

A Handbook of
CLASSICAL
DRAMA

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1. *AJAX*

(Perhaps 445–440 B.C.)

The precise date of the *Ajax*, the titles of the other plays produced with it, and the prize awarded are all unknown.

Legend.—The suicide of Ajax as a result of Odysseus' being awarded the arms of Achilles is alluded to in the *Odyssey* (11. 543–67), and the whole subject was treated at length in later epics and in lyric poetry.

Ajax, son of Telamon and second only to Achilles among all the Greek warriors, came from the mountainous island of Salamis just off the coast of Attica. He was the only great man in the expedition to whom the Athenians could lay even an indirect claim, for Athens had been of little importance in Homeric times. Early in the sixth century the Athenians had taken Salamis from their neighbors, the Megarians. Hero cults to both Ajax and his son Eurysaces were maintained among the Athenians, and an annual festival was celebrated on Salamis in honor of Ajax. Ajax, furthermore, was one of the heroes from whom the ten Attic tribes derived their names, and some of the most famous men of Athens, such as Peisistratus, Miltiades, the hero of Marathon, Thucydides, the historian, and Alcibiades, claimed descent from Ajax (but most of them through a son Philaeus who is not mentioned by Sophocles). Ajax had also been invoked for aid before the battle of Salamis, and after the battle captured ships were gratefully dedicated to Poseidon, Athena, and Ajax.¹⁰ Thus Ajax was a great national hero at Athens, and any Athenian audience would naturally view a play concerning him with patriotic fervor.

Source and influence.—Aeschylus had previously written a trilogy

on the subject of Ajax and his death. The first of his three plays concerned the judgment by which the arms of Achilles were awarded to Odysseus (*Hoplōn Krisis*). This play seems to have contained a debate between Ajax and Odysseus over their respective merits. The second play of Aeschylus concerned the suicide of Ajax, and it was entitled, after its chorus of captive women, the *Thracian Women*. In this play, the suicide of Ajax was not represented before the audience, as in Sophocles, but was related by a messenger. The body of Ajax, according to the legend here accepted, was invulnerable except in one spot, and the sword was reported to have bent like a bow against his body until a divine spirit appeared and showed the hero where he might pierce himself. The third play of the trilogy, called the *Women of Salamis*, probably dealt with the return of Teucer to Salamis and the grief of the father and mother of Ajax. The whole trilogy doubtless ended with the establishment of the cult of Ajax in Salamis, and it was probably designed in part as a further glorification of the hero who was thought to have aided the Greeks in their victory over the Persians.

Sophocles wrote two other plays, entitled *Teucer* and *Eurysaces*, on events subsequent to those of the *Ajax*. The *Teucer* probably dealt, like Aeschylus' *Women of Salamis*, with the return of Teucer to Salamis and with the grief and wrath of Telamon, which forced Teucer to go into exile and found a city, Salamis, on the island of Cyprus. These events are foreshadowed in certain lines spoken by Teucer in the present play (*Ajax* 1006-23). It is possible that these three plays were presented together and formed a trilogy.

The *Ajax* was apparently reproduced frequently, and it was certainly a favorite among late exponents and commentators.¹¹ At least three later Greek poets wrote tragedies on the fate of Ajax, and the subject was especially popular among Roman poets.¹² Livius Andronicus, the father of Roman literature, apparently based a play on the *Ajax* of Sophocles.

The argument of Sophocles' play is briefly stated in the first scene (379-81) of the Shakespearean *Titus Andronicus*:

The Greeks upon advice did bury Ajax,
That slew himself; and wise Laertes' son
Did graciously plead for his funerals.

This quotation is remarkable, especially because no English translation of Sophocles existed in the sixteenth century, though Latin versions existed, and reproductions of the originals were not uncommon.¹³

The quarrel over the arms of Achilles and the subsequent suicide of Ajax are favorite themes in ancient art.¹⁴

Subject and theme.—The subject of the *Ajax* is not the death of Ajax but his disgrace and rehabilitation. This subject bears some resemblance to that of the *Heracles* of Euripides; there, however, the hero is saved from suicide.

