



SOPHOCLES

ANTIGONE  
OEDIPUS THE KING  
ELECTRA

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

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SOPHOCLES

*Antigone*  
*Oedipus the King*  
*Electra*

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## INTRODUCTION

Time is a recurrent topic in Sophoclean tragedy. Of Oedipus, so recently so fortunate, the chorus sings, 'Time sees all, and Time, in your despite, | Disclosed and punished your unnatural marriage' (p. 91). Within the stark temporal economy of these tragedies, whose actions commence at dawn and are consummated within a single day, human fortunes are completely overturned. Antigone dies, Oedipus the king becomes a blinded outcast, and Electra is reunited with her long-lost brother Orestes, who slaughters the incumbents of the Mycenaean throne. Time is the only conceptual benchmark by which Sophocles' mortals can fully understand their difference from divinity. Unlike the power held by Creon or Oedipus or Clytemnestra, the sovereignty of the gods is immune to time's passing. The chorus of *Antigone* praises Zeus' immortality: 'Sleep... cannot overcome Thee, | Nor can the never-wearyed | Years, but throughout | Time Thou art strong and ageless' (p. 23).

Sophoclean drama has proved to be as 'strong and ageless' as its immortal gods. These plays in this volume do not die; they are merely reinterpreted. The inventory of Sophocles' admirers and imitators, in the English-speaking world alone, includes John Milton, Samuel Johnson, Percy Shelley (who translated *Oedipus the King* and drowned with a text of Sophocles in his pocket), Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and more recently Seamus Heaney and Tony Harrison.<sup>1</sup>

Sophocles' influence extends beyond literature to philosophy and psychology. Hegel's dialectic and view of tragic conflict are inseparable from his understanding of *Antigone*;<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud's most famous theory is named after the

<sup>1</sup> See further Stuart Gillespie, *The Poets on the Classics: An Anthology* (London/New York, 1988), 202–6.

<sup>2</sup> See esp. Michelle Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle* (Princeton, NJ, 1988).

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protagonist of *Oedipus the King*.<sup>3</sup> Nor, for over 400 years, has this poet been confined to the academy. The earliest-attested performance of a Greek tragedy in modern translation presented an audience of Italian humanists, in Vicenza, with a production of *Oedipus the King* on 3 March 1585.<sup>4</sup> Although the performance of Sophoclean drama was, in nineteenth-century Britain, generally proscribed on moral grounds by the Lord Chamberlain,<sup>5</sup> this playwright has never enjoyed so many revivals as in the period since the Second World War. During 1992, as this edition was in preparation, every play in it was performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company on the English stage.<sup>6</sup>

Their enduring popularity makes it hard to remember that they were first performed 2,500 years ago, by exclusively male actors, in the quite different context of a day-lit theatre in Athens. Dramas were produced at sacred festivals in honour of Dionysus, god of wine, dancing, and illusion. Every year three tragedians competed against each other with a group of four plays, three tragedies and a satyr play (a hybrid dramatic form mixing tragic and comic elements), with the aim of persuading a democratically selected jury to award their group of works the first prize; with it came vast prestige and fame around the whole Greek-speaking world.<sup>7</sup>

The decision to present these particular three of the seven surviving tragedies by Sophocles together in a single volume, although unusual, has great advantages. By detaching

<sup>3</sup> For a critique of Freud's (ab)use of Sophocles, especially with regard to *Oedipus the King*, see Jean-Pierre Vernant, 'Oedipus Without the Complex', in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (Eng. trans. New York, 1988), 85–111.

<sup>4</sup> Hellmut Flashar, *Inszenierung der Antike: Das griechische Drama auf der Bühne der Neuzeit 1585–1990* (Munich, 1991), 27–9.

<sup>5</sup> See F. Macintosh, 'Tragedy in Performance', in P. Easterling, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone* were performed together with *Oedipus at Colonus* under the title *The Thebans*. The director was Adrian Noble. *Electra* was directed by Deborah Warner. (Kitto's translations were not the versions used for these productions.)

<sup>7</sup> See A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, reissue, with new supplement, of the second edition, revised by J. Gould and D. M. Lewis (Oxford, 1988).

