

Chapter 7: Classical Greek Tragedy, Part 2
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IV. Sophocles (ca. 495-406 BCE)

"Sophocles wrote about killing your kids and having sex with your mom and gods descending at the last second to save the day. He knew how to pull off a decent opening weekend." Joel Stein ("Spider-Man Rules"), *Time* 5/20/2002

A. Sophocles the Man

Sophocles' life encompassed almost the entirety of the fifth century BCE. Born ca. 495 BCE into a wealthy Athenian family, the young Sophocles was chosen because of his beauty to lead the singing and dancing at the ceremony held in celebration of the Persians' defeat at Salamis. The same good fortune followed him into adulthood where, if classical Athens ever had one, he was the perennial "golden boy." For instance, as a young playwright, he defeated the veteran Aeschylus in dramatic competition—the evidence for this is found both on the Parian Marble and in a later history—and from there he went on to win an unprecedented number of playwriting victories at the City Dionysia, all this in spite of suffering from *microphonia*—that is, having a weak voice (see above)—which forced him at an early age to retire from acting in his own plays. ([note](#))



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Later in life, Sophocles also served his city as soldier and statesman, appointed as General (*strategos*) at least twice and Imperial Treasurer of Athens in 443 BCE. In addition to that, he played an important role in religion. Appointed the priest of Asclepius (the god of health), he received this deity's holy snake when it was first brought to Athens and had no temple as yet to house it. Because his counsel was widely respected, the aged Sophocles was one of the *probouloi* ("counselors") chosen to advise the Athenians after their navy was destroyed in Sicily in 413 BCE.

Indeed, all through his life, honors and awards flowed his direction, his good reputation never waning. He died in 406 BCE at an extremely advanced age, having managed to remain active artistically right up to the end. Following his death, the Athenians awarded Sophocles the highest honor a mortal could receive: he was dubbed a hero and given the name *Dexion* ("The Receiver") for having taken in Asclepius' sacred snake. Thus, living from the triumph of the Persian Wars through almost the entirety of the fifth century BCE, Sophocles' timely death spared him the horrors of witnessing the final humiliation of Athens at the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War and the Classical Age. Truly a blessed and remarkable man, he was the paragon of his times, having served in his day as the ancient Athenian equivalent of Shakespeare, Picasso, Lincoln, and Rose Bowl Queen.

B. Sophocles the Playwright

Yet, for all that is known about Sophocles the man, there is remarkably little information on Sophocles the playwright. For instance, the treatise he wrote about theatre called *On the Chorus* is now lost. Aristotle, furthermore, tells us pitifully little about Sophocles' drama—as opposed to the dramatist's life—in spite of the fact that Aristotle probably had access to much more information about classical tragedy than we do.

From other sources of varying reliability, we can add a fact or two. The Greek historian Plutarch, for instance, claims Sophocles went through three phases in his career: first, a "bombastic" period—epic-like? declamatory? Aeschylean?—followed by a "sharp and artificial" period—reduced? overly clipped? anti-Aeschylean?—and finally a period in which Sophocles' style was "best suited to expressing character"—realistic? naturalistic? [Menandrian](#)?—none of which unfortunately is particularly informative or says much about Sophocles' stagecraft. ([note](#)) Nor do the extant plays help much either, since all appear to come from the last phase, the one "best suited to expressing character," making it impossible for us to see for ourselves what really constituted these shifts in style. In the end, our best guide to assessing Sophocles as a playwright is his work itself, the seven plays that survive, meager leftovers of a once bountiful feast.

There is, however, one clear difference immediately visible in Sophocles' work which sets it apart from Aeschylus'. Sophocles is the first tragedian known to have written what modern scholars have termed **unconnected trilogies**, that is, sets of three tragedies whose plots do not revolve around a single family's saga or some sort of lore drawn from the same arc in the cycle of Greek myth. What links the unconnected trilogies is unclear today because so few of Sophocles' plays have survived and [none from the same trilogy](#), leaving us to guess the nature of how plays in unconnected trilogies created an integrated theatrical experience for the original audience. To judge from play titles and fragments alone, it seems safe to infer, however, that tragedies of Sophocles were at best connected thematically to one another in trilogies.

But there is a larger issue at stake here. Because Sophocles is the first tragedian whose trilogies are known to have been unconnected—from which it is often and, no doubt, rightly assumed that he was also first to do so—he then set an important precedent followed by the majority of

tragedians who followed him. If so, he was truly a trendsetter, in that this innovation gave the playwrights who followed in his wake the licence to cover much more mythological turf than if all trilogies had to consist of stories directly related by plot. In other words, unconnected trilogies opened the door to the staging of a much wider range of narrative, in particular, parts of the epic cycle which supported one drama well but not necessarily three. Thus, if Sophocles was the one who spearheaded this development, his descendants owed him a great debt.

