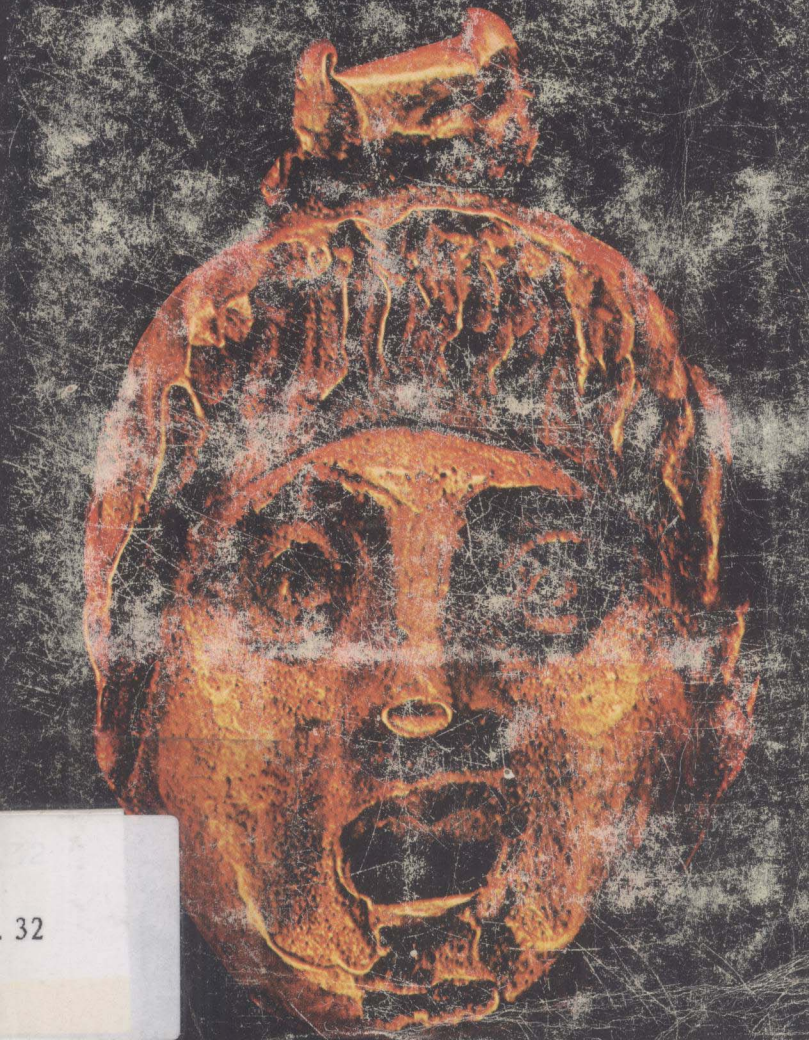
Penguin Classics

SOPHOCLES

THE THEBAN PLAYS



THE PENGUIN CLASSICS

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SOPHOCLES was born at Colonus, just outside Athens, in 496 B.C., and lived ninety years. His long life spanned the rise and decline of the Athenian Empire; he was a friend of Pericles, and though not an active politician he held several public offices, both military and civil. The leader of a literary circle and friend of Herodotus, he was interested in poetic theory as well as practice, and he wrote a prose treatise *On the Chorus*. He seems to have been content to spend all his life at Athens, and is said to have refused several invitations to royal cou

Sophocles first won a prize for tragic drama in 468, defeating the veteran Aeschylus. He wrote over a hundred plays for the Athenian theatre, and is said to have come first in twenty-four contests. Only seven of his tragedies are now extant, these being *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, *Women of Trachis*, *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, and the posthumous *Oedipus at Colonus*. A substantial part of *The Searchers*, a satyr-play, was recovered from papyri in Egypt in modern times. Fragments of other plays remain, showing that he drew on a wide range of themes; he also introduced the innovation of a third actor in his tragedies. He died in 406 B.C.

E. F. WATLING was educated at Christ's Hospital and University College, Oxford. His translations of Greek and Roman plays for the Penguin Classics now comprise the seven plays of Sophocles, nine plays of Plautus, and a selection of the tragedies of Seneca.

