty of adding a few remarks of a directorial nature where I thought them necessary to bring out the meaning of the passage. I have indicated

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my belief that the closing lines of the chorus are not part of the Sophoclean original, and at vv. 376-7 I have translated the manuscript reading, not the lines as emended by Brunck. My reasons for all this, and for many other things in the translation, will be found in my *Oedipus at Thebes* (Yale University Press, 1957).

I wish to thank Mr. Douglas Campbell, of the Stratford company, who gave me his expert (and overwhelming) advice on those parts of the translation which are used in the films, and an actress friend (who does not wish to be named) who went over every line of my text to test it for stage delivery. It is because of their patience and generosity that I have the confidence to call this translation an "acting version."

INTRODUCTION

Sophocles

Sophocles was born at Colonus, a village just outside the city of Athens, around 496 B.C. His father, Sophillos, was a wealthy man who saw to it that his son had the best teachers available—among them, a famous musician, Lampros. This would turn out to be of great importance, for the Athenian dramatist had to provide the music as well as the words for the songs of the chorus in his tragedies. The young Sophocles was chosen to lead the chorus that sang a hymn of thanksgiving to the gods for the great naval victory at Salamis, a battle fought in 480 B.C.

It was the turning point in a war that saved Greece from a large-scale Persian invasion aimed at bringing mainland Greece under Persian rule; the Greek cities of the islands and coasts of the Aegean Sea had already been annexed. In that sea battle the fleet of the democratic city-state of Athens played a decisive role, and Athens went on to lead a naval campaign which

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liberated the Greek cities from Persian rule. The newly freed cities joined Athens in an alliance, the Delian League, which pursued the war against Persia. But the League, in which Athens was the dominant military power, eventually became an empire: though they were still called allies, the other cities were in fact subjects, required to make financial contributions for the maintenance and operations of the Athenian fleet.

The growing power and influence of Athens aroused the fears of those cities that had been her allies in the war against the Persian invaders. Chief among them was Sparta, the city whose invincible infantry made it as formidable by land as Athens was by sea. The rest of the fifth century saw periods of war and uneasy peace between the two rivals for the hegemony of the Greek world. In 431 B.C. the final struggle, the Peloponnesian War, began. It ended twenty-seven years later, in 404, with the defeat and unconditional surrender of Athens.

Sophocles, who lived to be ninety years old, played a distinguished part in the turbulent events of the century. He served Athens often as ambassador, as general on at least one occasion, as treasurer of the Delian League, and as a member of the special commission of ten that was chosen to guide Athens through the desperate last years of the war, after the disastrous failure of an Athenian attempt to conquer the rich and far-off Greek cities in Sicily. But he did not have to witness Athens' surrender; he died in 406 B.C., in the same year as his younger rival in the theater, Euripides.

Sophocles was known to his fellow-citizens not only

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as an active participant in the affairs of the democratic state, but also as the most consistently successful of the poet-dramatists who composed and directed their plays at the annual spring festival of the god Dionysus. At that festival three tragic poets, selected from applicants by a city magistrate, presented three plays each in a competition for first, second and third prizes. Sophocles won his first victory in 468 B.C., when he was twenty-eight years old; he was competing against Aeschylus, the great dramatist of the generation that had defeated the Persian invaders at Salamis.

This was the start of a career which was to bring him the first prize no less than eighteen times. He was sometimes awarded the second prize (as in the year when he produced *Oedipus the King*) but never, we are told, the third.

Sophocles wrote 123 plays. Only seven of them have come down to us complete. They are: *Ajax* (probably the earliest of the plays that have survived), *Antigone* (produced in 442 B.C.), *Oedipus the King* (probably between 429 and 420), *Philoctetes* (409), *Oedipus at Colonus* (produced after his death, in 401), and *Electra* and *Women of Trachis*, dates uncertain. Among these seven plays, *Oedipus the King* is generally regarded as the dramatic masterpiece not only of Sophocles but also of the whole magnificent range of ancient tragedy.

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The City

The Athens of Sophocles was by modern standards a small and uncomfortable city. The total population of Athens and its surrounding territory, Attica, was probably not more than three hundred thousand, and the city itself was crowded, dirty and, from a material point of view, primitive—the Athenians had no running water in their houses, no central heating, no adequate artificial light. And yet it was in this city and at this time that the foundations of our modern Western civilization were firmly laid. In fifth-century Athens, European philosophy, history, drama, architecture, and sculpture emerged full-grown in masterpieces which have been dominating examples ever since.

The extraordinary achievements of fifth-century Athenians will probably never be satisfactorily explained, but there are certain historical factors which help us to understand why the human spirit was so enormously energetic and creative in this particular time and place. Early in the century (490–479 B.C.), the Greeks, weak, poor, and divided, had astonished the world (and themselves) by defeating at Salamis an invasion led by the great King of Persia himself, at the head of what must have seemed like an overwhelming force. The Greeks were inspired by a new heroic vision of their own potentialities; if they had beaten off the Persian army and fleet, there was nothing they could not do. In Athens, especially, the result of the victory was a fantastic burst of energy which showed itself not only in political and naval offensive action

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against Persia on its home ground, but also in every domain of civic and private endeavor.

It so happened that Athens possessed a form of government particularly adapted to encourage and guide this newfound energy. Athens was a democracy, the first in the history of the world. Its institutions allowed and even demanded a freedom of thought and discussion which was the best possible soil for the growth of new ideas, new forms of action and achievement.

