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The Complete Plays of Sophocles





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The Complete Plays of Sophocles

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Introduction

A life more satisfactory than Sophocles' is difficult to imagine. Its timing, first of all, could not be more propitious, for his lifespan coincided precisely with the Golden Age of Athenian intellectual, artistic, and political glory. He was born in 496 B.C., and so was reaching maturity at the time of the great victory over the Persians at Salamis (480 B.C.) which initiated the era of Athenian preeminence, and he died in 406, two years before Athens fell to the Spartans. On his youth we are informed by a single, but revealing passage in Athenaeus (1.20 e f):

Sophocles, besides being handsome in his youth, became proficient in dancing and music, while still a lad, under the instruction of Lampus. After the battle of Salamis, at any rate, he danced to accompaniment of his lyre around the trophy, naked and anointed with oil. Others say he danced with his cloak on. And when he brought out the *Thamyris* he played the lyre himself. He also played ball with great skill when he produced the *Nausicaa*.

To perform in the chorus celebrating the victory he must have been wealthy and of good family as well as handsome and a good singer. In his maturity his circle included the greatest galaxy of thinkers and artists the world has known. He appears to have been an intimate of Herodotus, to whom he addressed a poem and from whom he borrowed motifs in *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. He was a popular favorite; in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (completed after Sophocles' death) it is said of him, that "he was amiable on earth and he is amiable here." The respect and affection which he enjoyed brought him election to high office, which he bore with modesty. Plutarch (*Life of Nicias* 15) has this story:

Once when his fellow commanders were deliberating on some matter of general moment, Nicias bade Sophocles the poet state his opinion first, as being the senior general on the board. Hereupon Sophocles said: "I am the oldest man but you are the senior general."

He wrote more plays than his rivals and won far more prizes. He retained his intellectual and physical vigor to the end of his very long life; the superb *Philoctetes* and no less superb *Oedipus at Colonus* were written when he was approaching or had reached ninety. The story is told (in Cicero's treatise *On Old Age* and elsewhere) that when his family instituted a friendly suit to declare him senile in order to relieve him of business cares, he was asked by the judge to show what he was occupying himself with, and read the famous ode in praise of White Colonus; the family naturally lost the suit. Not long before this he is said to have fallen in love with a woman called Theoris, though at the beginning of Plato's *Republic* he is quoted as expressing great relief at being freed at last from the tyranny of love.

And a final satisfaction, especially for a Greek, was that he left behind a son who followed his own profession with success. We can only agree with the lines of the comic poet Phrynichus: "Blessed Sophocles who died after a long life, a man fortunate and successful, who made many fine tragedies. And finely did he die, having had no evil to endure." The concluding phrase seems to allude to a recurrent thought in Sophocles, expressed as follows at the end of the *Oedipus*: "While our eyes wait to see the destined final day, we must call no one happy who is of mortal race until he has crossed life's border free from pain." His own good fortune did not blind Sophocles to the precariousness of human existence and the tragedy implicit in human life. He saw life steadily (in Matthew Arnold's phrase) and he saw it whole.

Sophocles composed more than 120 plays, thus outdoing his older contemporary Aeschylus and his younger Euripides. His tetralogies won 24 "firsts," which means that 96 of his plays were victorious. Of the whole number only the seven in this volume have survived intact—because they were selected for school use in later antiquity. Of the others we have some snippets, either in quotations by later Greek authors or on scraps of papyrus recovered in Egypt. The most extensive papyrus fragment contains some 400 lines of the *Ichneutae*

or *Trackers*, a satyr play dealing with the prodigious infancy of Hermes; but these lines are too broken to yield a readable translation. We can only hope that the ancient scholars who chose the plays that survived have given us a fair representation of Sophocles' work.

Ancient criticism agreed with the judges of Sophocles' own day in regarding him as the greatest master of tragedy. The *Poetics* of Aristotle, our indispensable (though not flawless) guide to Greek tragedy, shows a preference for Sophocles over his rivals. But the Academy as well as the Lyceum preferred Sophocles. Polemo (314-276), who was head of the Academy, says that Homer is the Sophocles of epic and Sophocles the Homer of tragedy. Ancient criticism generally agrees with this view. It agrees too with Aristotle's preference for *Oedipus the King* as the best play. "Would anyone in his senses," writes the author of *On the Sublime*, "give the single tragedy of Oedipus for all the works of Ion in a row?" Traditional criticism has tended to follow the ancient view of Sophocles as the model, with Aeschylus marking the preparation and Euripides the decline; we now recognize that categorization of this kind is meaningless, for each poet had his own objectives and his own methods for reaching them.