SOPHOCLES

THE THEBAN PLAYS

KING OEDIPUS

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS

ANTIGONE

TRANSLATED BY E. F. WATLING

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INTRODUCTION

I

SOPHOCLES the Athenian was born in 496 B.C. and lived ninety years. A memoir written by an anonymous scholar of a later age – perhaps two hundred years after the poet's death – gives us a picture of his life which we may take to be substantially true in outline and in spirit, though some of its circumstantial details may be apocryphal: a picture of a childhood spent under the best influences of a prosperous and enlightened home, a youth educated in a harmonious physical and intellectual discipline and endowed with grace and accomplishment, a manhood devoted to the service of the state in art and public affairs, and an old age regarded with affectionate respect.

He lived through a cycle of events spatially narrow, no doubt, in the scale of national and global history, but without parallel in intensity of action and emotion, and of lasting significance in the procession of human achievement. At his birth, Athens was still in the infancy of her life as a free democracy, making her first experiments with the new machinery of popular government. During his boyhood she was defending that life and liberty, and those of Greece and the Europe of the future, against the aggression of the power-state of Persia. In his sixteenth year he was the chosen leader and symbol of Athenian youth in the ceremonial celebration of the decisive victory of Salamis. Through most of the fifty comparatively peaceful years during which Athens created and enjoyed the richness and breadth of a free social life and culture, Sophocles contributed to the expression of that culture in the theatre which was its prime temple, performing also in his course the public duties which were as much the province of the artist as of the man of action. From his sixty-fifth year another struggle for existence engaged and drained the forces of Athens and her miniature empire, when in the so-called Peloponnesian War all Greece was divided by contrary ideals of

statecraft and opposing ambitions for power. He died as that struggle was drawing to a close, leaving Athens materially exhausted and spiritually wrecked by the physical and moral strains of the conflict.

For first-hand acquaintance with the life and spirit of this momentous age we naturally turn to its surviving literature; and of this, apart from the two major historical works of Herodotus and Thucydides, by far the greatest bulk, and incomparably the greatest in range and power, is the work of the three tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the comedian, Aristophanes. The lyric poetry of Greece belongs mainly to the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., that of the fifth century being traditional rather than contemporary or progressive in spirit; while the full flowering of prose in oratory and philosophy is not to be seen until the fourth century. What then, was this Athenian theatre, into which was poured so much of the creative power of the age, and whose literature, it seems, is almost all that is left to us with which to fill out the factual narratives of the historians?

Negatively – to rid ourselves of the associations of modern 'theatre' – we must determine what it was *not*. It was not a place of daily or nightly resort and entertainment. It was not a medium in which any ingenious story-teller could make a living by the invention of novel, amusing, or exciting fictions to tickle the fancy of a chance audience. It was not a place in which to hold the mirror up to life in all its superficial and ephemeral detail. Even its comedy, which drew upon the contemporary social and political scene for subject-matter, did so only to add a topical spice to a highly stylised and largely conventional product. But tragedy, with which we are here concerned, touched the deepest centres of man's individual and corporate consciousness.

Tragedies were presented in the Athenian theatre at certain annual festivals. At the principal one, held in the spring, the whole population, swelled by large numbers of visiting strangers, was assembled on a number of successive days, and for

the greater part of each day, in an open-air theatre accommodating about 17,000 spectators, to witness a cycle of dramatic performances presented amid high civic splendour and religious ritual. On the practitioners of this art, therefore, rested a solemn responsibility, and for its worthy performance the rewards, in esteem and possibly in material value, were substantial. Competition was the order of the day, and was not felt to be incongruous with the religious dignity of the occasion. Before a tragedy could be performed at all, it had to pass the scrutiny of a selection board, and its acceptance for production already conferred a high honour on the author. In performance it competed with the work of two other chosen authors, and the victory in the whole contest was awarded by the votes of a panel of adjudicators, influenced, no doubt, to some degree by the reactions of the audience. For the purposes of this contest, the work of each author consisted of a group of four plays – three tragedies, either independent of each other or forming a 'trilogy' on a connected theme, and a 'satyr-play' in lighter vein. Such were the basic conditions of the dramatist's art, and within them was established a code of technique and convention of which more must now be said – though the new reader may, at this point, prefer (and not unwisely) to turn to the plays themselves and form his own impressions of them before seeking the answers to such questions as they will probably suggest.