We are told also that he made changes in the nature of the **chorus**, whose number he set at fifteen, though it is not immediately evident whether this represents an increase or decrease from the usual number in Aeschylus' day. It is also possible there was no fixed number prior to Sophocles and so his innovation may only be that he regularized the size of choruses. In other regards, however, he seems to have downplayed the chorus over time—choruses in Sophocles have significantly fewer lines than their Aeschylean counterparts—though the impression of a diminished role for the chorus may stem from the general tendency of classical drama through the fifth century to shift focus away from choral song and toward the interaction of the individual actors who portrayed speaking characters.

This is not to impugn the centrality and beauty of the choral odes in Sophocles' drama which make it hard to believe he actively disliked using choruses in performance—not only did he write a treatise entitled *On the Chorus*, but his skill in composing choral odes argues against any such notion—more likely, then, Sophocles simply modulated the role of the chorus in drama from active participant in the play to ode-singing onlookers, playing up the more reflective and philosophical aspect of their dramatic potential by enhancing the esthetic quality of the lyrics they sang. This would be a natural development for [the first playwright on record](#) to sit in the audience and watch the performance a play he had

written. All in all, it is better to see his modulation in the nature of the chorus' role in Greek theatre as a matter of "modernization" and not a diminution of its role on stage.

C. Character in Sophocles

Even with so few tragedies on which to base judgment, there is yet another pattern discernable in Sophocles' drama, something seen nowhere better than in his acclaimed masterpiece *Oedipus the King*. To comprehend this pattern, however, requires an understanding of Greek myth in general and dramatic myth in particular, principally that both are much more fluid than commonly thought. The popular notion today that the ancient audience came to the theatre knowing the stories of the myths they were about to witness on stage is a half truth, at best. To judge from the widely variant versions of the tales enacted in tragedy, it is clear Greek playwrights had quite a bit of latitude in their treatment of mythological stories and characters, a tendency fostered, no doubt, by the existence of rival variants of myth within traditional Greek lore itself.

For instance, in one version of the Trojan War myth Helen is abducted against her will by Paris of Troy and forced to become "Helen of Troy." In another, she runs off with him voluntarily, dazzled by his good looks and his family's wealth. Depending on the particular needs of his play, an ancient dramatist could pull from either tradition, or sometimes both at the same time, as Euripides did in *The Trojan Women* where Helen and Hecuba argue over who is the real "Helen": abductee or debauchee. All in all, the classical Greek audience entered the Theatre of Dionysus knowing the general parameters of the myths to be performed—Helen clearly had to go to Troy, though how and why was up to the individual playwright—but the viewers were never sure what version of the myth they would see in any particular drama.

At the same time, Greek myth—and its step-child, Greek drama—was not without limitations, since certain things had come to be expected of certain characters. As a foreign witch, for instance, Medea must be willing to commit murder to get her way, or [as the Roman poet Horace said](#):

If, for instance, you write of that time-honored Achilles—
A man not slow to act, who's angry, stubborn and bitter—
Let him say laws weren't made for him, settle quarrels with force.
Let Medea go wild, be uncontrollable. Let Ino be tearful,
Ixion treacherous, Io dazed, and downcast Orestes.

To the ancients, a timid or complacent Medea was inconceivable, nor was a mild-mannered Clytemnestra. Though she might feel guilty after killing her husband, still she had to find in herself somewhere the will to commit such an unspeakable act.

Similarly, on the day the Athenian audience approached the Theatre of Dionysus to see for the first time Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, they were surely expecting to confront a power-hungry, headstrong king who was willing to go to extreme lengths to keep his throne. According to the traditional story—no less a luminary than Aeschylus had staged this myth a generation earlier—**Oedipus**



discovered the terrible truth of his fate, that he had killed his father and married his own mother, fairly soon after arriving in Thebes. According to some versions of the tale, including Aeschylus' perhaps, the wicked man then decided to hide the awful fact and live and sleep with his wife and mother Jocasta—so eager to remain king, he slept with his own

mother, knowing full well who she was!—but when she found out what had happened, she killed herself. The ensuing investigation of her suicide revealed the awful story in its entirety, and Oedipus suffered the consequences of his lust for power. ([Click here to see a fuller explication of the evolution of the Oedipus myth and a fuller exegesis of Sophocles' play](#))