The theme of the play may be found in the moral which Athena in the prelude draws from the fate of Ajax (127-33): Let no man wax insolent over superior strength or wealth; a single day suffices to exalt or to overthrow the fortune of any mortal man. This is the old moral that insolence (*hybris*) and pride come before a fall, perhaps the most frequent moral idea in Greek tragedy. Here the moral is illustrated not only by the downfall of Ajax but also by the insolent attitude of Menelaus and Agamemnon, contrasted with the wiser prudence of Odysseus.

The anger of Ajax is here presented as the natural result of the unjust award of the arms of Achilles, but his madness as the result of the intervention of Athena.¹⁵ Athena herself and later Calchas, as reported by the messenger, find the explanation of the downfall of Ajax in his insolent conceit. Though born a mortal he has dared to think more than mortal thoughts (760-61). Here, as frequently in Homer and as in the *Hippolytus* of Euripides, natural motivation is supplemented—or perhaps it would be more proper to say symbolized—by divine motivation. The rationalization of this in the case of Ajax is very simple: Ajax was so conceited that the leaders' preference of Odysseus drove him mad.

Two axiomatic fundamentals of popular Greek morality should be taken into account in any consideration of the motives or character of Ajax. To be laughed at by one's enemies is quite intolerable for a self-respecting person. In the *Medea* of Euripides, also, this is a primary motivation. And Ajax, of course, is far more than a self-respecting person. In his heroic code, honor is everything. To do evil to one's enemies, furthermore, is as natural and commendable as to do good to one's friends. This, of course, was systematically refuted by Plato; but it was long held in popular morality.

That the attitude of Odysseus is both wise and plausible from the Greek point of view is nicely shown by a sentence in Thucydides' brilliant description of the effects of war upon character (3. 84, Jowett): "But, when men are retaliating upon others, they are reckless of the future, and do not hesitate to annul those common laws of humanity to which every individual trusts for his own hope of deliverance should he ever be overtaken by calamity; they forget that in their own hour of need they will look for them in vain." The role of Odysseus in Sophocles' play perhaps is not, however, in accord with his role in that ver-

sion of the legend which depicted his machinations as the cause of Ajax' disappointment and death. Here the machinations are attributed to the leaders themselves (cf. 1135). Odysseus' generous praise of Ajax (1340-41) might be considered inconsistent with his acceptance of the arms after such a judgment. But these matters are outside the action proper and should not be too closely scrutinized.

Discussion.—From the standpoint of technique the *Ajax* is one of the most extraordinary Greek tragedies. Unusual features are found in the prelude and its presentation of Ajax still in his fit of madness, in the removal of the chorus and the following change of scene,¹⁶ and in the presentation of an act of violence before the eyes of the audience. Unusual, also, is the extended use of a child for emotional effect—a device which became popular with Euripides, as did, also, the heated rhetorical debate. Typical of Sophoclean technique, however, is the deception of the chorus and its song of joy just before the catastrophe.

Sophocles gains tremendously by substituting action for the narration of Aeschylus and presenting the suicide of Ajax before the audience. First of all, Ajax is thus allowed perfect solitude befitting his mood and character.¹⁷ His final words, furthermore, may thus be spoken directly to the audience rather than related by a messenger. The act itself is of great dramatic effect, especially in the Greek theater, where deeds of violence are almost always committed off the scene.¹⁸

The custom of producing plays with only three actors has a noticeable effect on the action of this play. The roles of Ajax and Teucer were doubtless taken by the same actor. Some other arrangement would have been necessary if Teucer had appeared before the death of Ajax. The role of Tecmessa in the final scenes of the play, furthermore, must have been taken by a mute actor. The shift from speaking actor to mute was made when Tecmessa was sent by Teucer for the child Eurysaces—a clever motivation, adding action and avoiding monotony of setting in the final scenes. Here, as often with a great artist, necessity becomes a virtue.