II

The origins of the art of drama, in Greece as elsewhere, lie far beyond the reach of literary or even archaeological evidence. At its roots lie not only the human instinct for narrative and impersonation, but also the instinct for the ritualistic expression and interpretation of the power of natural forces, the cycle of life and death, and the nexus of past, present, and future. By the time the art emerges into anything like historical daylight, it is evident that the elements of dance and song are essential to its nature and that its prime function is the expression of the feel-

ings and reasonings excited by man's battles with the eternal forces that appear to govern his life – in Sophoclean words 'the encounters of man with more than man'. These two characteristics – the choric element and the religious note – survive throughout the great period of Greek tragedy. In the earliest plays of Aeschylus the strictly dramatic element is hardly greater than, for instance, that of a modern oratorio; the play is a poem recited or sung by a 'chorus' with one or two 'characters' to personify its leading themes; and even with Euripides the innovator, the Chorus, though often standing aloof from the now more highly developed plot and action, is still the unifying and commenting interpreter of the drama. In common parlance a dramatic performance was as often called a 'chorus' as a 'drama'.

Sophocles stands midway between Aeschylus and Euripides in this respect. For him, the dramatic action is vital and to a great extent realistic, but the Chorus is also essential to the play both in its capacity as actor in the events of the drama, and as 'presenter' of its dominating theme in lyric terms; and a particularly subtle and interesting feature of his technique is the way in which the Chorus, distinctly characterised as 'Elders of Thebes', 'People of Colonus', and so on, bridge the footlights, as it were, between spectator and stage, their presence and participation in the acted events heightening the vividness and urgency of the action. With them we, the audience, are citizens of Thebes, witnesses of the passion of Oedipus, the martyrdom of Antigone; whose conflicts must not only be fought out, but must be fought out in public, submitted to the scrutiny and judgment of their fellow-men. Sometimes, indeed, this double function of the Chorus, as actor and as commentator, leads, we may think, to a somewhat too palpable inconsistency. The Chorus of *Antigone*, in their dramatic character, must express a submissive, if rather unenthusiastic, loyalty to their king, Creon, and are heard to reprove Antigone as having 'gone to the outermost limit of daring, and stumbled against Law enthroned'; 'authority,' they opine, 'cannot afford to

connive at disobedience'. But in the greater detachment of their lyric utterances they are instinctively aware, as we must be, that the truth of the situation, and of the tragedy, lies deeper than that. For it is here a question of two stubborn wills, each loyal to a principle good in itself, but each pressing that loyalty with ruthless single-mindedness to the point at which it breaks against the other, and on both the disaster falls. Yet there is a plausibility and a dramatic necessity in this convention. The tragedy, whatever its subject, is *our* tragedy. We, like the Chorus, are both in it and spectators of it. And while the tragedy is played out, we identify ourselves now with this character and now with that – inconsistent, vacillating mortals that we are. But the tragedy is not fully played out, the story not fully told, until we have looked the whole matter squarely in the face and commented on it, so far as lies in us, truthfully, impartially, without passion, bias, or self-deception.

It is, then, in the Chorus as persons, and in their more impersonal lyric interludes, that we shall chiefly observe that religious approach to the dramatic theme which, as we have said, is an essential characteristic of Greek Tragedy. It remains to notice some further consequences of this religious approach. The Greek dramatists could, no doubt, if they had been so minded, have constructed plays of 'ordinary life' in which the tragic aspects of man's ambition or perversity should be starkly depicted against a contemporary background. But dramatic convention grows and changes slowly, and the fact remains that it was taken as axiomatic that the play should tell some already established story of the legendary and heroic past. (The few exceptions to this rule only demonstrate the unsuitability of any other kind of theme for such treatment as the conventions demanded.) Indeed, it was not necessary that the play should 'tell a story' self-contained and complete. Since the audience was already in possession of the main facts of the story, the way was prepared for the dramatist to come swiftly to whatever situation in it he chose for the exposition of his theme.