Superficially the plays of all three surviving Greek tragedians are similar: they quarry the same cycles of myths, and often use the same story and the same *dramatis personae*, they show the same structure of "spoken" portions interlarded with choral lyrics, and they are all concerned with questions of man's fate. The lives of the three overlapped and they learned from one another, Aeschylus from Sophocles, Sophocles from Aeschylus and Euripides, Euripides from Aeschylus and Sophocles. Even slight variations in outlook and technique are therefore conscious and meaningful. The easiest approach to the special qualities of each as playwright and thinker, and especially of Sophocles who is our present concern, is to compare his techniques with those of the other two.

According to Aristotle, innovations introduced by Sophocles include enlargement of the chorus from twelve to fifteen members, introduction of painted scenery, and the addition of a third actor. This last was far the most important, and was adopted in the later plays of Aeschylus. The availability of a third actor multiplied opportunities for dramatic intrigue,

with consequent enrichment of plot, and made fuller and more subtle characterization possible. Even if the third actor has little to add to a dialogue his very presence on the stage sharpens the significance of others' speeches and reactions. All of these contributions are in keeping with Sophocles' highly developed and sophisticated sense of theater, in which he surpasses both Aeschylus and Euripides. A character may go on some errand, like Chrysothemis in *Electra*, or be summoned for some information, like the shepherd in *Oedipus the King*, be virtually forgotten, and then dramatically arrive on the scene to a situation drastically changed. Or, just before the catastrophe, the chorus will sing an exultant song of joyous anticipation to give the disaster that comes upon its heels greater impact.

The two actors in Aeschylus' early plays tend to illustrate clashes of large principles, in which Aeschylus was more interested than in individuals, and serve almost as impersonal symbols. Sophocles is content to accept the principles as fixed data, as if they were laws of gravity or electricity, part of the world order, and instead concerns himself with the individual's reaction to them. This explains another peculiarity of Sophocles (in which he was followed by Euripides) as contrasted with Aeschylus. Aeschylus composed trilogies on interconnected subjects, so that they are in effect triptychs, almost three acts of one large play. For working out the history of crime and countercrime and their eventual solution, as in the *Oresteia* (which is the only complete trilogy we have), such spaciousness is required. But if it is the reaction of the individual as a person, not as an abstract figure in the history of a principle, that is paramount, then a single play is sufficient. Sophocles, too, composed trilogies, as the usage of the Greek theater required, but the three plays were not connected in subject and might derive from different cycles of myth.

Sophocles' concern with individual character and the maturity of his dramatic structure suggest a move in the direction of the theater as we know it; but Sophocles did not travel so far in this direction as did Euripides. Euripides, too, used the familiar myths, but in Euripides the figures who bear the great names of the heroic past are essentially contemporary types oppressed by contemporary problems. His descent from the heroic is a perceptible move in the direc-

tion of Menander and the comedy of manners. Sophocles maintains the high dignity of the heroic level; his major figures are indeed as grandiose as Homer's. Not that he was ignorant of what men are actually like: he himself said that Euripides showed men as they are while he portrayed men as they should be. It is even possible that plays like Sophocles' *Electra* or his *Trachinian Women* are in part intended as "corrections" of Euripides' vulgarity in handling similar themes. Euripides' *Electra* is slatternly, self-pitying, sex-ridden; and because she and the other characters in his *Electra*, victims as well as slayers, are recognizable as commonplace types, the murders of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are as unjustifiable as they are shocking. Euripides does not keep within the heroic code but is criticizing it from without. We do not apply contemporary criteria to Sophocles' *Electra* because the traditional level of heroic remoteness is maintained and raises the problem above the contemporary. Euripides' *Medea* is a wildly passionate woman who knowingly uses a poisoned garment to destroy her rival; in Sophocles' *Trachinian Women* Deianeira also uses a poisoned garment, but with the thought that the drug is beneficent, not lethal. She is a mature and gentle creature who wanted only to ensure domestic felicity. And while her mistake causes her suicide and Heracles' painful death, that death was the fated instrument of his transfiguration.