The exposition of the play, an ancient commentator remarks, could not plausibly have been given to Ajax himself, who would thus speak as if indicting himself, and no one else except a divinity could know precisely what had happened.¹⁹ This ancient commentator has perhaps failed, however, to grasp the more important reasons why Sophocles only here in his seven extant plays employs a divinity in the prologue, as Euripides does so frequently. The joint knowledge of the chorus and of Tecmessa constitutes adequate explanation of Ajax' deeds. But the presentation of the mad Ajax before our eyes and the characterization of Odysseus are of the greatest importance. In Euripides' *Heracles*,

the actual rage of the hero is described by a messenger. No effort is there made to exhibit the madness itself. This is as we should expect in Greek tragedy; but Sophocles here, as frequently elsewhere, substitutes dramatic action for narration. The gain in emotional impact is incalculable, for only thus can the eerie atmosphere of madness be effectively created. The bloody scourge which Ajax carries and the terror of Odysseus increase the awfulness of the scene. Indeed, this effect seems the main reason for presenting Odysseus as terrified; for his courage or cowardice, except as a contrast with the courage of Ajax, is not pertinent to this play, though as preparation for his later role, his reverence for the gods and his pity for a fallen enemy must be clearly presented.

This opening scene, furthermore, casts an unmistakably tragic gloom over the coming action, focuses the whole play into an Olympian frame, and points the moral that presumption (*hybris*) is inevitably followed by ruin (*ate*). This scene is distinctly a prelude. The *Eumenides* of Aeschylus offers a close parallel. This prelude in the *Ajax*, again, opens with a "set," as do the *Suppliants* of Euripides and a few other Greek plays. Odysseus is discovered already before the audience by Athena. This in itself is a remarkable feat in the Greek theater, which had no curtain, although a screen, such as that used in the later Graeco-Roman theater,²⁰ may possibly have been used to serve somewhat as a curtain.

The following scene between the chorus and Tecmessa repeats perhaps too much of the exposition given in the prelude. A certain amount of repetition, of course, is natural and desirable. Such repetition is often found in Euripides, but it usually serves incidental purposes such as that of characterization. In this scene of the *Ajax*, the indirect characterization of Tecmessa and the chorus is of little importance to the plot. Tecmessa does give new details which add pathos to the downfall of *Ajax*, however, and she relates the important events which have taken place since the prelude, especially Ajax' return to sanity and his foreboding dejection. Like Medea in Euripides' play (*Medea* 24-29), Ajax is described as refusing food and drink and wholly inconsolable.

In his first scene with Tecmessa and the chorus, Ajax, though depressed at his failure and disgrace and at the invincibility of Athena, is still the boastful Ajax. He claims that Troy has never seen his equal among the Greeks. He does not except even Achilles. His prayer is still that he might slay Odysseus and the Atreidae and then that he himself might die.

But when Ajax returns to deliver his farewell to Tecmessa and the chorus—possibly the finest speech of the play—his mood has changed. Strong as before, but chastened and resigned, he feels genuine pity for

those from whom he is departing, although he must deceive them with dreadful irony in order that they may leave him in peace to accomplish his purpose. The sword of Hector in his hands adds to the irony of his words. He is both sincere and ironical when he says he will learn to yield to the gods and to revere the Atreidae. He sincerely means that he is now prepared to accept the consequences of his deeds—that is, to die. He does not admit error. He still believes in the justice of his cause against the Atreidae, as later in his final speech he shows by calling down divine retribution on them and on the Greeks. But he does admit defeat and resignation to the will of the gods in lines of exquisite beauty (668–77).

From the first it has been clear to all, especially to Ajax, that death is his only course. A noble man must live honorably or honorably die (479–80). Nowhere is there any serious wavering in his resolve. He has no conscience to make a coward of him, and no pale cast of thought paralyzes his action. His men, Tecmessa, and his infant son, and the thought of his mother may arouse his pity; but they cannot touch his resolve, for all that they can urge is quite impertinent to the principle which determines his death. No situation could more effectively bring out the inexorable strength of the mighty Ajax.