Some element of narrative, of course, remained, as well as much scope for originality in the ordering of the incidents within the chosen field; but the attention of the audience was not primarily to be held by the factor of suspense or the desire to 'see what happens'. And this was the most fitting condition for an art-form which was to invite not a passing curiosity but profound contemplation of eternal truths. In addition, on the technical side, it gave the dramatist that powerful and subtle weapon of 'dramatic irony', which Sophocles used with especial skill, whereby the audience can judge every speech and action of the play in the light of their previous knowledge of the situation. We are to imagine, then, an Athenian audience listening – for it was more a matter of listening than of looking, even though the *décor*, within its conventional limits, was carried out with lavish care and expense – listening to a tragedy somewhat in the attitude of a Christian audience at a Nativity or Passion play, familiar with the accepted version of the story and thus the more ready to grasp, and to criticise, the particular interpretation offered by the author, and to be struck by any out-of-the-way incident or novel emphasis in his treatment of the subject. It may reasonably be added, without contradiction of the above principle, that part of the function of the drama was to keep alive the old stories, and that some, the youngest, of the audience, must often have found in the theatre their first introduction to them – nor would they have been disappointed, in most cases, of a clear and exciting tale.

III

The three plays included in this volume are derived, it will be seen, from one cycle of legend – that concerning the royal house of Thebes – and may be read, with the connecting narrative which will be found in its place, as a continuous saga. But with a caution. The plays were not written or produced in the order in which they are here placed – the order of the narrative – and they belong to widely different periods in the poet's life. Their

probable dates are: *Antigone*, 442–441 B.C.; *King Oedipus*, 429–420; *Oedipus at Colonus*, 401 (after the poet's death). The series, therefore, cannot have formed a 'trilogy' in the sense already referred to; nor from internal evidence should we have supposed that it did. Beyond the fact that each of the three plays deals with a situation in the Oedipodean family history, there is no unity of theme or treatment between them, and, except for the obvious links of fact connecting them, each constitutes a fresh approach to a distinct and self-contained problem. A minor detail, but significant, is that the respective ages of the persons concerned cannot be harmonized with any probability. Creon, who must be at least as old as his nephew, Oedipus, and speaks of himself as, like him, an old man in *Oedipus at Colonus*, would be still older in *Antigone*; but his character in the latter play is that of a vigorous middle-aged father of a youthful son, who is betrothed to the still youthful Antigone.

In *Antigone* (to take them now in the order of the poet's thought) we are concerned with a single, and comparatively simple, conflict. A king, in full and sincere consciousness of his responsibility for the integrity of the state, has, for an example against treason, made an order of ruthless punishment upon a traitor and rebel – an order denying the barest rites of sepulture to his body, and therefore of solace to his soul. A woman, for whom political expediency takes second place, by a long way, to compassion and piety, has defied the order and is condemned to death. Here is conflict enough, and tragedy – not in the martyrdom of obvious right under obvious wrong, but in the far more bitter, and at the same time more exhilarating, contest between two passionately held principles of right, each partly justifiable, and each to a degree (though one more than the other) vitiated by stubborn blindness to the merits of the opposite. But there is more: between these two antagonists stands a third character, in whom their tragedy, and that of the whole situation, is personified and brought to a single focus – a young man, betrothed to the woman, whom he honours for

her courage and piety, and son to the king, whom he has respected and longs to go on respecting for his fatherhood and for his office. To see statecraft misdirected into blasphemous defiance of piety is for him (and for the Athenian audience) the greater tragedy; the sacrifice of a well-meaning woman, the less. Thus the king's final humiliation and chastening, through the loss of his son, is of higher dramatic significance than the fate of the woman. This triangular tragedy, of the woman ruled by conscience, the king too confident in his authority, and the young man tormented by conflicting loyalties, it is the function of the Chorus to resolve, gradually but in the end uncompromisingly, by appeal to God's law, which alone can hold the scales between opposing and imperfect human wills. All else (to this conclusion the successive choral odes point with cumulative force) – intellect, ambition, power, even love itself – draws mankind as often to evil as to good:

> 'Of happiness the crown
> And chiefest part
> Is wisdom, and to hold
> The gods in awe.
> This is the law
> That, seeing the stricken heart
> Of pride brought down,
> We learn when we are old.'