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*Oedipus the King* and *Antigone* from *Oedipus at Colonus*, which is not included, the misleading latter-day myth of a Theban 'trilogy' or 'cycle' is exploded. For the three surviving plays by Sophocles set at Thebes and focusing on the family of Oedipus were not designed to be performed together sequentially. They were independently conceived, composed over a period of perhaps nearly forty years, and were first produced separately, each in a group with other, unknown, tragedies. *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, are, however, at least consistent with each other, whereas *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus* contain one important factual difference. *Antigone* assumes that Oedipus died ingloriously at Thebes, whereas *Oedipus at Colonus* brings him to a beatific death at Athens.

The selection has other merits, however. A distinctive feature of Sophoclean tragedy is a titanic central heroic figure defiantly refusing to compromise and bend to other people's different perceptions of reality.<sup>8</sup> These characters' intransigent stances, while ennobling them, bring them into collision with, at best, misery (*Electra*) and, at worst, catastrophe (*Oedipus*): this volume brings together the two surviving Sophoclean tragedies, *Antigone* and *Electra*, in which the dominant heroic figure is a woman.

Another significant link connecting the three is the similarity of their perspective on familial relationships. Discord abounds between husbands and wives. Creon drives his wife to suicide; Oedipus wants to kill his mother/wife; Clytemnestra murdered her husband. Siblings of the same sex are vulnerable to dissension; in *Antigone* two brothers have killed each other; in both *Antigone* and *Electra* pairs of sisters are in powerful disagreement. Oedipus killed his father, and mother-child enmity leads to matricide in *Electra*. All three plays, however, privilege, indeed idealize, two particular bonds—between daughter and father and between sister and brother: in the case of *Antigone* and *Oedipus* the bond is famously and bizarrely identical.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of this aspect of Sophoclean drama see the definitive, but controversial, study by B. M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1964).

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Antigone, torn as a child from her father's arms at the end of *Oedipus the King*, later brings death upon herself out of loyalty to her dead brother Polyneices; Electra awaits the return of her adored younger brother Orestes to avenge the death of a father to whose memory she is quite obsessively attached. Sophoclean women are only defined, and can only achieve heroic status, in the contexts of their relationships with men.

### *Sophocles*

Sophocles was enormously popular within his own lifetime, and had his place in the gallery of the greatest poets of all time canonized by the generations immediately succeeding him. Even Plato, who was to banish dramatists from his ideal Republic, was gentle in his assessment of Sophocles (*Republic* 1. 329 b–c), and in his *Poetics* Aristotle expressed the view that Sophoclean drama brought the genre of tragedy to its consummate achievements, especially in *Oedipus the King*. The general consensus of Sophocles' contemporaries and successors was that he was a man blessed with a virtuous disposition and, unlike his characters, a remarkably trouble-free life. A charming epitaph occurred in a fragmentary comedy entitled *The Muses*, by Phrynichus: 'fortunate Sophocles lived a long life, made many beautiful tragedies, and, in the end, died without suffering any evil'.<sup>9</sup>

The facts of Sophocles' life must, however, be pieced together from diverse sources of varying reliability.<sup>10</sup> Inscriptions can usually be trusted; ancient librarians and scholars had access to sources of information now lost to us, but many allusions in ancient authors have little claim to veracity. The 'Chronology' in this edition therefore confines itself to those few dates which are almost certainly trustworthy.

Ancient poets attracted anecdotes and sayings which were

<sup>9</sup> Phrynichus, fr. 32, in R. Kassel and C. Austin (eds.), *Poetae Comici Graeci*, vol. vii (Berlin, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> All the evidence is compiled in S. Radt, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* iv (Berlin, 1977), 29–95.



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compiled in later antiquity into 'biographies'. The *Life of Sophocles* contains numerous pieces of information which it would be delightful to be able to believe. He is alleged to have led with his lyre the Athenian chorus which celebrated the victory over the Persians at the battle of Salamis, to have acted leading roles in his own plays, and to have died either while reciting a long sentence from *Antigone* without pause for breath, or by choking on a grape (the fruit of Dionysus, the tutelary deity of drama). Unfortunately such anecdotes reveal more about the biographers' imaginations than about the poet himself.<sup>11</sup>

Sophocles son of Sophilus was born at the Colonus of his *Oedipus at Colonus*, a district of the Athenian city-state, in the middle of the first decade of the fifth century BC. He is said to have married one Nicostrate, and both a son (Iophon) and a grandson (also named Sophocles) followed him by becoming tragic poets. He lived until about 405 BC, just before the Athenians' defeat in the disastrous Peloponnesian War, which had thrown the Greek-speaking world into divisive chaos for nearly three decades. His life thus began and ended commensurately with the century of Athens' greatness as an imperial democracy and the leading city-state of the Hellenic world.<sup>12</sup>

He composed at least 120 dramas, of which only seven tragedies survive; a certain amount is known, however, about many of his other productions.<sup>13</sup> In the three plays translated here mythical parallels are often drawn from other stories we know he was sufficiently interested in to dramatize. He wrote, for example, a *Niobe*, about a tragically bereaved mother, with whose misery both *Antigone* and *Electra* emotionally identify (see pp. 29 and 109 with explanatory notes).

