Sophocles

The son of Sophilus, Sophocles was born at Colonus, a deme a little more than a mile northwest of Athens. Sophocles was not only a playwright, he also served as a priest on several occasions, was head of the Athenian treasury in 443/442 BCE, was elected to a military command in 440 (supposedly on the success of his Antigone), and was appointed to a special commission after disaster befell the Sicilian Expedition in 413. Sophocles had two sons (Iophon and Sophocles the younger) by Nicostrata and a third son (Ariston) by Theoris. Both his sons by Nicostrata were playwrights. Sophocles had a reputation as being good-natured and being a true gentleman. After the death of Euripides, Sophocles is said to have honored Euripides by wearing mourning clothes and by presenting his chorus before the play without their usual garlands. In Aristophanes’ Frogs, Sophocles is portrayed as not contesting the recognition of Aeschylus as the greatest of tragedians. In that play, after Aeschylus leaves the underworld, he turns over his title of best tragedian to Sophocles rather than Euripides.

Sophocles wrote 123 plays, of which seven survive: Ajax, Antigone, Trachinian Women, Oedipus Tyrannos, Electra, Philoctetes, and Oedipus at Colonus. We also have some 400 lines from a Sophoclean satyr play, Ichneutae (Searchers). The dating of Sophocles’ plays is difficult, and the preceding list reflects a likely order of production. Only the dates of Philoctetes (409), and Oedipus at Colonus (produced in 401, after Sophocles’ death) are securely established. Antigone is usually dated to 442/441, but this date is based on the anecdote about the link between Sophocles’ military command in 440 and the success of Antigone. Ajax is usually dated to the 440s, Oedipus Tyrannos to around the time of the plague in Athens (430/429), Electra to about the same period as Euripides’ Electra (420–410). The date of Trachinian Women ranges between 450 and 425; most scholars now favor a date in the last decade of that period. The date of Searchers is unknown. Tradition and inscriptive evidence confirm that Sophocles won first prize in competition 18 times, perhaps more than Aeschylus and Euripides combined. Sophocles is said never to have finished in last place in a dramatic competition. His first victory was in 468 (with the no longer Triptolemus) against Aeschylus. Early in his career, Sophocles took roles in some of his own plays, but he is said to have stopped because of a weak voice. According to Aristotle in Poetics, Sophocles was the first to use three actors and scene painting (see skenographia). Sophocles is also credited with increasing the number of the chorus from 12 to 15. The effects of increasing the choral number are not clear, and scene painting would not have added much to the powerful messages contained in Sophocles’ surviving plays; however, the use of a third actor did allow Sophocles to explore his heroes and heroines from an additional perspective. Instead of only Antigone versus Creon, we have Ismene’s added perspective on Antigone’s actions. Instead of only Electra versus Clytemnestra, we have Chrysothemis’ view of Electra’s attitude.

Other than their inclusion of a third actor, Sophocles’ surviving plays seem fairly conventional with respect to staging and spectacle. His Ajax, however, is one of two Greek tragedies that have a change of scene (Aeschylus’ Eumenides is the other); some scholars think the title character may have committed suicide before the audience rather than dying offstage and his death later being reported. Sophocles’ plays seem fairly conventional when compared with the numerous problems that occur in Euripid. Powerful visual images do occur in Sophocles, to be sure, such as Ajax’s sword, Philoctetes’ bow, and Electra’s urn, but Sophocles does not have Euripidean extremes of spectacle. Divinities appear before the audience only twice in Sophocles’ tragedies (Ajax, Philoctetes), and only one of Sophocles’ tragedies (Philoctetes) ends with the appearance of a divinity; in contrast, Euripides ends many of his plays in this way. Sophocles also lets the action of his plays unfold in a more natural way than Euripides and avoids the expository prologues of his contemporary. The seven tragedies show a more consistent use of the chorus than do the works of Euripides; Sophoclean choruses deliver between 15 and 25 percent of the lines. Five of Sophocles’ seven tragic choruses represent men (the exceptions are Trachinian Women and Electra). Two of Sophocles’ choruses (Ajax, Philoctetes) represent sailors, unlike in the tragedies of Aeschylus or Euripides. Sophocles’ choruses are also considered to deliver some of the finest lyric poetry, such as the beautiful little ode to the beauty of Athens in Oedipus at Colonus and the famous ode in Antigone on the wonders of humankind.

Whereas Euripides was stereotyped as allowing a greater stage presence to women, common people, and slaves, Sophocles relegates most of his commoners to the chorus or to the function of messenger; however, the role of the messenger, Lichas, in Trachinian Women is an important one and the unnamed guard in Antigone adds some levity to an otherwise serious play. Only one nurse (Trachinian Women) and one tutor (Electra) have speaking roles in Sophocles’ extant tragedies. Sophocles’ tragedies have several prominent female roles, especially Antigone, Electra, and Trachinian Women, but none of Sophocles’ surviving
plays has onstage a seductive Phaedra or Stheneboea, as do Euripides'. In the lost plays, however, Sophocles did treat wicked women such as Eriphyle and Medea.

Sophocles' primary interest are kings, queens, princes, and princesses and the struggles they experience within themselves, with their fellow human beings, and with the gods. Whereas Euripides' characters often express a cynical attitude about the behavior of their fellow humans and the divinities, Sophocles is usually perceived as less pessimistic and more accepting of the religious system of his day. Scholars often think of Sophocles as a pious person, and he even helped introduce the cult of Asclepius to Athens. Most of Sophocles' plays contain prophecies that lead the play's characters to grapple with their own relationship to the gods. As Blundell's study shows, most of Sophocles' surviving plays deal with instances in which expected friends become one's enemies. Ajax turns against his fellow Greeks at Troy; Antigone and Creon, niece and uncle, oppose one another; Orestes and Electra oppose their mother; Philoctetes is rejected and then sought out by his fellow Greeks; Oedipus is rejected and then sought out by his sons. Such oppositions cause the questions taken up by Sophocles' play to become far more complicated and tension filled. In Ajax and Antigone, Sophocles poses the following question: "Does a deceased person have a right to be buried?" The answer seems simple, but the question becomes far more complex when the deceased person has tried to wage war against his native land or kill his commanding officers. Similar complex questions are raised in Oedipus at Colonus: "Should a country grant asylum to a refugee?" "If so, how far should that country go to protect that refugee?" The answer becomes more complicated when the refugee is Oedipus, one of the most abhorrent figures in mythology. Further complicating the issue is that this abhorrent figure must be defended by the host nation's military might. Finally, Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannos may ask the most profound and complex question of any ancient work: "What is the definition of a man?"

Further Information


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