

Sophocles

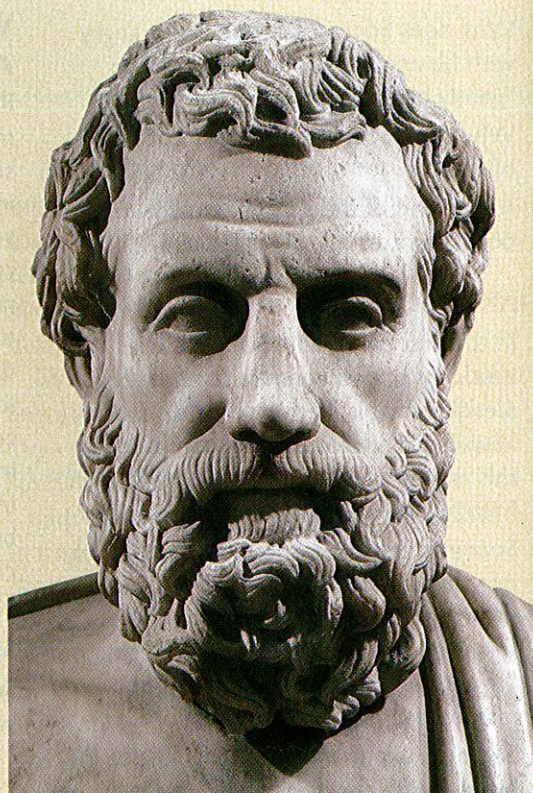
(c. 496–406 B.C.)

The tragedies of Sophocles probe the depth of human suffering and despair as profoundly as the works of any writer in world literature. The playwright himself, in contrast to the misery he portrayed in his works, lived a long, comfortable, and happy life. He grew up in a well-to-do family in Athens, enjoyed a carefree childhood and education, and eventually became a distinguished public official as well as an outstanding dramatist.

Sophocles first achieved recognition in the theater at the age of twenty-eight, when he defeated Aeschylus—another great Greek playwright—in an annual dramatic competition. He went on to win twenty-four first prizes over the next six decades—the best record of any Greek playwright. He produced 123 plays, of which only seven survive today.

The artistic fulfillment of Sophocles' long life reflects the spirit of the age in which he lived. The first half of the fifth century B.C. in Athens was a time of political expansion and social optimism, following the great victories of the Greeks over the invading Persians at Marathon (490 B.C.) and Salamis (480 B.C.). In the second half of the century, the Athenians experienced tremendous intellectual and cultural developments. This was the brilliant era of the statesman Pericles, the historians Herodotus and Thucydides, and the philosopher Socrates. It was the age that raised the majestic temple called the Parthenon on the Acropolis high above the city and developed democracy as a political system. The age of Sophocles was indeed a time when anything seemed possible through human effort and reason.

Toward the end of Sophocles' life, however, this expansive spirit began to dwindle, largely



Bust of Sophocles.
Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.

because of the costly investment of Athenian lives and resources in the long Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.). This conflict pitted Athens and its allies against the rival city of Sparta and various other allied city-states for twenty-seven years. Perhaps this conflict is one of the reasons that Sophocles' surviving plays—most of which were written after 440 B.C.—are so deeply troubling. They depict characters caught up in unsolvable dilemmas that test their faith in divine and human justice.

Introduction

Oedipus Rex

O*edipus Rex* is considered one of the world's greatest tragedies. A **tragedy** is a serious drama featuring a main character, often of noble birth, who strives to achieve something and is ultimately defeated. The defeat of the hero may be caused by forces beyond his or her control, but often the main character's downfall is due to an inborn character flaw or weakness—the **tragic flaw**. In spite of defeat and even death, however, the tragic hero is ennobled by newly gained self-knowledge and wisdom.