<sup>11</sup> The ancient *Life of Sophocles* is reproduced in English translation and well discussed by Mary R. Lefkowitz in *The Lives of the Greek Poets* (London, 1981), 74–87 and 160–3. See also J. Fairweather, 'Fiction in the biographies of ancient writers', *Ancient Society* v (1974), 231–75.

<sup>12</sup> An admirably clear account of fifth-century Athenian history is to be found in J.K. Davies, *Democracy and Classical Greece* (Glasgow, second edition, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> See D. F. Sutton, *The Lost Sophocles* (Lanham, 1984), and A. Kiso, *The Lost Sophocles* (New York, 1984).

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He was victorious in the dramatic competitions about twenty times, and apparently never came last; he is thought to have won in the year he produced *Antigone*, but the group of plays which included *Oedipus the King* was astonishingly awarded only second place. Whether or not *Electra* and its companion dramas won the first prize is not even known. A portion of *Trackers*, a satyr play, has been discovered on papyrus: its pastoral content—an enormous newborn Hermes, greedy satyrs, an indignant nymph, and cattle dung—has granted the twentieth century a precious glimpse into this sombre tragedian's sense of humour.<sup>14</sup>

Sophoclean scholarship is hampered by the lack of evidence concerning the dates of his works. He won his first victory in 468 BC, defeating the great Aeschylus, when he was approaching the age of thirty;<sup>15</sup> the victorious plays may have included his (lost) *Triptolemus*. *Philoctetes* was awarded first place in 409,<sup>16</sup> and *Oedipus at Colonus* was produced posthumously in 402/1.<sup>17</sup> But of the other five extant tragedies, namely *Ajax*, *Women of Trachis*, and those published here, not one is firmly dated. The dramatic technique and style of *Ajax* and *Women of Trachis* may suggest that they are fairly early, but this assumes that a writer's works must evolve in a smooth linear progression. An ancient, but unreliable, tradition implies that *Antigone* may have been produced in the late 440s.<sup>18</sup> Scholars have tried hard to place *Oedipus the King* in the mid-420s<sup>19</sup> and *Electra*

<sup>14</sup> Recently incorporated by Tony Harrison into his drama *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* (2nd edn., London, 1991). The fragment, which is of considerable length and interest, was edited by Richard Walker (*The Ichneutae of Sophocles*, London, 1919); a prosaic, but faithful, translation may be found in D. L. Page (ed.), *Select Papyri*, vol. iii (Cambridge, Mass./London, 1941), 27–53.

<sup>15</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Cimon* 8. 8.

<sup>16</sup> 'Hypothesis' (ancient scholarly note of introduction) to *Philoctetes*.

<sup>17</sup> Second 'hypothesis' to *Oedipus at Colonus*.

<sup>18</sup> See below and n. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Bernard Knox ('The date of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles', in *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater*, Baltimore/London, 1979, 112–24), argues for a production in 425 BC. He compares the plague blighting Thebes in the play with the outbreaks of plague which had beset Athens from 430 to 426 BC. This seems persuasive, until it is remembered that the earliest and greatest work of Greek literature, the *Iliad*, likewise opens with a plague sent by Apollo.

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about a decade later,<sup>20</sup> but such conjectural dating should not be treated with anything but rampant scepticism.<sup>21</sup>

It is fairly certain that Sophocles dedicated a cult of the healing hero Asclepius in his own home,<sup>22</sup> but the biographical tradition makes extravagant claims about the poet's personal piety. He is supposed to have been loved more than others by the gods, to have been a favourite of Heracles, and to have held a priesthood himself. Such dubious testimony has resulted in scholarly quests for evidence of religious conviction in his plays.<sup>23</sup> But the only generalization that can safely be made applies equally to all Greek tragedy: divine will is always eventually done.

