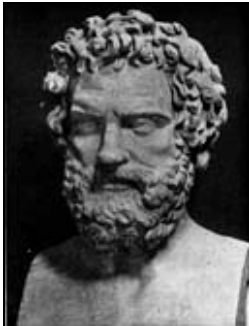


Sophocles



Born in 495 B.C. about a mile northwest of Athens, Sophocles was to become one of the great playwrights of the golden age. The son of a wealthy merchant, he would enjoy all the comforts of a thriving Greek empire. He studied all of the arts. By the age of sixteen, he was already known for his beauty and grace and was chosen to lead a choir of boys at a celebration of the victory of Salamis. Twelve years later, his studies complete, he was ready to compete in the City Dionysia--a festival held every year at the Theatre of

Dionysus in which new plays were presented.

In his first competition, Sophocles took first prize--defeating none other than [Aeschylus](#) himself. More than 120 plays were to follow. He would go on to win eighteen first prizes, and he would never fail to take at least second.

An accomplished actor, Sophocles performed in many of his own plays. In the *Nausicaa* or *The Women Washing Clothes*, he performed a juggling act that so fascinated his audience it was the talk of Athens for many years. However, the young athenian's voice was comparatively weak, and eventually he would give up his acting career to pursue other ventures.

In addition to his theatrical duties, Sophocles served for many years as an ordained priest in the service of two local heroes--Alcon and Asclepius, the god of medicine. He also served on the Board of Generals, a committee that administered civil and military affairs in Athens, and for a time he was director of the Treasury, controlling the funds of the association of states known as the Delian Confederacy.

One of the great innovators of the theatre, he was the first to add a third actor. He also abolished the trilogic form. Aeschylus, for example, had used three tragedies to tell a single story. Sophocles chose to make each tragedy a complete entity in itself--as a result, he had to pack all of his action into the shorter form, and this clearly offered greater dramatic possibilities. Many authorities also credit him with the invention of scene-painting and periaktoi or painted prisms.

Of Sophocles' more than 120 plays, only seven have survived in their entirety. Of these, [Oedipus the King](#) is generally considered his greatest work. This tragedy of fate explores the depths of modern psycho-analysis as Oedipus unwittingly kills his father and marries his mother in an attempt to avoid the very prophecy he ultimately fulfills. A masterful work of plot and suspense, *Oedipus the King* is often heralded as a "perfectly structured" play. And although Oedipus cannot escape his fate, he finally finds peace in the sequel, *Oedipus at Colonus*, after enduring the worst the fates had to offer.

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Another masterpiece, [Antigone](#), possibly the first of the surviving plays to have been written, is the story of a passionate young woman who refuses to submit to earthly authority when it forbids a proper burial for her brother Polyneices. Illustrating the rival claims of the state and the individual conscience, Antigone is an excellent example for the modern social dramatist.

In [The Women of Trachis](#), Sophocles presents another well-rounded female character--Deianira, the wife of Heracles. Although the focus of the play is oddly split between Deianira and Heracles himself, this drama does offer a powerful and touching study of a jealous woman. His greatest character drama, however, is probably [Electra](#). When Aeschylus treated this story, he was concerned primarily with the ethical issues of the blood feud. Sophocles dismisses the ethical question and addresses himself to the problem of character. What kind of woman was Electra that she would want so desperately to murder her own mother?

Shortly after the production of *Oedipus at Colonus* in 405, Sophocles passed away. He joined Aeschylus who had long since gone to his grave and [Euripides](#) who had passed on a few months earlier. Thus the first great age of tragedy came to an end.

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