The suicide of Ajax, placing the seal of finality upon all his actions, sets the stage for and constitutes the first act of his rehabilitation. Nevertheless, this deed of violence and the disappearance of the hero as a speaking character strain the plot structure. Sophocles, realizing this, has obviously gone to great pains to relieve the strain as much as possible, especially by foreshadowing and preparing for the final quarrel over the disposition of the body of the hero. The denial of burial is earlier suggested when the chorus speak of death by stoning (254), for denial of sepulture would naturally follow this.²¹ Ajax himself foresees the effort of the leaders to ruin even his memory. So he prays to Zeus first of all to bring the news to Teucer in order that he may be buried properly. Violation of the corpse might be inferred from the extreme anger of the Greeks, which is repeatedly stressed. Upon discovery of the corpse, furthermore, both the chorus and Tecmessa foresee exultation and laughter from Odysseus and the Atreidae. Teucer, also, immediately thinks of vengeance being taken on the infant son—"for the dead, when they have fallen, all men are wont to mock." The absolute necessity of burial for the rehabilitation of the hero was axiomatic for the ancient spectator, since burial was prerequisite to the proper reception of the departed soul in the underworld.

Elaborate preparation is made for the entrance of those who play the main roles in the final scenes. The return of Teucer is anticipated

in various passages, and his role as protector of the infant son and the body of Ajax is clearly foretold (562, 827). The Atreidae and Odysseus again and again have been referred to, especially in the bitter words of Ajax. We have been prepared for Odysseus' role in the final scene by his characterization in the prelude, although this has been somewhat beclouded by the bitter references of Ajax and Tecmessa.

Still other considerations serve to join the final scenes with the earlier part of the play. The physical setting of these is an element of continuity, for the body of Ajax remains before the audience with Tecmessa and the infant son beside it. We should like to think of it as the central point about which the "debaters" are grouped. As in the *Alcestis*, the grim presence of the dead body prevents the quarrel, however bitter, from becoming in the least ludicrous.²² The reappearance of the chorus and Tecmessa, furthermore, is awaited by the audience, and this, too, serves to aid the continuity.

The two parts of the play are thus bound together. But even for an ancient Athenian, there must have been a considerable difference in tone between the two parts. In the speeches of Ajax, a great soul contemplates death, first with gloomy despair and finally with lofty resignation. The tone of these speeches—and they are among the finest in Greek tragedy—is quite different from the feverish, angry speeches of the debate.

The debate itself is primarily a discussion of the deserts of Ajax, and Teucer's speech to Agamemnon becomes almost a funeral encomium. Not only burial but recognition of the worth of Ajax is essential to his later status as a hero. To say, as one recent critic has done,²³ that Ajax virtually committed an atrocious and silly crime—attempted treason and murder—is to repeat as fact the allegation of Menelaus, with which Sophocles obviously had little or no sympathy, although the idea that Ajax' vengeance would have been silly is entirely modern, of course, and betrays a lack of feeling for the heroic code and for the spirit of the Homeric Age. In his reply to Menelaus, Teucer says that Ajax sailed to Troy as his own master. Although this is disputed by Agamemnon (1234), the Homeric quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon shows that the organization of the Greeks at Troy was extremely informal. Ajax, like Achilles and Palamedes, had been grossly mistreated (1135), and according to the custom of the Homeric Age any vengeance for such injustice was justified.

It is not necessary to resort to the divinities in order to condone the acts of Ajax. Tecmessa and Teucer do precisely this, although earlier (260–62) Tecmessa has intimated that Ajax has brought these woes upon himself. Thus in the *Iliad*, Agamemnon at one time admits

his responsibility (9. 116) and at another he blames the gods (19. 86-144). In modern criminology a similar practice still prevails, and the deities usually blamed are Heredity and Environment. The individual, ancient or modern, has always liked to feel that his future depends upon his own decisions but that the mistakes of his past were thrust upon him. Sophocles certainly intended us to feel that the gods were displeased at the conduct of Ajax, but that Ajax himself was morally responsible for his downfall. The real rehabilitation of his character is found in Teucer's recitation of his virtues and of the wrongs done him, in the generous praise which Odysseus grants him, and in the final words of Teucer.