Antigone affirms that the laws of heaven are 'Unwritten and unchanging. Not of today | Or yesterday is their authority; | They are eternal' (p. 17). These 'Unwritten Laws' encoded archaic taboos and imperatives regulating familial and social relations; they proscribed murder within the family, the breaking of oaths, incest, and disrespect towards the dead—for example, the failure to bury them.<sup>24</sup> Mortals who in tragedy transgress these immortal edicts must come to see the error of their ways. Creon may have justification in *Antigone* for the measures by which he attempts to deter possible traitors to his city, but the play reveals that human reasoning faculties are not sufficient means by which to apprehend an inexplicable universe. Iocasta derides oracles as hocus-pocus, but they all come true in the end. Oedipus attempts to save his city from its disastrous plight by means of his intellect, but his detective trail leads him to the discovery that the gods had ordained that he break, by parricide and incest, two of the 'Unwritten Laws'. In *Electra* Clytemnestra may have had a perfectly understandable motive

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. A. M. Dale (ed.), *Euripides' Helen* (Oxford, 1967), xxiv–v.

<sup>21</sup> For a succinct and sensibly agnostic discussion of Sophoclean chronology see R. G. A. Buxton, *Sophocles (Greece & Rome, New Surveys in the Classics, xvi, Oxford, 1984), 3–5.*

<sup>22</sup> *Inscriptiones Graecae* ii<sup>2</sup>. 1252.4.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951), 193.

<sup>24</sup> On the 'Unwritten Laws' see V. Ehrenberg, *Sophocles and Pericles* (Oxford, 1954), 22–50 and 167–72.

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for killing her husband, Agamemnon—he was responsible for the death of their daughter Iphigeneia—but divine law dictates that as a murderer within the family, she must give her life in return.

The only other pertinent biographical information, which in this case is reasonably reliable, concerns Sophocles' public life.<sup>25</sup> He served as an ambassador, held office under the Athenian democracy as a treasurer in 443-2 BC, as a general (not a narrowly military office) in 441-0, and as a magistrate in 413 after the disastrous Athenian expedition to Sicily.<sup>26</sup> Such practical experiences are not inconsistent with the continuous investigation running through all three plays of the ease with which political authority can turn into tyranny, and with the artistic exploration, through the dilemmas facing Creon and Oedipus, of the anxieties inherent in the possession of political power.

### *Antigone*

Of all Sophocles' tragedies *Antigone* is the most overtly political, in that it directly confronts problems involved in running a *polis*, a city-state. The ancients already recognized this; a tradition emerged that Sophocles' election to the generalship in 441/0 was a direct result of the success of the play.<sup>27</sup> In modern times the political element has inspired numerous adaptations and productions, often anachronistically portraying Antigone as a liberal individualist shaking her little fist against a totalitarian state: she has been made to protest against everything from Nazism (especially in the versions by Jean Anouilh of 1944 and Bertolt Brecht of

<sup>25</sup> For an attempted reconstruction of Sophocles' political career see Ehrenberg (n. 24 above).

<sup>26</sup> *Inscriptiones Graecae* i<sup>3</sup>. 269.36; first 'hypothesis' to *Antigone*; Androtion 324, fr. 38, in F. Jacoby (ed.), *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, vol. IIIb (Leiden, 1950), 69; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1419<sup>a</sup>25.

<sup>27</sup> Recorded in the first 'hypothesis' to *Antigone*. L. Woodbury argued that the tradition was credible ('Sophocles among the Generals', *Phoenix* xxiv, 1970, 209-24); for a more sceptical view see Karl Reinhardt, *Sophocles* (Eng. trans. Oxford, 1979), 240.

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1948) to eastern-bloc communism, South African apartheid, and British imperialism in Ireland.<sup>28</sup>

The action of the play, although occupying first place in this volume, should, according to a strict observance of 'mythical time', occur later than that of *Oedipus the King*. It is set in Thebes, a mainland Greek city-state to the north of Athens and in reality anti-democratic and hostile to her; the Athenian dramatists typically displaced or 'expatriated' to Thebes political strife, tyranny, and domestic chaos.<sup>29</sup> *Antigone* opens at a moment of political crisis caused directly by internecine warfare. King Oedipus and Iocasta, now deceased, had four children, Polyneices, Eteocles, Antigone, and Ismene. The two sons quarrelled over the kingship of Thebes, and Polyneices was driven into exile; Eteocles was left ruling Thebes, apparently with the support of the brothers' maternal uncle Creon. Polyneices formed an alliance with the king of the important Peloponnesian city of Argos (where *Electra* is set), and raised a force with which to attack his own city. The assault failed, but in the battle Polyneices and Eteocles killed each other.