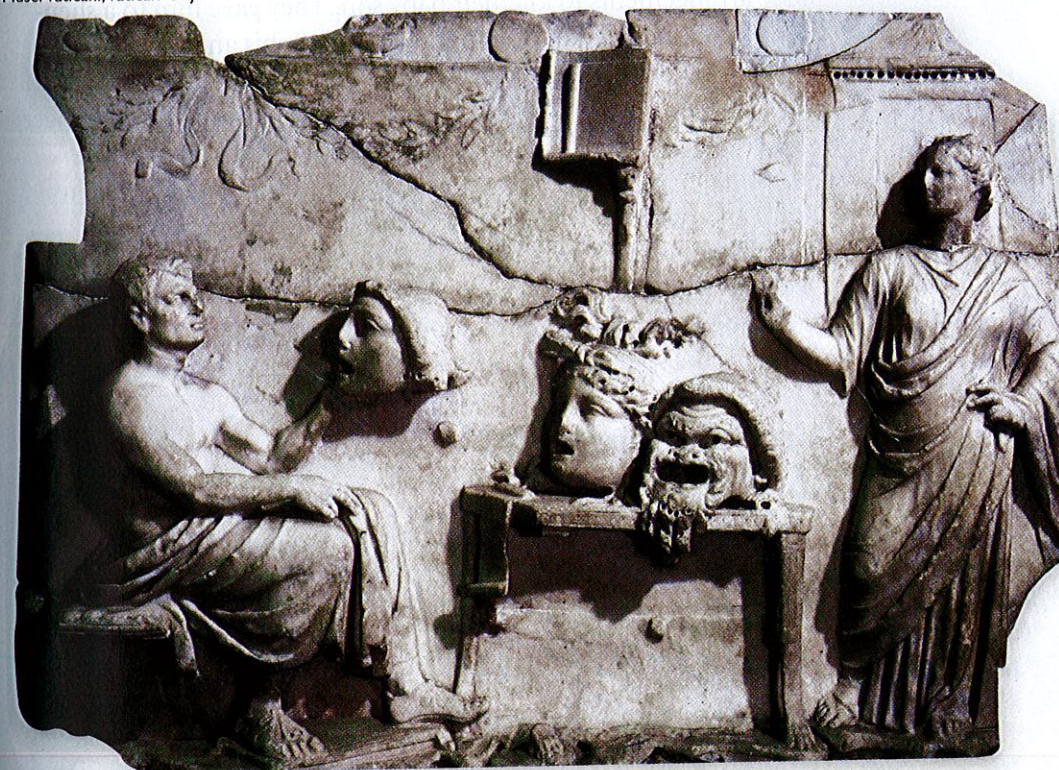
The Greek Theater

By the second half of the fifth century B.C., drama in Greece was experiencing its Golden Age. In Athens, dramatic festivals—which had grown out of religious rituals—and contests were the center of cultural life. The Dionysia, an annual festival in honor of the god Dionysus, was a four-day extravaganza held in March or April. At the open-air Theater of Dionysus, some fifteen thousand spectators witnessed a variety of plays, both tragic and comic.

The Theater of Dionysus was carved out of a stone hillside and resembled a semicircle with steeply rising tiers of seats. At the bottom was the rounded orchestra, or performance area, where the chorus

Roman copy of Greek relief showing Menander, an Athenian dramatist of the 4th century B.C.E.

Museo Gregoriano Profano,
Musei Vaticani, Vatican City.



sang and danced. Behind the orchestra was an open, practically bare stage, where the actors spoke their lines from behind huge masks. Male actors performed all the roles; by switching masks, one actor could play a number of roles—both male and female—in a single play.

The Oedipus Plays

Oedipus Rex is one of Sophocles' three "Theban plays"—three tragedies about King Oedipus (ed'i-pəs) of Thebes and his family. Sophocles composed these dramas over a thirty-six-year period, beginning with *Antigone* (442 B.C.), continuing with *Oedipus Rex* (c. 429 B.C.), and concluding with *Oedipus at Colonus* (406 B.C.).

The Story of Oedipus

Oedipus is the ill-fated king of Thebes whose mysterious past catches up with him and wreaks havoc on him and his family. The tale of King Oedipus would have been familiar to the Greek audience of the time and would have served as backstory to the play. Before the play begins, Oedipus has won the hand of Queen Jocasta, whose husband, King Laius, had been killed on the road by another traveler. Oedipus won Jocasta by solving a riddle posed by the Sphinx—a monster with the head of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of an eagle—who was terrorizing Thebes. What Oedipus did not know at the time—but discovers during the course of the play—is that he is the child of Laius and Jocasta. Seeking to avoid an awful prophecy that their son would one day kill his father and marry his mother, Jocasta and Laius had made arrangements to kill their baby son. They gave him to a shepherd, who was ordered to abandon the infant, his ankles pinned together, on the side of Mount Cithaeron. The shepherd pitied the baby, though, and so the infant was given to a Corinthian messenger, who in turn brought him to the king and queen of Corinth. The Corinthian royal couple named him Oedipus (meaning "swollen foot") and raised him as their own. Oedipus's discovery of his true identity as the murderer of his own father—for it was Oedipus who had unknowingly met King Laius on the road and killed him—and the spouse of his own mother is the central focus of *Oedipus Rex*.

The Structure and Themes of the Play

Oedipus Rex maintains a tight dramatic framework. All the action takes place in a single location and involves a small number of characters

interacting with the central figure, Oedipus, who remains on stage for nearly the entire play. In addition, the Chorus—which serves simply as a nameless onlooker and commentator in other Greek tragedies—is transformed by Sophocles into a collective "actor" within the drama itself.

In this work what is left unsaid is often more powerful than what is explicitly expressed. Practically every line contains a possible double meaning or an ambiguity. This verbal irony reinforces the dramatic irony of the play, as the main characters—and even the Chorus—only gradually come to grips with what is understood by the audience at the very start.

The themes, or underlying messages, of *Oedipus Rex* include

- the quest for identity
- the nature of innocence and guilt
- the nature of moral responsibility
- the limitations of human will versus fate
- the abuse of power

The structure of most Greek tragedies presents a tight, formal arrangement of parts. These parts include the **prologue** (opening scene), the **parados** (the first of the Chorus's lyric songs, or choral odes), a regular alternation of scenes in **dialogue** and **choral odes**, and, finally, the **exodos** (concluding scene). These terms have been retained in this translation of *Oedipus Rex*.

(Foreground) Chorus, from *Oedipus the King*. Olivier Theatre/National Theatre, London; (background) theater, Epidauros (c. 3rd century B.C.E.).

