

# Oedipus the King and Antigone Sophocles

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Editor and Translator





Oedipus the King  
and  
Antigone

# Crofts Classics

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SOPHOCLES

Oedipus the King  
and  
Antigone

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# introduction

## THE POET AND HIS TIMES

Sophocles, the second great figure in the history of Greek, and thus of all, drama, was born in Colonus, a suburb of Athens. Like most Greek writers he played a full part in public life. There was as yet no conception of a professional theater in the modern commercial sense. Performances were limited in Athens to three main festivals each year, and associated with an act of public worship. Sophocles was an amateur in the noblest sense of the word, writing not for financial reward but for the love of his art and the honor of public recognition. Moreover, the poet was still regarded as a teacher, whose function was not merely to entertain but to provide his audiences with matter for reflection. Thus tragedy, while taking its subjects from a body of familiar stories, employs these stories as a framework within which to treat pertinent moral problems. Sophocles' work is a commentary upon the main currents of thought in his own time.

His life covered a period of profound change in Athens and the Greek world generally. The traditional religion, never completely satisfactory, was becoming more and more the target of criticism. Interest was shifting from the nature of the gods to the nature of man himself, his triumphs and tragedies, powers and limitations. In the works of Sophocles, and particularly in the two plays in this volume, this new humanism finds perhaps its purest and most profound expression, without the bitter cynicism we observe in the plays of Euripides, his near contemporary.

## SOPHOCLES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRAGEDY

Tragedy had evolved from its primitive beginnings in dance-drama and sacred songs to become a highly formal art in which the story was told through an alternation of acted scenes and choruses. The number of actors was always limited—before Sophocles to two—though one actor might take several parts in the play; and emphasis had lain chiefly on the chorus. To Sophocles is ascribed the intro-

duction of the third actor. This opened the way for more complex scenes and greater possibilities of characterization, and the importance of the chorus was thereby diminished. Sophocles may therefore be said to have invented character in an art form which had previously been concerned mainly with theme. It is significant that another tradition credits him with being the first to write parts with particular actors in mind. This shift of emphasis from mass spectacle to individual characterization reflects the growing awareness of human personality and motivation.

The plays were written to be performed in an open-air theater devoid of scenic artifice. The focal point was the orchestra, a circular space in which the chorus sang and danced. Round most of this circle ran the steeply raked auditorium. On the far side stood the scene building (*skēnē*) with a painted architectural façade and a low platform on which the actors performed, connected by steps with the orchestra. As in Shakespeare's theater the scene was set by the dramatist's words. He had only to suggest where the action was taking place, and the imagination of the audience did the rest. Against this multi-purpose background the actors, wearing formalized masks and ornate robes, declaimed their parts, with the action punctuated by choral songs. The music of these Greek plays has been lost to us, but it is important to realize that the manner of stage presentation was as formal as the manner of composition. Greek tragedy offered a unique combination of music, dancing, and the spoken word. To find an equivalent we must look not to the modern theater in Europe and America but to the traditional drama forms of the Orient.

#### THE LEGEND

The story of Oedipus appears in Greek literature as early as Homer, and soon passed into the poetic heritage, undergoing several modifications until at last it reached the hands of the dramatists. The version used by Sophocles is as follows.

It was prophesied to Laius and Jocasta, King and Queen of Thebes, that the son to be born to them would murder his father and marry his own mother. To avert this disaster they exposed the child with his feet pinned together (hence the name Oedipus, "swollen-foot") to die on the mountain side. He was found by a kindly shepherd and



taken to Corinth, where he was adopted by the childless Polybus and Merope and brought up as a prince of the royal house. Learning of the prophecy uttered at his birth, he fled his supposed parents in terror. His wanderings brought him back to Thebes. On the way he killed in a roadside brawl an old man who, unknown to him, was King Laius. Thebes was ravaged by the Sphinx, a monster half-beast half-woman, who killed anyone who could not answer her riddle. Oedipus solved it, defeated the Sphinx, and was rewarded with the hand of the widowed Jocasta and the Theban throne. There he ruled in peace and prosperity until the coming of a plague which could only be removed by the discovery of Laius' murderer. Here begins the action of Oedipus the King, and the chain of circumstances which finally reveals to Oedipus the secret of his birth. Oedipus blinded himself and left Thebes to wander in exile, dying in Colonus (the subject of Oedipus at Colonus, not included in this volume). Thebes was ravaged by civil war, in which Oedipus' two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, fought and killed each other. Creon, Jocasta's brother, ascended to the throne. Here Antigone begins, telling of Creon's refusal to bury Polyneices and its tragic consequences.

#### THE PLAYS

Although dealing with successive episodes in the same story the Oedipus plays were not conceived as a unity but written at different points in Sophocles' career. Although, for the sake of clarity, they are printed in the order of the story here, Antigone was in fact written first, in about 441 B.C., then Oedipus the King in about 429 B.C., and finally Oedipus at Colonus, the work of Sophocles' last years, produced posthumously in 401 B.C. They must therefore be regarded as independent compositions, and the reader must not expect to find consistency of characterization between one play and another, or even that the details of the story tally. The Creon of Oedipus the King, for example, differs markedly from the Creon of Antigone. But these discrepancies are irrelevant. It is simply a question of focus. In each play Sophocles has something new to say, and adapts the details of the story to his immediate purpose.