2. **ANTIGONE

(About 441 B.C.)

The other plays presented with the *Antigone* and the prize awarded are unknown.

Legend.—The legend that Antigone buried her brother contrary to the edict of Creon does not appear to have been a part of the epic or lyric tradition of Polyneices' famous expedition. In extant literature this story is found first at the end of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, but this passage is often considered spurious. The story may have been a popular Theban tradition long before Aeschylus.²⁴ It is obviously uncomplimentary to the Thebans, however, and the Thebans were despised at Athens during the fifth century for having proved traitors to the Greek cause in the Persian Wars. They were also notorious for their un-Hellenic propensity to refuse burial to fallen enemies.²⁵

Certain features of Sophocles' *Antigone* are thought to be his own innovations. He may have been the first to introduce Teiresias into this part of the story and to play up Ismene as an important foil for Antigone. His most brilliant apparent addition to the story, however, is the role of Haemon. In the epic version Haemon died before Oedipus.²⁶ Haemon's role in this play adds a carefully restrained romantic interest and binds the fate of Antigone with the fate of Creon. Thus is brought about the dreadful punishment visited upon Creon at the end of the play.

Influence.—Euripides, too, wrote an *Antigone*. This play was perhaps later than that of Sophocles, but little can now be determined concerning its content. In Euripides, Haemon seems to have aided Antigone in the burial of Polyneices. Certainly Haemon and Antigone married, and a son, Maeon, was born to them. Their love obviously

played a more important role in the action than it does in Sophocles' play. The "trial" of Haemon and Antigone seems to have taken place, as in Sophocles; and here, too, there was a discussion of government and the necessity for maintaining discipline. Incidentally we may note that Euripides' play opened with a typical Euripidean prologue (frag. 157, Nauck²), explaining the story of Oedipus, and that it may have ended with a *deus ex machina*.

The *Antigone* of Sophocles has always been considered one of his best plays. Its choral lyrics are especially celebrated. It apparently aroused great admiration when first produced, for Sophocles is said to have been elected to a generalship in the Samian War (about 440 B.C.) because of this play. During the fourth century, according to Demosthenes (19. 246), the *Antigone* of Sophocles was frequently produced by the leading actors of the day. The stellar role, incidentally, was that of Antigone herself, while the role of Creon was left to the third actor. In this period a contemporary dramatist, Astydamas, produced an original play on the same subject. The Roman Accius later wrote an *Antigona*, perhaps an adaptation of Sophocles' play. The influence of this play of Sophocles on later art and literature, however, was apparently not great. Modern adaptations, also, are of slight importance, but the music which Mendelssohn composed for a German version is famous.²⁷

Theme.—The conflict between secular and divine law is often considered the basic theme of Sophocles' *Antigone*. But this is not an entirely satisfactory statement of the theme, for the decree of Creon is considered invalid by various characters in the play, and probably most of the original Greek audience would have denied this decree the status of law. In the amusing discussion of the definition of law by Pericles and Alcibiades (in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 1. 2. 40-46), for instance, the decrees of a tyrant, unsanctioned by the people, are denied the status of law. The ultraconservatism of the Greeks and their reverence for established law is well illustrated by the refusal of Socrates to escape from prison and save his life because in so doing he would have been breaking the law.²⁸ Again, in the Greek town of Thurii in southern Italy, anyone wishing to propose a change in the laws was compelled to do so with a rope around his neck, and he was straightway hanged if the proposed change was not accepted by the majority.²⁹ Thurii was founded in 444/43 B.C., perhaps about the time the *Antigone* was being written; and the reference to Italy (1119) may well have been suggested by this recent foundation, in which various Athenians and Herodotus, the friend of Sophocles, took part. Their conception of law was probably much the same as Sophocles' own.