It was the kind of democracy that is possible only in a relatively small community; it worked not through elected representatives, as ours does, but through an assembly of the whole citizen body, a town meeting, in fact. There was, of course, a council, which prepared the agenda for the meetings of the assembly and dealt with current business between those meetings. The members of the council, as well as the executive officers, were elected to serve for one year only. There was only one exception to this term limitation—the office of general; there were ten of them, representatives of the ten tribal regiments in which the Athenian citizens were enrolled. This was an office of vital importance; once a competent man was elected, the obvious thing to do was to keep him on the job. Pericles, the political leader of the democracy during its greatest days, was elected general year after year and from this position directed the foreign and domestic policies of Athens. But powerful and influential as he became, he still had to stand for re-election every year.

This direct democracy, with its instant control on

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the executive power, had great advantages. Official corruption, for example, was almost impossible, since every magistrate, at the end of his one-year term, had to present his accounts at a public meeting, where any citizen could question him. Lobbying by vested interests was nonexistent; there were no long-term representatives to influence or bribe. The only modern equivalent would be some form of instant referendum, through which the citizen body could make its will known on any issue at once, and see the will of the majority translated into immediate action.

Even Pericles, the charismatic and successful leader of the Athenian people from mid-century until his death in 429, was subject to the wishes of the full citizen assembly and in fact, in 430 the Athenians, suffering from shortages caused by the war and, worse still, the onset of a devastating plague, did not re-elect him to the board of generals for the first time in many years. He was elected again the following year, but died of the plague.

But direct democracy had its disadvantages too. There were several occasions during the long war on which the assembly, carried away by passion and the manipulation of that passion by skillful orators, made decisions it came to regret. In 426 the rich island of Lesbos, which had been treated much more leniently than many of the other subject-allies of Athens, declared its independence and called on Athens' enemy, Sparta, for help. The rebels were finally forced to surrender, and the Athenian assembly met to decide the terms of their punishment. Fired by the speeches of a popular politician called Cleon, they decided to

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massacre the male population and sell the women and children into slavery; a ship was dispatched to the Athenian commander on Lesbos with those instructions. But the Athenians had second thoughts, and at a further assembly called by opponents of the original decree, they rescinded the order; the ship carrying the cancellation arrived just in time to prevent the massacre. On a later occasion the Athenians were not so lucky. In 415, at a time when the war with Sparta had reached a stalemate formalized by a truce, the assembly—dazzled by the promises of Alcibiades, a brilliant but unreliable member of the family of Pericles—embarked on a hazardous imperialist venture: the conquest of the rich Greek cities of far-off Sicily. What they clearly should have done was use the time granted by the truce to recover from the damage sustained in ten years of war, to build up their military and economic resources, but instead they “fell in love”—the only phrase the historian Thucydides could find to describe their mood—with the idea of adding Sicily to their empire. Disregarding the warnings of elder statesmen, they assembled and sent off to Sicily a huge expeditionary force; “no armament so magnificent or costly,” Thucydides said, “had ever been sent out by any Greek power.” The result was a stupendous disaster; not a single ship and very few of the men returned, and though the war, now renewed by Sparta, dragged on for a few more years, it could only end in Athenian defeat.

Direct democracy—the full participation of the whole citizen body in the work of government and the immediate response of elected authority to its constit-

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uents' wishes—had not only its obvious values but also its dangers. And in our own republic, in this age of instant communication, of television, telephone banks and computer networks, the possibility of "electronic democracy"—of voters' pressure bypassing those checks and balances written into the Constitution by the Founding Fathers—has added a new relevance to the study of the world's first attempt to establish "government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

In the case of Athenian democracy, however, the "people" were in fact a minority of the population. Attendance at meetings of the assembly as well as election to the council or the magistracies was open only to male Athenian citizens, men whose parents were legally married and were both citizens themselves. Women, though they were citizens, did not participate in the business of governing the city, nor did resident aliens (of whom there were a great many living in Athens) nor, of course, did the slaves.

An Athenian woman had no political rights, and in the law courts, even in cases where her property might be at issue, a male relative had to speak for her. She had only one career open to her, that of wife and mother. She would be married young, at the age of sixteen or so, to an older man, to whom she brought a dowry; the marriage would be arranged by her father or some other male relative. Once married she would spend most of her time in the house, where she would be in charge of the training and supervision of the household slaves, the care of domestic equipment and supplies, the storage and distribution of grain, olive

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oil, and wine, the drafting and control of the household budget, and the manufacture of clothes for the whole family, from the raw wool to the finished garment.

This situation was an inheritance from earlier times, when the individual family had to struggle for survival on a small farm in a far-from-fertile land; harsh conditions imposed a rigid division of labor, and marriage was not a matter of individual choice but a means of advancing family interests by forming alliances. But these customs still prevailed in the democratic and wealthy city of Athens, and there were some who questioned their validity. In the intellectual ferment of the last half of the century the role of women in the family and society emerged as a subject for discussion and reappraisal, and one of the places where such new ideas were expressed was the theater. In Euripides' play *Medea*, which was produced in 431 B.C., the heroine makes a long speech that expresses women's discontent with their situation. "First of all," she says, "we have to dispense large sums of money to buy a husband, to acquire a master for our body . . . and it is a critical matter whether we get a good one or a bad . . . A man, when he's tired of the people in his home, goes out . . . and turns to a companion of his own age. But we are forced to fix our gaze on one person alone. . . ." And in another play, the *Tereus* of Sophocles, a female character put the case even more forcefully. "When we are children in our father's house, our life is the most pleasant in the world; young girls grow up in thoughtless delight. But when we reach maturity and intelligence, we are