Antigone has been interpreted variously as a conflict between divine and human law, between family and state,

between generosity and intolerance. Superficially the issue is simple. Creon finds it politically expedient to deny burial to the traitor Polyneices; Antigone, claiming that the right of burial transcends all other considerations, performs the last rites over her brother's body and is condemned to death. For the Greeks, to refuse a man burial was the worst of crimes, sentencing him to wander forever a homeless shade, denied entrance to the underworld. Although these associations have now lost something of their force, modern audiences would be no less ready to support Antigone against Creon. Are we then to regard the play as the story of a persecuted heroine? Several considerations argue against this romantic conception. Creon suffers no less than Antigone, and it is with his personal tragedy that the latter part of the play is concerned. Let us say rather that Sophocles has shown us here two strong-willed people in conflict. Neither is selfish; both have a clear conception of where their duty lies, and are resolved to obey its dictates. But Creon's views are too narrow. In achieving his immediate purpose he has blinded himself to more fundamental obligations. Nor is Antigone herself above criticism. If we close our eyes for a moment to the pathos of her situation, we see that Sophocles has not made her particularly sympathetic—note her treatment of Ismene in the opening dialogue, and her callous disregard of Haemon, the boy who will lay down his life for her. Creon's failing is his stubbornness, his refusal to go back on a misguided decision once he has made it; Antigone's, that she is too impatient when faced with human frailty, that she refuses even to attempt appeals and persuasion.

Possibly the greatest problem in interpretation of Antigone has been that of the "double burial." Polyneices' corpse is covered twice, the first time by a mysterious sprinkling of dust. Antigone is caught red-handed making the second attempt. Perhaps the most attractive explanation is that the first "burial" is a natural phenomenon sent by the gods as a warning to Creon, a warning he chooses to ignore.

Oedipus the King, concentrating on a single character, is in many respects a more powerful tragedy than Antigone. Sophocles here develops, in a tightly-knit plot, themes we have already seen in the earlier work. The mechanics of the plot are powerful enough in themselves. Sophocles has

contrived, while dealing with the immediate action, to keep the background constantly in our minds. Past and present are skillfully intertwined, until all the threads are tied together in Oedipus' moment of self-revelation.

Stubbornness is inherent in Oedipus' character as it was in Creon's. In Oedipus, however, this failing is balanced by the corresponding virtue of persistence. He too can make a misguided decision—his accusation of Teiresias and Creon—and cling to it; but his virtue is his ability to go on questioning to the bitter end, even after the first premonitions of disaster. Oedipus is a man who must know the truth at all costs. Teiresias warns him, early in the play, that the truth may be terrible, but he is still impelled to seek it out. His weakness, his "fatal flaw," is his belief that the human intellect is sufficient to itself. His pride in his past achievements, his acknowledged intellectual superiority, mislead him into thinking that cleverness is the same thing as wisdom. The events which his investigation sets in train prove to him that this is not so. Nevertheless he meets his self-inflicted disaster grandly. His self-blinding is not an act of weakness but of strength. Jocasta, superficially the stronger character, is the first to crack. She cannot face the truth, but commits suicide. Oedipus is strong enough to face the truth and go on living. His is the true strength, the strength to learn from suffering, and he ends the play a nobler character than he began it. His self-conceit has been purged and he has won through to a deeper understanding.

Sophocles plays continually on the opposition of light and darkness, sight and blindness. In the Teiresias scene, Oedipus is revealed as mentally blind to his real position and the dangers which surround him. It is the blind prophet who has true knowledge. At the end of the play, when Oedipus has found the truth, he destroys the fallible sense organs which had led him into error. He is now blind, but sees truly.

The tragedy of Oedipus is thus a hymn to man, who for all his limitations and propensities to error still possesses a grandeur which is all his own and owes nothing to the gods. Both Antigone and Oedipus, in spite of all, end nobly. Sophocles was not concerned with delineating every aspect of the human character. There is nothing petty or mean about his protagonists. They are still super-

human figures, moving in a world of great issues, purged of the triviality of our own. Nevertheless Sophocles has created characters with whom we can suffer and sympathize, in whom we can see the virtues and vices of humanity written large.

# principal dates in the life of Sophocles

- B.C. 495 Birth of Sophocles
- 480 Chosen to lead the chorus celebrating the Greek  
victory over Persia at Salamis
- 468 Production of the lost *Triptolemus*; defeats  
Aeschylus in the dramatic festival
- ? Production of *Ajax*
- 443/1 Production of *Antigone*
- 440 Appointed general, serves on expedition against  
the island of Samos
- ? Production of *The Women of Trachis*
- 431 *Outbreak of war between Athens and Sparta*
- ?429 Production of *Oedipus the King*
- ? Production of *Electra*
- 409 Production of *Philoctetes*
- 406 Death of Sophocles
- 401 Posthumous production of *Oedipus at Colonus*