The Heracles of the *Trachinian Women* may serve as the type of the Sophoclean hero, the large and intense and tormented character who is by no means faultless but who nevertheless achieves the status of hero. A hero, in the Greek sense, is a man who by his extraordinary career has pushed back the horizons of what is possible for humanity and is therefore deemed worthy of commemoration after his death. He is not a flawless man, above the nature of ordinary humanity, but his flaws are inherent in and inseparable from the virtues which enable him to become a hero. Achilles himself was self-centered and ruthless, but without these traits he would not have been Achilles, and his status as hero is unquestioned. Some of Sophocles' heroes may be questionable, and his plays then amount to a weighing of merits and demerits and an eventual demonstration that the hero is in fact worthy of heroization.

The clearest example is in the oldest Sophoclean play,

Ajax. Ajax is an unqualified brute, arrogant, obsessed with self, savage, unfeeling to his wife and his crew who are dependent upon him. His flaws are serious indeed, but he is the only Greek who could stem the rush of the Trojan army to burn the Greek fleet—not a service a nambypamby could render. Did such a man deserve heroization? The *Ajax* is a demonstration that he did. More popular plays like *Oedipus the King* and the *Antigone* receive fuller illumination from this viewpoint. It is always tempting to readers to look upon the *Oedipus* as a tableau of horrible crimes and their just requital: Oedipus had done lawless things and in the end received deserved punishment. So conceived, the requital seems monstrously unfair, for Oedipus had done his best to avoid the crimes and had committed them unwittingly. Actually the play is rather a glorification than a condemnation of Oedipus. Only an uncommonly good man would persist in his investigation so unflaggingly even after it had become manifest that it might be disastrous. He did indeed have flaws: he was self-righteous and hasty and suspicious of his well-wishers; but if he had not been these things he could never have gone on with his inquiry. Though he is destroyed in the end, in a true sense he is the victor, and the conclusion is satisfying rather than disturbing to the perceptive reader. According to human standards (what Greek could know what divine standards might be?) Oedipus had behaved not only well, but extraordinarily well and had asserted the dignity of manhood. If there is a villain in the piece it is not Oedipus but Apollo; however, Apollo cannot be a villain for he is a god, and the moral arithmetic of the gods is different from men's and inscrutable to men. When a man behaving well as man is nevertheless tripped up by powers he cannot control or even understand, then we have tragedy. And the "big" man who has the mind and the energy to pioneer is most exposed. That is why tragedy, and the tragedy of Sophocles in particular, is concerned with the fate of "big" men.

The Sophoclean heroine whom modern readers are most tempted to consider flawless is Antigone, who suffered martyrdom for loyalty to her dead brother. But martyrdom is not necessarily a virtue among the Greeks; and to look upon her as a saint and her persecutor Creon as a villain is to make of the play a black-and-white melodrama, which

Greek tragedy never is. To the original audience Creon's position must have seemed sounder than Antigone's. Could a conscientious ruler honor a traitor who had come to destroy the city equally with the patriot who had saved it? And should not Antigone have accepted the authoritative decree, as Ismene says it was proper for a woman and a subject to do? In the end Creon suffers more than Antigone, who got the martyrdom she seems to crave, and we might almost expect the play to be called *Creon* instead of *Antigone*. But the title is right, for Antigone is the one who enlarges ordinary human limitations by being willing to sacrifice love and life for a principle. She too may be obsessed and twisted, but unless she were these things she could never have carried her enlargement of humanity through. As always in Sophocles the chorus and lesser characters counsel the moderation appropriate to ordinary humanity, but it is an enrichment for ordinary humanity to see one self-willed woman, flawed though she be, step out of ordinary limitations. Just as Oedipus though blinded is the victor in his play, so Antigone though dead is victor in hers.

Involved in both *Ajax* and *Antigone* is the question of the proper balance between the claims of the individual and the claims of the society of which he is a part. How far must a man suppress his own will in the interests of his society? What if society's demands are unreasonable or wrong? How far may an individual disregard society in order to do what he himself is convinced is right? To some degree the theme is touched upon in all the plays; it is central in the *Philoctetes*. Philoctetes was a respected member of the original Greek expedition against Troy and possessor of the wonderful bow which Heracles had used in his labors. En route to Troy he had offered to guide his fellow-chieftains to a particular shrine, and had there been bitten by a serpent. Because of the stench of his wound and his loud cries of pain his shipmates marooned him on a desert island. (The island in question was in fact inhabited, as everyone in the audience would know and as Aeschylus and Euripides represented it in their plays on Philoctetes; the fact that Sophocles makes it deserted demonstrates that his theme is isolation vs. participation.) On this island the helpless cripple, thanks to his bow, eked out a living for ten years, when the Greeks, admonished that Troy could not be taken without Philoctetes and

his bow, sent Odysseus and Achilles' son Neoptolemus to fetch Philoctetes back to the army. Philoctetes refuses to go, though he is promised recovery and fame, and would actually use the bow, which Neoptolemus voluntarily restores to him after robbing him of it, to kill Odysseus. His desire is to live in isolation with Neoptolemus who, in his view, is being corrupted by Odysseus and the Greek host. Heracles, who had used the bow for the benefit of mankind, appears as *deus ex machina* and persuades Philoctetes to rejoin the society he has abjured.

