

GREEK THEATRE - SOPHOCLES



The tyrant is a child of Pride
Who drinks from his sickening cup
Recklessness and vanity,
Until from his high crest headlong
He plummets to the dust of hope.

—OEDIPUS THE KING

Sophocles is one of the Ancient Greek dramatists who helped to form the structure of theatre as we know it today.

As with all historical records from over two thousand years ago, the information we have on Sophocles is incomplete. These facts and stories are compiled as the most common.

His Life

- Generally thought to have lived from 496 BC to 406 BC
- Grew up in Colonus, educated in Athens and excelled in all the arts
- Came from a wealthy family
- Aside from being a playwright at other times in his life he was a general, a priest, and worked in government for the Treasury.
- Close friend to Pericles, one of the leaders of Athens

His Plays

We only have plays from three Ancient Greek tragedians: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Sophocles is younger than Aeschylus and older than Euripides. He wrote over a hundred plays but only seven have survived: OEDIPUS THE KING, OEDIPUS AT COLONUS, ANTIGONE, AJAX, TRACHINIAN WOMEN, ELECTRA, and PHILOCTETES.

Aristotle used OEDIPUS THE KING as the best example of tragedy in his definition of the form:

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that has serious implications, is a complete story, and of a certain magnitude. It uses a heightened language and includes incidents that arouse pity and fear in the audience. At the end, there must be an emotional purging, a catharsis, based on the inevitable downfall of the main character.

OEDIPUS THE KING (or OEDIPUS REX) is Sophocles's best-known play and is often cited as the epitome of his body of work, and in the work of Ancient Greek Tragedy.

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Themes Explored

- Pain and suffering caused when humans go against authority
- Wisdom gained through suffering
- Nature of Fate
- Human beings lead by ordinary emotion, most often pride
- Human beings lead by and suffering the consequences of a fatal flaw
- Less about man's relationship with the gods, but more with man's relationships with each other.

Influenced Theatre How?

- Added a third actor
- Relied less on the chorus and more on developing characters
- Introduced painted scenery
- Did away with the trilogy form. Each tragedy was its own story. ANTIGONE, OEDIPUS THE KING and OEDIPUS AT COLONUS are not actually part the same trilogy, and in fact were written out of order and produced in different years. ANTIGONE was written first, OEDIPUS THE KING second and OEDIPUS AT COLONUS was performed after his death.

Interesting Facts

In his first competition he beat Aeschylus (468) In subsequent competitions, he won 24 times and never placed any lower than second. OEDIPUS REX did not win the year it competed.

Did not act in his own plays because his voice wasn't strong enough.

There is a story that he was sued by his son for mental incapacity. In his defence at the trial Sophocles read from the as of yet unperformed, OEDIPUS AT COLONUS. He was instantly acquitted. Do you think this is a true story?

Although there is little known about Sophocles himself, the general thought is that he was a good-natured man his whole life and was very well liked. This is mentioned in THE FROGS by Aristophanes. Dionysus describes Sophocles in the play as "easy" (line 84) as in easy-going. And when he died, it is described that when he came to Hades, he did not stake claim (the chair) as the greatest poet but gave Aeschylus respect:

"Claim it? Not he! When he came down, he kissed with reverence Aeschylus and clasped his hand, and yielded willingly the chair to him." (789-791)

Nothing so evil as money ever grew to be current among men. This lays cities low, this drives men from their homes, this trains and warps honest souls till they set themselves to works of shame; this still teaches folk to practise villainies, and to know every godless deed. But all the men who wrought this thing for hire have made it sure that, soon or late, they shall pay the price.

– ANTIGONE