Sophocles, however, took the story in a very different direction. While still arrogant and driven, he created an Oedipus who is ignorant of the truth until very late in his reign. Only then is the whole story made known, whereupon he blinds himself and goes into exile. Instead of the traditional villain who tries to hide his shame and hang onto the throne of Thebes, Sophocles' Oedipus stands innocent of any intentional wrongdoing, at least on the surface. And when he is at long last shown to be the "most wretched of men," only then does he concede power and punish himself with blinding and exile, even though it is not exactly clear what wrong he has actually committed. In changing the timing of Oedipus' discovery of the truth, Sophocles has made him a sympathetic character, much more so than he was in Greek myth prior to this.

The same is true of other Sophoclean characters. For instance, according to traditional Greek myth, **Deianeira**, Hercules' wife, kills the great hero when he brings home another woman. In Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, however, Deianeira does so out of ignorance, believing that the potion she was giving Hercules would win her back his love. Instead, of course, it kills him. And like Oedipus, when she realizes what she has done, she punishes herself, in this case with suicide, out of grief and to save her good name.

Likewise, **Phaedra** in Sophocles' play of the same name—a drama now lost, but the general plot can be reconstructed from its fragments—is a lustful Cretan princess who usually emerges in Greek myth as an unsympathetic seductress, but Sophocles appears to have treated her

character with rare compassion. According to standard Greek myth, Phaedra fell in love with her own stepson, the handsome hunter **Hippolytus**. In some versions of the story she makes advances on him and, when he rejects her, she angrily accuses him of rape to his father Theseus.

In Sophocles' *Phaedra*, however, she becomes entangled in a web of misunderstanding that mitigates her lechery and guilt. Believing her husband dead, she proposes a political, not sexual alliance with Hippolytus in order to protect her children's claim to the throne of Athens. It is not Phaedra in this case but Hippolytus who is the excessive character and, interpreting her proposition as sexual, chastises her without good cause. When Theseus suddenly shows up alive, Sophocles' Phaedra panics and, like Deianeira, overreacts by accusing Hippolytus of rape. The young man dies horribly and unfairly at his father's command, and at the end of the play Phaedra kills herself in remorse, a far more pitiful—and interesting!—death than the one normally accorded this lascivious, foreign strumpet.

In some Sophoclean dramas, the converse is true. Sophocles is also known to darken typically favorable characters. **Electra**, for instance, traditionally takes the part of the faithful daughter who waits passively—as a good Greek woman, it is not her role to participate in public life—and allows her brother Orestes to claim justice by slaying their unrighteous mother Clytemnestra, or so Aeschylus portrayed her in *The Libation-Bearers* (458 BCE).

Sophocles, on the other hand, has used the same story to create a very different Electra. In his play named after her, she is a bitter and despondent woman, obsessed with her father and avenging his murder. Refusing to change her clothes and clean herself, she rails at any who approach her about Agamemnon's unrequited assassination. When her brother Orestes at last returns, she hounds him, insisting that he kill their

mother and, when he finally does it, stands outside listening and abusing Clytemnestra as she cries out for help and pity. Though to many ancients Electra's cause is clearly just, the way she acts in Sophocles' *Electra* reveals the narcissistic monster lurking inside her, a beast who just happens to have right on its side. If it didn't, it would be so much easier—and infinitely more comfortable for the viewer—to condemn Electra for the Fury she is, but Sophocles' play doesn't afford such a freedom.

Perhaps clearest of all and best known these days, the title character of Sophocles' *Antigone* stands as another such self-righteous abomination. *Antigone* also hurtles forward, fueled by the force of justice, and in the process propels herself into disaster. Moreover, by carrying her sense of rectitude too far, she takes down innocent people—among them, her fiancé and his mother—in her crusade of suicidal obstinacy.

All in all, when we survey the treatment of character in Sophoclean drama, a pattern emerges. More than once, the playwright undercuts the classical audience's expectation of the way a well-known hero or villain behaves or should behave in myth. This seems clearly to be an attempt to realign—or simply complicate—the viewers' traditional sympathies. Even in what little remains of his drama, Sophocles does this often enough that it is tempting to suppose the inversion of standard character type was a recurring theme in his work, perhaps a hallmark of his drama in the Classical Age.