The necessity of observing divine law and the invalidity of any human decree which contravenes it are certainly basic concepts in the play. These form the basis of Antigone's defense, and her point of view is championed by Haemon and Teiresias. Creon himself must finally adopt it (1113-14). The blessings of wisdom and its attainment, especially the wisdom of recognizing one's own fallibility and human limitations, form another aspect of the theme here as in the *Ajax* and in the *Oedipus*. The specific application of this concept here is found in the grave obligations of the human ruler and the folly of the unjust judge—a favorite theme in Attic drama, for Athenians were always proud of their democracy and contemptuous of tyrants.³⁰ "Wisdom is the supreme part of happiness," the chorus declare at the end of the play (Jebb's translation); "and reverence towards the gods must be inviolate. Great words of prideful men are ever punished with great blows, and, in old age, teach the chastened to be wise."

The subject of the *Antigone* bears a resemblance to that of the *Ajax*. Both plays are concerned with a kinsman's burial of a corpse contrary to the decree of the rulers. The primary subject of the *Ajax*, however, is the rehabilitation of the dead hero, whereas in the *Antigone*, no attempt is made to rehabilitate the honor of Polyneices. His very dishonor, in fact, adds to the glory of Antigone's unwavering devotion and applies the most extreme test to her loyalty and to the validity of the law of Heaven. The downfall of Ajax, furthermore, bears no significant resemblance to that of Antigone. It does bear a resemblance to that of Creon, as intimated above; but, otherwise, the similarity between the two plays is only superficial. Many critics have insisted that the structure of the *Antigone*, being the more effective, shows a distinct advance in technique over that of the *Ajax*, and that therefore the *Antigone* must be the later play. This is fallacious reasoning, for the differences in subject rob this comparison of any significance.

Discussion.—A certain amount of suspense is maintained in the *Antigone*. The audience presumably did not know what the outcome would be; for if Euripides in his play could contradict the Sophoclean version (if that preceded) and have Antigone's burial of her brother lead to her marriage rather than to her immediate death, doubtless Sophocles might have arranged some such ending if he had so desired. The suspense is aided by the absence of an expository prologue. The masterly opening scene and the withholding of certain important information are both characteristic of Sophocles' skillful handling of exposition. Preparation for the tragic outcome, however, is found in the fear of Ismene for the fate of her sister (82) and in her conviction that any attempt to bury Polyneices must end in disaster. Antigone her-

self forebodes disaster. The tone of all the action, furthermore, is tragic except parts of the speeches of the Guard, which approach comic relief. Teiresias, however, at first seems to promise Creon that a change of heart and counsel will save the day. Although his dire prophecy of the death of Haemon is unqualified, the chorus obviously think that Creon's change may still prevent the tragedy, and they joyfully invoke Bacchus to come to the rescue of their city. Such a joyful song immediately before the announcement of the catastrophe is especially pathetic and constitutes a characteristic device of Sophocles for heightening the tragic effect, as may be observed in the *Ajax* (693-718), in the *Oedipus the King* (1086-1109), and in the *Trachiniae* (633-62).

The role of Haemon is handled with consummate skill. Most effective is Ismene's revelation of the betrothal of Antigone to Haemon at the crucial point when Creon is determining the fate of Antigone. Here again the advantage of omitting an expository prologue is seen, for a prologue might naturally have been expected to contain such information. Ismene's revelation serves also as preparation for the entrance of Haemon.

Antigone is not taken off to die immediately after Creon has sentenced her. The play gains tremendously by this delay, which allows time for a change of mood in the heroine, and by the insertion of the quarrel between Haemon and Creon with Haemon's praise of Antigone before she sings her farewell and is led away. Sophocles does not, however, bring Antigone and Haemon on stage at the same time. This is in accordance with his usual classic restraint in treating the soft emotions, and no scene between the lovers could be so profoundly pathetic as the Messenger's brief description of their death.