The problem of Neoptolemus echoes and underscores the problem of Philoctetes. He too was a member of society in good standing, was utterly disillusioned by society's apparent immorality, and then made to realize that duty and interest alike dictated rational subservience to the claims of society. Neoptolemus had come to Troy after the death of his father Achilles in the tenth year of the war. But instead of the noble warrior's career he had envisioned he finds his first assignment is to trick a helpless man of his only means of subsistence. He is sickened; but in the end he rejoins society as a mature and responsible member. Odysseus is not the villainous corrupter of youth he is sometimes represented to be but the conscientious and realistic agent of the state. At another time, as Odysseus himself says, he could enjoy being honest as much as any man, but it was a luxury he could not afford when the interests of all demanded chicanery.

Sophocles was reputed to be a pious man, and indeed his plays are filled with the power of the gods and the unfailing fulfillment of their oracles. But what are we to think of gods who are the ultimate cause of the heroes' catastrophes? How could a god cause a serpent to ruin Philoctetes when he was on a religious mission, or why should a god trap Oedipus in a hopeless snare? Aeschylus had labored to justify the ways of the gods to men according to human notions of justice, and Euripides went so far as to say that gods who do evil are no gods. Sophocles acknowledges the power of the gods but does not assume that their standards of justice are the same as man's. Protagoras, a philosopher contemporary with Sophocles, said "Man is the measure of all things," and also said, "Of the gods I cannot speak because I do not know." The sphere of the gods and the sphere of men are disparate. The gods behave as it becomes gods to behave, and men must

behave as it becomes men to behave, not necessarily as the gods behave. Actually man has a greater responsibility for moral choice than if he were bidden to follow a prescribed code. When he does transgress, even unwittingly as Oedipus did, he is tainted; and in *Oedipus the King* Oedipus acknowledges that he is "vile." In *Oedipus at Colonus*, however, we detect a new note. Oedipus does not deny that he is tainted, for he had in fact killed his father and married his mother, but he insists that he is not in a moral sense a guilty man: "In nature how was I evil?" This is not rebelliousness but a clarification and an enhancement of the notion of moral responsibility. And the justice of the argument is approved, for at his death Oedipus receives divine recognition and his tomb becomes a seat of beneficent power.

In its conception of tragedy as in its art, *Oedipus at Colonus* is the culmination of Sophocles' career. The play is something of a valedictory, like Shakespeare's *Tempest*, and something of an apocalypse. The scene is the parish of Sophocles' boyhood and the description of the landscape and religious ritual suggest cherished memories of long ago. The dramatis personae, Oedipus, Antigone, and the rest, are those associated with his greatest successes. And as Athens is sinking to its fall, Sophocles recalls, in the person of its ideal king of legend, its nobility, integrity and hospitality and its mission of championship of the weak, and ends with a note of hope and benediction. Oedipus enters as a blind old man who has walked a long way, but has retained his pride and his integrity, and when the moment of his departure comes, he walks on and out, this time with clearer vision than his guides, to the destined secret spot where, amidst peals of thunder, he is translated to a new and eternal existence.

Such observations on Sophocles' dramaturgy as the foregoing, whether of similar or widely different tenor, are accessible to the Greekless reader who looks at the plays attentively. But the refinements of Sophocles' literary techniques most of us must take on faith. For a helpful analogy we might turn to architecture, which uses stones instead of foreign words, and specifically to the Parthenon, which was built while Sophocles was writing. What makes the Parthenon so rhythmically satisfying is not its apparent regularity but its subtly calculated irregularities. The columns are not straight-sided, perpendicular, and evenly spaced, as they appear, and the base line is

not level but curved. The result is a seemingly natural and powerful whole, so rhythmical and harmonious that its power is never obtrusive. The analogous art of Sophocles serves similarly to regularize extremes of passionate intensity into serene and natural entities of classical detachment and permanence.

