

= Sophocles =

Sophocles (/ ˈsɒfəˈkliːz / ; Greek : Σοφοκλῆς , Sophoklḗs , Ancient Greek : [so.pʰo.klɛ̌ s] ; c . 497 / 6 ? winter 406 / 5 BC) is one of three ancient Greek tragedians whose plays have survived . His first plays were written later than those of Aeschylus , and earlier than or contemporary with those of Euripides . Sophocles wrote 120 plays during the course of his life , but only seven have survived in a complete form : Ajax , Antigone , The Women of Trachis , Oedipus the King , Electra , Philoctetes and Oedipus at Colonus . For almost 50 years , Sophocles was the most celebrated playwright in the dramatic competitions of the city @-@ state of Athens that took place during the religious festivals of the Lenaea and the Dionysia . He competed in 30 competitions , won 18 , and was never judged lower than second place . Aeschylus won 14 competitions , and was sometimes defeated by Sophocles , while Euripides won 5 competitions .

The most famous tragedies of Sophocles feature Oedipus and also Antigone : they are generally known as the Theban plays , although each play was actually a part of a different tetralogy , the other members of which are now lost . Sophocles influenced the development of the drama , most importantly by adding a third actor , thereby reducing the importance of the chorus in the presentation of the plot . He also developed his characters to a greater extent than earlier playwrights such as Aeschylus .

= = Life = =

Sophocles , the son of Sophilus , was a wealthy member of the rural deme (small community) of Hippeios Colonus in Attica , which was to become a setting for one of his plays , and he was probably born there . Sophocles was born a few years before the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC : the exact year is unclear , although 497 / 6 is the most likely . Sophocles was born into a wealthy family (his father was an armour manufacturer) and was highly educated . Sophocles ' first artistic triumph was in 468 BC , when he took first prize in the Dionysia theatre competition over the reigning master of Athenian drama , Aeschylus . According to Plutarch , the victory came under unusual circumstances . Instead of following the usual custom of choosing judges by lot , the archon asked Cimon and the other strategoi present to decide the victor of the contest . Plutarch further contends that following this loss Aeschylus soon left for Sicily . Although Plutarch says that this was Sophocles ' first production , it is now thought that his first production was probably in 470 BC . Triptolemus was probably one of the plays that Sophocles presented at this festival .

In 480 BC Sophocles was chosen to lead the paeon (a choral chant to a god) , celebrating the Greek victory over the Persians at the Battle of Salamis . Early in his career , the politician Cimon might have been one of his patrons , although if he was , there was no ill will borne by Pericles , Cimon 's rival , when Cimon was ostracized in 461 BC . In 443 / 2 he served as one of the Hellenotamiai , or treasurers of Athena , helping to manage the finances of the city during the political ascendancy of Pericles . According to the Vita Sophoclis , in 441 BC he was elected one of the ten generals , executive officials at Athens , as a junior colleague of Pericles , and he served in the Athenian campaign against Samos ; he was supposed to have been elected to this position as the result of his production of Antigone .

In 420 BC , he welcomed and set up an altar for the image of Asclepius at his house , when the deity was introduced to Athens . For this , he was given the posthumous epithet Dexion (receiver) by the Athenians . He was also elected , in 413 BC , one of the commissioners (probouloi) who responded to the catastrophic destruction of the Athenian expeditionary force in Sicily during the Peloponnesian War .

Sophocles died at the age of ninety or ninety @-@ one in the winter of 406 / 5 BC , having seen within his lifetime both the Greek triumph in the Persian Wars and the bloodletting of the Peloponnesian War . As with many famous men in classical antiquity , his death inspired a number of apocryphal stories . The most famous is the suggestion that he died from the strain of trying to recite a long sentence from his Antigone without pausing to take a breath . Another account suggests he choked while eating grapes at the Anthesteria festival in Athens . A third holds that he

died of happiness after winning his final victory at the City Dionysia . A few months later , a comic poet , in a play titled *The Muses* , wrote this eulogy : " Blessed is Sophocles , who had a long life , was a man both happy and talented , and the writer of many good tragedies ; and he ended his life well without suffering any misfortune . " According to some accounts , however , his own sons tried to have him declared incompetent near the end of his life ; he is said to have refuted their charge in court by reading from his as yet unproduced *Oedipus at Colonus* . One of his sons , Iophon , and a grandson , also called Sophocles , also became playwrights .

Several ancient sources mention Sophocles ' homosexuality or bisexuality . Athenaios reported that Sophocles loved boys like Euripides loved women . The poet Ion of Chios relates an anecdote involving Sophocles seducing a serving boy at a symposium , and Athenaios one in which Sophocles is tricked by a hustler .

