

Greek Tragedy: Sophocles

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Sophocles, 496-405

- ▶ Son of a merchant
- ▶ Led a choir of boys in celebration of Salamis
- ▶ Defeated Aeschylus in first attempt in 462
- ▶ 120 plays (7 survive); 18 first prizes; acted himself
- ▶ Priest of Asclepius; Board of Generals; Director of Treasury
- ▶ Introduced Third Actor



Tyrannos Rex (429 B.C.)

- ▶ Becomes King due to excellence
- ▶ Trying to avoid his Fate, he fulfills it
- ▶ It is not that the gods are cruel; Fate is inexorable
- ▶ Oedipus charges the priest, Teiresias, with treason
- ▶ Hubris of Oedipus: attack on religion and unrelenting pursuit of knowledge



Oedipus At Colonus (401 B.C.): Exiles and Beggars

- ▶ Oedipus, Antigone and appeal to the Eumenides and Athens for sanctuary
- ▶ Chorus wants to expel him for his crimes and pollution
- ▶ Battle for Thebes: body of Oedipus
- ▶ Creon wants Oedipus; Theseus protects him
- ▶ The death and blessing of Oedipus



R. Tegner 1873-1950: Oedipus & Antigone. Photo © Maicar Förlag - GML.

Historical Context of Oedipus at Colonus

- ▶ Composed during the end of the Peloponnesian war and presented after the fall of Athens and rise of the Council of 30 Tyrants
- ▶ Other citizens were exiled, just as Oedipus was exiled from Thebes
- ▶ O.C. makes the argument that Oedipus is not morally responsible for his actions, which were guided by Fate and committed in Ignorance
- ▶ Is the plight of the exiled Oedipus, blinded and humbled, an analogy for the leading Athenians who were exiled?

Antigone (441)

- ▶ Set in the political aftermath of Oedipus' ascension and disappearance from Thebes
- ▶ Eteocles and Polyneices fight over throne and die
- ▶ Uncle Creon becomes King and forbids burial
- ▶ Antigone demands that both bodies be buried; Creon's law forbids burial of the "traitor"
- ▶ Antigone, in act of civil disobedience, throws dirt on him and is jailed and killed
- ▶ Haemon, son of Creon and Antigone's cousin, is in love with her; commits suicide
- ▶ Eurydice, Creon's wife commits suicide
- ▶ Creon is left a broken man at the end of the play

Key Themes in *Antigone*

- ▶ Religious Freedom vs. Sanctity of Law: Antigone's resistance is an act of political disobedience; she chooses either her own law, or the law of the gods, over the political law of the city
- ▶ Feminism: Her civil disobedience is perceived by Creon as an act of female insubordination
- ▶ Rhetoric and Morality: Their debate mirrors the debates of the rhetoricians
- ▶ Hubris Punished: Death of Antigone, Haemon and Creon's wife

Weak Women? (60 ff)

- ▶ Ismene's argument: we are alone in the world, our father a self-admitted pollution; shall we break the law?
"If in defiance of the law we cross a monarch's will? Weak women, think of that, not framed by nature to contend with men. Remember too that the stronger rules...I, by force, obey the powers that be. It is foolish to exceed in anything the golden mean."

Duty to State: How Important is Patriotism?

- ▶ Creon: "I condemn the man who sets his friend before his Fatherland...And I would not count any enemy of the city as a friend; The city is the good ship that holds all our fortunes: if she sails upright, friends will be ours for the making."



Gender: Creon and Antigone

- ▶ Antigone: "it was not Zeus that made the proclamation; nor did Justice...God's ordinances, unwritten and secure are not of today and yesterday; they live forever...these are the laws whose penalties I would not incur from the gods.
- ▶ Creon: "I swear I am no man and she the man if she can win and not pay for it."

Free Speech Silenced

- ▶ Antigone maintains that what she did is honorable and glorious
- ▶ The people would shout out in support of her if they were not afraid
- ▶ The gist of Creon's argument: love for the one brother entails hatred of the rebel brother; but Antigone responds that the god's of death demand rites for both
- ▶ Creon falls back on: "When I am alive no woman shall rule."

Haemon and Creon (Age and Hierarchy)

- ▶ Opportunity for Creon to bow to reason, to listen to a man, to be persuaded by his son
- ▶ His failure to listen to Haemon makes his stubbornness and Hubris appear worse
- ▶ Creon sees it as the duty of Haemon to obey him; As you rule the House, so shall you rule the City
- ▶ Haemon: Be wise; Be flexible; Metaphor of Tree that is rigid and is broken by a storm wind

Creon's Response to the News of Eurydice

- ▶ “By sorrow schooled. Heavy the hand of God, thorny and rough the paths my feet have traveled, humbled my pride, my pleasure turned to pain; Poor mortals, how we labor all in vain.”
- ▶ Upon my head I feel the heavy weight of crushing Fate...
- ▶ Chorus: Of happiness, the greatest part is a wisdom; And to cheat the gods in anything is dangerous; High words full of pride bring down great blows of the gods in retribution; They teach wisdom to the old, paying back crimes of old.

Conclusions

- ▶ Sophocles Questions Gods, but ultimately respects religion as central to the Polis
- ▶ Antigone shows how gender structures the power of the polis
- ▶ Sophocles highlights moral dilemmas in the polis: individualism vs obedience to state; religious freedom vs respect for law
- ▶ Hubris in Sophocles: manifested in blind ambition (Oedipus and Creon) and abuse of rhetoric (Sophistry)