Returning to the Theban legend in the maturity of his powers, Sophocles produced in *King Oedipus* the masterpiece of his life's work, so far as we can judge from the seven plays surviving out of the hundred or more ascribed to his pen. This is the judgment also of Aristotle, who has this play constantly at his elbow as the perfect type of tragic composition. In brief, its greatness lies in the combination of a faultlessly articulated plot with the profoundest insight into human motive and circumstance. Formally a story of the impact of quite fortuitous mischance upon a man of no exceptional faults or virtues, it lays bare, with a ruthless sincerity worthy of its own protagonist,

the pitfalls lying about the path of man, into which those very unexceptional faults or virtues may at a touch overbalance him, at the bidding of some incalculable chance, and out of which he must raise himself, chastened and ennobled, by the 'greatness in the soul' which alone makes him a match for the eternal powers. The anthropological and religious implications of the story offer fruitful fields of research and speculation to the expert inquirer. The average reader will be well enough rewarded by a study of the more universal human issues of the drama. Oedipus, too complacent in his prosperity, too confident of his sufficiency, too ready to take offence or to impute blame when 'rattled' by the approach of trouble; Oedipus, unshirking in the performance of a self-appointed unpleasant task, unflinching in quest of the truth at whatever cost of terrible self-revelation; Oedipus driven to the summit of passion by agony of body and soul, and returning at the last to humility and selfless resignation: this vast and living portrait of man, surrounded by a group of subsidiary portraits no less vital, has no equal in the Greek, nor perhaps in any other, theatre. The Chorus, fellow-citizens desperately implicated in the awful happenings, are more than ever closely tied to the action, and their moods move swiftly with the march of events. Bewildered and apprehensive, they have little respite for calm reflection or reasoned judgment, and even their final words seem only to deepen the hopeless gloom. What more constructive 'moral' they would draw for us is implied, rather than stated, in their moods of apprehension lest divine law should after all be found wanting and a lurking spirit of defiance be vindicated by the event. This worst calamity at least is averted.

> 'Then learn that mortal man must always look to his ending,
> And none can be called happy until that day when he carries
> His happiness down to the grave in peace.'

These closing words of *King Oedipus* themselves suggest a sequel; but it was only in the closing years of his own long life that Sophocles completed the story with the legend of the

passing of the aged hero. Oedipus does not indeed die happy, but in *Oedipus at Colonus* he is a different man. Though resigned by long endurance to the hardness of his physical lot, the consciousness of defilement coupled with moral innocence has in no way softened his daemonic temper, which blazes out with the old fury in denunciation of his rebellious son and deceitful uncle; but it has brought him to a sense of his symbolic sacredness, as a person set apart, a sufferer in whom others may find redemption. Therefore a special and wonderful end is reserved for him, a passing 'without grief or agony, more marvellous than that of any other man'.

The mood of the play is a singular blend of harshness and serenity, with slow-moving action and a somewhat static plot, and a strongly-marked ritual element which presents some difficulty to the modern reader. The whole is sweetened with the fragrant local atmosphere of a spot long hallowed and cherished in Athenian lore, no other than the poet's own birthplace, the 'white Colonus', to which he pays his farewell tribute in one of his most picturesque odes.

IV

'Hard to analyse, impossible to translate' – such, says Dr J. T. Sheppard (*Greek Tragedy*) is 'Sophoclean language at its best'. In the face of such an admonition from a supreme authority (who has himself produced a masterly version of *King Oedipus*) a new translator may well search his heart for an excuse for his audacity. In the versions which I now offer (largely, I hope, to new and unprejudiced readers) I have taken as my first aim the production of a readable, and actable, dramatic text, not a line-for-line, word-for-word transcription of the original. Inaccuracies are, I hope, as few as is humanly possible; but an accurate rendering is not a translation. The problem of finding English substitutes for Greek idiom and terminology is difficult enough in prose, more difficult in verse, and most difficult of all in drama. For here we require not only the lucidity of