D. Sophocles and Language

Overall, Sophocles was—and if more people could read his original works, he would undoubtedly still be—best appreciated and remembered for his exquisite command of the **Greek language**, something blunted but still visible in translation. Yet the power of his drama derives not from high-sounding, intricate poetic expressions, [as Aeschylus'](#)

["drunken" verses do](#), but from the driving simplicity of phrases which often carry multiple meaning and are rich with irony. To wit, Sophoclean choral odes are among some of the finest poetry ever written in any tongue and, even without the music composed to accompany them, resound through the ages, shimmering with the elegance and beauty of the ideas streaming from them. Thus, readers across the ages have valued Sophocles' plays for their literary virtues as much as audiences have admired their dramatic force. That readability is, no doubt, what caught Aristotle's eye who seems to have preferred him to Euripides, in spite of the fact that the latter was [clearly more theatrically marketable in the Post-Classical Age](#).

At times, what makes Sophocles' poetry so spectacular and compelling is hard to see from the English, but it is worth looking into since it was so patently a part of his art in its day. Let's look at just example of his word-magic. About midway through Sophocles' *Oedipus*, a messenger from Corinth enters with what he thinks is good news for the king, that Oedipus' purported father who lives in Corinth has died and so now Oedipus cannot be his father's murderer as the Delphic oracle has decreed. Gleefully, the messenger says to the chorus:

From you, O strangers, *I would like to learn where* (*mathoim' hopou*)
The house of the king is, *Oedipus'* [house] (*Oidipou*).
So call him, if *you know where* [it is] (*katisth' opou*).

The first and third lines end with phrases meaning "know where," employing two different Greek verbs for "know" (*mathoim'*, *katisth'*). The end of the second line is the name Oedipus in a form equivalent to the English possessive, *Oidipou* ("Oedipus' [house]"). That form of the name happens to have an ending which is synonymous with the Greek word "where" (*pou*), the same word used in the lines directly above and below.

Seen this way, the name takes on new meaning, because the first half of

Oedipus' name (*Oidi-*) closely resembles yet another Greek verb meaning "know," *oida*. That is, Oedipus' name could be understood as "know-where," if one were to misread it as a compound of *oida* and *pou*. ([note](#)) The messenger's intentional misreading of Oedipus as "know-where" is then reinforced by the other words meaning essentially the same thing directly above and below it, so that three lines in succession appear to end with a trio of variations on "know-where" in Greek.

In other words, at this moment in the play the Corinthian messenger puns(!) on Oedipus' name—the technical term for this practice is **paronomasia**—presumably out of joy because he believes he is bringing Oedipus good news. He is, of course, *not*. The report of the Corinthian king's death will precipitate the revelation of the greater truth that Oedipus has, in fact, killed his father and married his mother, and joy will change to horror as the king's actual biography unfolds. So, the lines are humorous, and at the same time not.

All in all, Sophocles' paronomastic word choice here conveys far more than a simple pun. By stressing "know-where" Sophocles reminds the audience who, in fact, do "know where" Oedipus is living, that Oedipus himself does not "know where" he lives or reigns or sleeps. It is a very dark kind of humor, if this sort of paronomasia can really be seen as humorous at all. ([note](#))

Such intricate use of language demands an audience whose tastes incline toward wordplay and verbal delicacies, a fact almost certainly true of the Athenian audience in the Classical Age, but apparently not of their immediate descendants in the fourth century. There is less evidence than one might expect for the production of Sophocles' plays on stage after his lifetime—in that regard, his colleague and rival Euripides whose tragedies appear to have been staged more often after the fifth century must be given the first prize—perhaps Sophocles' exquisite use of classical Greek did not bear up well in later ages when the language had

evolved and tastes in general shifted toward more sensationalistic and spectacular forms of entertainment.

In any case, it would be pointless to export such rich language to non-Greek-speaking audiences who could never be expected to "know where" Sophocles was coming from. In such a circumstance it is remarkable that, absent the theatre and society into which it was born, Sophoclean drama survived at all. Much credit and tribute must go to the power behind his words after their innate beauty fell largely out of reach. Granted, it was a survival that relied more on the libraries and schoolrooms of antiquity than the stage, and in a corpus tragically trimmed to a mere seven favorites. In [the next chapter](#), as promised [before](#), we will see finally why.

Terms, Places, People and Things to Know

Sophocles

Probouloi

Dexion

On the Chorus

Unconnected Trilogies

Chorus

Oedipus (*Oedipus the King*)

Deianeira (*Women of Trachis*)

Phaedra (*Phaedra*)

Hippolytus
Electra (*Electra*)

Antigone (*Antigone*)

Greek Language

Paronomasia