The tragedy begins at dawn after the Theban victory; Creon, as the nearest surviving male relative of the two sons of Oedipus, has now assumed power. The play enacts the catastrophic events which take place on his first day in office; it ironically demonstrates the truth of his own inaugural speech, in which he pronounces that no man's character can be known 'Until he has been proved by government | And lawgiving' (p. 8). For the very first law which Creon passes—that the body of the traitor Polyneices is to be refused burial—is in direct contravention of the 'Unwritten Law' protecting the rights of the dead; it precipitates, moreover, not only the death of his disobedient niece Antigone, who buries the corpse, but also the suicides of his own son Haemon and of Creon's wife Eurydice.

<sup>28</sup> On the 'afterlife' of *Antigone* see the illuminating discussion by George Steiner in *Antigones* (Oxford, 1984).

<sup>29</sup> See Froma Zeitlin, 'Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama', in J. Peter Euben (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1986), 101–41.

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*Antigone* explores the difficult path any head of state must tread between clear leadership and despotism. It has sometimes been argued that Creon's law was defensible, given the divisive nature of the civil war which had blighted Thebes and the urgent need for a firm hand on the rudder of government.<sup>30</sup> Funerals, as politicians everywhere know, can spark off insurrection. It is even possible to see Creon's failure to achieve heroic stature, at least in human terms, as a result simply of his unsteadiness in the face of opposition. For he is, above all, erratic: having decided that Ismene is as guilty as Antigone, he then changes his mind about her. He vacillates wildly about Antigone's fate: the original edict decreed death by stoning, but at one point he is going to have her executed publicly in front of Haemon; finally he opts for entombing her alive, but eventually revokes even this decision. He is the perfect example of the type of tragic character Aristotle described as 'consistently inconsistent' (*Poetics*, ch. 15).

Thinkers contemporary with Sophocles were involved in the development of a political theory to match the needs of the new Athenian democracy. One concept being developed was that of *homonoia* or 'same-mindedness', according to which laws are ideally the results of a consensual or contractual agreement made by all the citizens of a state.<sup>31</sup> Creon's law was passed autocratically, without *homonoia*, and his increasingly domineering attitude towards the views of others renders the disastrous outcome of his reign, and of the play, inevitable. As his own son puts it, 'The man | Who thinks that he alone is wise, that he | Is best in speech or counsel, such a man | Brought to the proof is found but emptiness' (pp. 25-6).

Creon is 'brought to the proof', however, not by civic disagreement articulated in the male arenas of council or assembly, but by a young female relative. This completely incenses him. Her goal is not political influence; she is simply obeying the divine law which laid on family members—

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. W. M. Calder, 'Sophocles' political tragedy, *Antigone*', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* ix (1968), 389-407.

<sup>31</sup> See G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge, 1981), 149-50.

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especially women—the solemn duty of performing funeral rites for their kin. The mysterious, and often arrogant, Antigone is as inflexible as Creon is erratic; as the chorus comments, ‘The daughter shows her father’s temper—fierce, | Defiant; she will not yield to any storm’ (p. 17). It is Creon’s misfortune that she happens to be not only Oedipus’ daughter, but Creon’s own niece and his son’s fiancée. This calls the conventional dichotomy of public and private life into profound question; Creon cannot keep his two worlds separate, and the drama shows that they are as inextricably intertwined as the corpses of Antigone and Haemon, locked in a bizarre travesty of a nuptial embrace. If the play has a moral, it is that when political expediency cannot accommodate familial obligations and ritual observance of ancestral law, its advocates are courting disaster.

### *Oedipus the King*

In recent times this definitive tragedy has been brought to a wider audience than ever before by a cinematic adaptation, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s atmospheric *Edipo Re* (1967), which, appropriately in our post-Freudian era, concentrates on the hero’s private psychological and emotional self-discovery.<sup>32</sup> But *Oedipus the King* (sometimes known by its Latinized name as *Oedipus Rex*) was previously reinvented, especially in pre-revolutionary France, as a treatise on government.<sup>33</sup> And indeed, although less transparently political than *Antigone*, it meditates on a similar difficult issue in statecraft: the *via media* between decisive leadership and excessive self-confidence.