= = Works and legacy = =

Among Sophocles ' earliest innovations was the addition of a third actor , which further reduced the role of the chorus and created greater opportunity for character development and conflict between characters . Aeschylus , who dominated Athenian playwriting during Sophocles ' early career , followed suit and adopted the third character into his own work towards the end of his life . Aristotle credits Sophocles with the introduction of *skēnographia* , or scenery @-@ painting . It was not until after the death of the old master Aeschylus in 456 BC that Sophocles became the pre @-@ eminent playwright in Athens .

Thereafter , Sophocles emerged victorious in dramatic competitions at 18 Dionysia and 6 Lenaia festivals . In addition to innovations in dramatic structure , Sophocles ' work is also known for its deeper development of characters than earlier playwrights . His reputation was such that foreign rulers invited him to attend their courts , although unlike Aeschylus who died in Sicily , or Euripides who spent time in Macedon , Sophocles never accepted any of these invitations . Aristotle used Sophocles ' *Oedipus the King* in his *Poetics* (c . 335 BC) as an example of the highest achievement in tragedy , which suggests the high esteem in which his work was held by later Greeks .

Only two of the seven surviving plays can be dated securely : *Philoctetes* (409 BC) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (401 BC , staged after Sophocles ' death by his grandson) . Of the others , *Electra* shows stylistic similarities to these two plays , which suggests that it was probably written in the latter part of his career . *Ajax* , *Antigone* and *The Trachiniae* are generally thought to be among his early works , again based on stylistic elements , with *Oedipus the King* coming in Sophocles ' middle period . Most of Sophocles ' plays show an undercurrent of early fatalism and the beginnings of Socratic logic as a mainstay for the long tradition of Greek tragedy .

= = = Theban plays = = =

The Theban plays consist of three plays : *Oedipus the King* (also called *Oedipus Tyrannus* or by its Latin title *Oedipus Rex*) , *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone* . All three plays concern the fate of Thebes during and after the reign of King Oedipus . They have often been published under a single cover . Sophocles , however , wrote the three plays for separate festival competitions , many years apart . Not only are the Theban plays not a true trilogy (three plays presented as a continuous narrative) but they are not even an intentional series and contain some inconsistencies among them . He also wrote other plays having to do with Thebes , such as the *Epigoni* , of which only fragments have survived .

= = = = Subjects = = = =

Each of the plays relates to the tale of the mythological Oedipus , who killed his father and married his mother without knowledge that they were his parents . His family is fated to be doomed for three generations .

In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus is the protagonist. Oedipus' infanticide is planned by his parents, Laius and Jocasta, to avert him from fulfilling a prophecy; in truth, the servant entrusted with the infanticide passes the infant on through a series of intermediaries to a childless couple, who adopt him not knowing his history. Oedipus eventually learns of the Delphic Oracle's prophecy of him, that he would kill his father and marry his mother; Oedipus attempts to flee his fate without harming those he knows as his parents (at this point, he does not know that he is adopted). Oedipus meets a man at a crossroads accompanied by servants; Oedipus and the man fought, and Oedipus killed the man. (This man was his father, Laius, not that anyone apart from the gods knew this at the time). He becomes the ruler of Thebes after solving the riddle of the sphinx and in the process, marries the widowed queen, his mother Jocasta. Thus the stage is set for horror. When the truth comes out, following from another true but confusing prophecy from Delphi, Jocasta commits suicide, Oedipus blinds himself and leaves Thebes. At the end of the play, order is restored. This restoration is seen when Creon, brother of Jocasta, becomes king, and also when Oedipus, before going off to exile, asks Creon to take care of his children. Oedipus's children will always bear the weight of shame and humiliation because of their father's actions.

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the banished Oedipus and his daughter Antigone arrive at the town of Colonus where they encounter Theseus, King of Athens. Oedipus dies and strife begins between his sons Polyneices and Eteocles.

In *Antigone*, the protagonist is Oedipus' daughter, Antigone. She is faced with the choice of allowing her brother Polyneices' body to remain unburied, outside the city walls, exposed to the ravages of wild animals, or to bury him and face death. The king of the land, Creon, has forbidden the burial of Polyneices for he was a traitor to the city. Antigone decides to bury his body and face the consequences of her actions. Creon sentences her to death. Eventually, Creon is convinced to free Antigone from her punishment, but his decision comes too late and Antigone commits suicide. Her suicide triggers the suicide of two others close to King Creon: his son, Haemon, who was to wed Antigone, and his wife, Eurydice, who commits suicide after losing her only surviving son.

=== Composition and inconsistencies ===

The plays were written across thirty @-@ six years of Sophocles' career and were not composed in chronological order, but instead were written in the order *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Nor were they composed as a trilogy? a group of plays to be performed together, but are the remaining parts of three different groups of plays. As a result, there are some inconsistencies: notably, Creon is the undisputed king at the end of *Oedipus the King* and, in consultation with Apollo, single @-@ handedly makes the decision to expel Oedipus from Thebes. Creon is also instructed to look after Oedipus' daughters Antigone and Ismene at the end of *Oedipus the King*. By contrast, in the other plays there is some struggle with Oedipus' sons Eteocles and Polynices in regard to the succession. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles attempts to work these inconsistencies into a coherent whole: Ismene explains that, in light of their tainted family lineage, her brothers were at first willing to cede the throne to Creon. Nevertheless, they eventually decided to take charge of the monarchy, with each brother disputing the other's right to succeed. In addition to being in a clearly more powerful position in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Eteocles and Polynices are also culpable: they consent (l. 429, Theodoridis, tr.) to their father's going to exile, which is one of his bitterest charges against them.