What is wanted and possible in a translation of Sophocles is not a reproduction of his art but the sense that the art is there. Admirable as certain poetic versions of Sophocles are their excellence is not (and should not be) identical with the excellence of their originals. A reader who attends to Sophocles as a monument in the history of the human spirit may find transparent prose a truer reflection than verse. But the prose must not be commonplace, as it may be for Euripides; it must communicate the stately remoteness of the original. The most carefully wrought prose version of Sophocles in English is that of Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb (1841–1905), which has the merit not only of extreme accuracy but also of maintaining a high formalism and dignity appropriate to Sophocles. Jebb's device for lending dignity to a prose version of stately poetry was to use archaism in vocabulary, wordforms, word order—in a word, to emulate the English of the King James Bible. But to readers not brought up on the King James Bible the extremes of the "forsoothly" mode are sometimes unintelligible and may sometimes seem ludicrous. The object of the present edition has been to substitute moderate for extreme archaism in vocabulary, syntax, and word order in cases where the modern reader might be puzzled, but without distorting the emphasis or vitiating the sense of stately remoteness which is Jebb's special merit. The choral portions have been left untouched or very slightly edited; their differences from the "spoken" portions should be perceptible, and the use of italic type as well as the retention of archaisms is intended to make them so.

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Ajax

The character of Ajax, as fixed in the *Iliad* and therefore familiar to the audience, was of an extraordinarily powerful man, next to Achilles the best of the Greek warriors at Troy, but also of a man extraordinarily headstrong and self-centered. After Achilles' death, according to legend, the divine armor made for him by Hephaestus was to be given to the worthiest of his survivors, and Ajax naturally expected the prize. Instead the chieftains voted to award it to Odysseus. Ajax' consequent hatred of Odysseus is mentioned in the *Odyssey*: when the two meet in Hades, Ajax refuses to speak to Odysseus but turns his back on him.

The opening of the play informs us that in chagrin at his disappointment Ajax was on the point of murdering the Greek generals; to save them Athena darkened Ajax' senses so that he mistook the army's livestock for the generals and slaughtered them instead. When Ajax recovers and realizes, not that his intention was wrong, but that its miscarriage would make him ridiculous, he determines on suicide. He ignores the pleas of Tecmessa and the chorus, bids his child farewell, and departs. Soon he returns, ostensibly reconciled to life; he says he will go and bury his unlucky sword by the seaside and then have peace forevermore. After Ajax has gone and the chorus has sung its premature joy, a messenger from Teucer brings Calchas' warning that Ajax must be kept indoors that day. The chorus and Tecmessa leave to find him. The scene changes to seaside sedge (the only change of scene in the extant plays of Sophocles) and there Ajax makes a farewell speech, with a curse for the Atreidae, buries his sword point up, and falls upon it. The searchers enter and the

body of Ajax is found, fittingly by Tecmessa. Teucer comes to bury the body but is forbidden to do so, first by Menelaus, whom he outfaces, and then by Agamemnon, who presents a reasonable argument for denying burial. Odysseus, despite Ajax' animosity toward him, persuades Agamemnon to allow the burial.

Modern readers sometimes find the dispute about the burial anticlimactic and irrelevant; but the last third of the *Ajax* is not a *Hamlet* without Hamlet. It is not an episode in Ajax' life which is the theme but the totality of his career. To assess his career justly the arguments for and against burial are relevant, and the final decision puts the seal on Ajax' claim to heroization.

PERSONS

ATHENA	TECMESSA
ODYSSEUS	TEUCER
AJAX	MENELAUS
CHORUS OF SALAMINIAN SAILORS	AGAMEMNON
EURYSACES, ATTENDANTS, HERALDS	(<i>mute characters</i>)

SCENE: Before the tent of Ajax at Troy.



(*ODYSSEUS is seen scanning footprints, ATHENA aloft.*)

ATHENA. Always I have seen you, son of Laertes, seeking to snatch some occasion against your enemies; and now at the tent of Ajax by the ships, where he is posted at the very edge of the camp, I see you pausing long on his trail and scanning his fresh tracks, to find whether he is within or abroad. Your course keen-scenting as a Laconian hound's leads you well to your goal. Even now the man is gone within, sweat streaming from his face and from hands that have slain with the sword. There is no further need for you to peer within these doors. But what is your aim in this eager quest? Speak, so that you may learn from her who can give you light.

ODYSSEUS. Voice of Athena, dearest to me of the Immortals, how clearly, though you are unseen, do I hear your call and seize it in my soul, as when a Tyrrhenian clarion speaks from mouth of bronze! You have rightly discerned that I am hunting to and fro on the trail of a foeman, Ajax of the mighty shield. It is he and no other that I have been tracking so long.