This aspect of the play is somewhat obscured in translation: the Greek title and several passages actually call Oedipus a *turannos*. This is an ambiguous word, from which

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of this and other film versions of Sophoclean tragedy see Kenneth MacKinnon, *Greek Tragedy into Film* (London/Sydney, 1986), esp. 126–46.

<sup>33</sup> See Pierre Vidal-Naquet, ‘Oedipus in Vicenza and in Paris: Two Turning Points in the History of Oedipus’, in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (n. 3 above), 361–80.

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our 'tyrant' is derived, but whose meaning in Sophocles' time was unstable. It oscillated between 'a ruler who has attained to power, not by inheritance, but by popular support' (which Oedipus *thinks* he has, although he is ironically later revealed as the true son of the former hereditary king of Thebes), and the more value-laden and pejorative 'despot' (which Oedipus is in danger of becoming). The play's interest in the psychology of the *turannos* is expressed in Oedipus' monologue on the fears besetting those in power (pp. 61–2), and culminates in the enigmatic central ode, in which the chorus sings, 'Pride makes the tyrant—pride of wealth | And power, too great for wisdom and restraint' (p. 78).

The action takes place perhaps a decade earlier in mythical time than that of *Antigone*. It also opens with the city of Thebes in crisis, but on this occasion the reason is plague. The opening tableau portrays the priests and other Thebans entreating their king, Oedipus, who had previously saved them from the monstrous Sphinx by solving her famous riddle, to find a way to cure the disease. It is the irony of the play that in this he is successful, but only by bringing utter catastrophe upon himself, for it is none but he who has unwittingly caused the city's afflictions.

Twentieth-century scholarship has continually reassessed the relationships in Sophocles between fate and freewill, character and action.<sup>34</sup> The litmus test is always the unforgettable story of the lame king who becomes a scapegoat, and who blinds himself at the precise point when he is no longer blind to the truth of which his audience, in this paradigmatic exercise in dramatic irony, has been painfully aware all along. Oedipus was doomed *before he was born* to kill his father and marry his mother, and commits both crimes unwittingly. Some interpreters see him as a virtuous man, through whom Sophocles shows the absolute injustice

<sup>34</sup> e.g. John Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London, 1962); P. E. Easterling, 'Character in Sophocles', *Greece & Rome* xxiv (1977), 121–9; J. Gould, 'Dramatic character and "human intelligibility" in Greek tragedy', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* cciv (1978), 43–67.



## INTRODUCTION

(from a human perspective) of divine preordnance; others point to the unattractive sides of his character—his temper, his paranoia, the way he threatens Teiresias, Creon, and the Theban with arbitrary punishment, and his arrogant conviction that his intellect can surmount any obstacles in his, or his city's path. This view renders Oedipus somehow culpable after the event; his fate is rendered justifiable by his abrasive personality.

Yet both views oversimplify the sophisticated dialectics of the Sophoclean negotiations between character, action, and responsibility. Although the Greeks had none of the Christian cognitive machinery which lies behind, for example, Renaissance drama, a limited psychological vocabulary, and only an embryonic notion of the autonomous individual will, Sophocles still makes it entirely plausible that tragic victims can only bring their fates upon themselves because of the type of people that they are. If Oedipus had not been a self-sufficient individual, confident in his ability to escape the dreadful destiny the Delphic oracle had revealed to him as a youth, he would never have left Corinth, the city in which he grew up, and the couple he believed to be his natural parents. If he had not been a proud and daring man, he would not have retaliated single-handedly against the travellers, including his real father Laius, who tried to push him off the road at the triple junction between Thebes and Delphi. He certainly would not have killed them. If he had not been a man of searching intellect and sense of civic responsibility, he could never have solved the riddle of the supernatural Sphinx and released Thebes from servitude, thus meriting election to kingship of the very city of his birth and marriage to its queen. It is the same public spirit and curiosity which drives Oedipus on to solve the new riddle—who killed king Laius?—and thence to the discovery of the horrifying truth. The play's agonizingly slow accumulation of the 'facts' of the past simultaneously builds up a picture of Oedipus' egregious personality. The magisterial subtlety of Sophoclean characterization thus lends credibility to the breathtaking coincidences which led to his hero's unconscious breaching of fundamental taboos. Oedipus can only fulfil his exceptional