=== Other plays ===

In addition to the three Theban plays, there are four surviving plays by Sophocles: *Ajax*, *The Women of Trachis*, *Electra*, and *Philoctetes*, the last of which won first prize in 409 BC in which it competed.

Ajax focuses on the proud hero of the Trojan War, Telamonian Ajax, who is driven to treachery and eventually suicide. Ajax becomes gravely upset when Achilles' armor is presented to Odysseus instead of himself. Despite their enmity toward him, Odysseus persuades the kings

Menelaus and Agamemnon to grant Ajax a proper burial .

The Women of Trachis (named for the Trachinian women who make up the chorus) dramatizes Deianeira 's accidentally killing Heracles after he had completed his famous twelve labors . Tricked into thinking it is a love charm , Deianeira applies poison to an article of Heracles ' clothing ; this poisoned robe causes Heracles to die an excruciating death . Upon learning the truth , Deianeira commits suicide .

Electra corresponds roughly to the plot of Aeschylus ' Libation Bearers . It details how Electra and Orestes ' avenge their father Agamemnon 's murder by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus .

Philoctetes retells the story of Philoctetes , an archer who had been abandoned on Lemnos by the rest of the Greek fleet while on the way to Troy . After learning that they cannot win the Trojan War without Philoctetes ' bow , the Greeks send Odysseus and Neoptolemus to retrieve him ; due to the Greeks ' earlier treachery , however , Philoctetes refuses to rejoin the army . It is only Heracles ' deus ex machina appearance that persuades Philoctetes to go to Troy .

= = = Fragmentary plays = = =

Although the list of over 120 titles of plays associated with Sophocles are known and presented below , little is known of the precise dating of most of them . Philoctetes is known to have been written in 409 BC , and Oedipus at Colonus is known to have only been performed in 401 BC , posthumously , at the initiation of Sophocles ' grandson . The convention on writing plays for the Greek festivals was to submit them in tetralogies of three tragedies along with one satyr play . Along with the unknown dating of the vast majority of over 120 play titles , it is also largely unknown how the plays were grouped . It is , however , known that the three plays referred to in the modern era as the " Theban plays " were never performed together in Sophocles ' own lifetime , and are therefore not a trilogy (which they are sometimes erroneously seen as) .

Fragments of Ichneutae (Tracking Satyrs) were discovered in Egypt in 1907 . These amount to about half of the play , making it the best preserved satyr play after Euripides ' Cyclops , which survives in its entirety . Fragments of the Epigoni were discovered in April 2005 by classicists at Oxford University with the help of infrared technology previously used for satellite imaging . The tragedy tells the story of the second siege of Thebes . A number of other Sophoclean works have survived only in fragments , including :

= = = Sophocles ' view of his own work = = =

There is a passage of Plutarch 's tract De Profectibus in Virtute 7 in which Sophocles discusses his own growth as a writer . A likely source of this material for Plutarch was the Epidemiae of Ion of Chios , a book that recorded many conversations of Sophocles . This book is a likely candidate to have contained Sophocles ' discourse on his own development because Ion was a friend of Sophocles , and the book is known to have been used by Plutarch . Though some interpretations of Plutarch 's words suggest that Sophocles says that he imitated Aeschylus , the translation does not fit grammatically , nor does the interpretation that Sophocles said that he was making fun of Aeschylus ' works . C. M. Bowra argues for the following translation of the line : " After practising to the full the bigness of Aeschylus , then the painful ingenuity of my own invention , now in the third stage I am changing to the kind of diction which is most expressive of character and best . "

Here Sophocles says that he has completed a stage of Aeschylus ' work , meaning that he went through a phase of imitating Aeschylus ' style but is finished with that . Sophocles ' opinion of Aeschylus was mixed . He certainly respected him enough to imitate his work early on in his career , but he had reservations about Aeschylus ' style , and thus did not keep his imitation up . Sophocles ' first stage , in which he imitated Aeschylus , is marked by " Aeschylean pomp in the language " . Sophocles ' second stage was entirely his own . He introduced new ways of evoking feeling out of an audience , as in his Ajax , when Ajax is mocked by Athene , then the stage is emptied so that he may commit suicide alone . Sophocles mentions a third stage , distinct from the other two , in his discussion of his development . The third stage pays more heed to diction . His characters spoke in

a way that was more natural to them and more expressive of their individual character feelings .