Some critics have been troubled by the fact that, according to the Messenger, Creon buries Polyneices before attempting to rescue Antigone. This action is really outside the play proper and, therefore, should not be too closely scrutinized. Possibly this order is adopted only for dramatic convenience in order to avoid an anticlimax, but we should note that Teiresias has ordered the burial of Polyneices as the more important act.³¹

The portrayal of the feminine characters is especially noteworthy. A respectable woman in the Athens of Sophocles' own age was restricted almost exclusively to the life of her own home. "To a woman not to show more weakness than is natural to her sex is a great glory," Pericles is represented by Thucydides (2. 45, Jowett) as saying, "and not to be talked about for good or for evil among men." Even in Athens, however, there were exceptional women, such as Pericles' own

foreign and therefore illegitimate wife, Aspasia, who had great influence upon the intellectual and political life of her times. The position of women was higher among the contemporary Aeolic and Doric Greeks, as it had been among the Greeks, apparently, during the heroic age; for certainly the position of Penelope and Helen and Arete in the *Odyssey* is a very high one. The heroic type of womanhood, offering vastly superior dramatic possibilities, is usually preferred by the Athenian writers of tragedy. In the *Antigone* these two types of womanhood are effectively contrasted.

From her first words, Ismene is characterized as feminine and helpless. She has heard nothing of the news which has upset Antigone. But she does know her place in life and her own limitations: as a woman she cannot strive with men, and as a subject she must obey her ruler. If she refuses to attempt the burial of her brother, she is not committing sacrilege, because she is not a free agent. Since she cannot defy the ruler of the land successfully, it would be folly to make the attempt. So Ismene reasons and, from the standpoint of practical wisdom, she is right; but she is nevertheless base in her feverish haste to admit her weakness, and Antigone readily so pronounces her. Indeed she is the basest member of the house of Oedipus—and the only one to survive. But if Ismene has the weakness of a woman, she has the strength also. Though declared hateful to Antigone and to the dead, Ismene insists on continuing her love for her sister; and when Antigone is apprehended and brought before Creon, Ismene is willing to die with her in the ecstasy of feminine devotion, which itself is revolting to the deliberate Antigone.

In sharp contrast to Ismene, Antigone stands out as a woman of great will and strength of character. As a tragic role, Antigone ranks with the superhuman Clytemnestra of Aeschylus and the dread Medea of Euripides. But, unlike these other most famous heroines, Antigone, if not wholly good, is at least wholly admirable. She insists that one's first obligation is to those divine laws whose justice is as obvious as it is immutable, and she will admit no exception to this obligation.

If Antigone has a fault it is the admirable fault of Prometheus—the fault of willfulness and stubborn determination to do what appears to her to be right in spite of all opposition and regardless of all consequences. Like Prometheus, Antigone finds her opponent in the figure of a tyrant, though the ideal which she defends is perhaps more definite and more obviously just. As Prometheus is urged to yield before troubles by his well-meaning but not very admirable kinsman, Oceanus, so Antigone is urged to cower before the decree of Creon by her not very admirable sister, Ismene. After Antigone's bitter clash with Creon

and her condemnation, the chorus sings that the hope of the last of the house of Oedipus has been brought low "by the blood-stained dust due to the gods infernal, and by folly in speech, and frenzy at the heart" (601-3, Jebb). The opinion of the chorus, then, is clear: Antigone is guilty of folly in speech when she very flagrantly insults Creon. In Euripides' *Phoenissae*, also, Antigone's action is similarly viewed. "A noble spirit you have," remarks Creon there (1680), "but a certain folly, too."

The deliberate defiance of authority by one unjustly accused may be admirable; but, from the worldly point of view, it is certainly folly, and the case of Socrates—for he too insulted his judges—proves that such defiance has never been conducive to longevity. Creon cites Antigone's praise of her deed as adding to her guilt. Willfulness and fury of temper are the faults not only of Antigone but of the whole house of Labdacus. They caused the fatal duel at the crossroads where Oedipus slew his father Laius. They are the most distinctive characteristics of the sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polyneices, in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* or in Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, or in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. So the chorus in the *Antigone* may well say that the daughter of Oedipus has the fierce spirit of a fierce father, and that she is one who does not know how to yield before troubles.³²

The character of Antigone is portrayed most vividly by means of contrast with the other characters. Even the Guard serves to bring out the nobility of her action. The Guard is a simple man. He has a simple man's frank cowardice where death is concerned but also a simple man's belief in the inevitability of any misfortune which may befall. Amusingly, the Guard tries to win pardon before telling his tale, and he has a plain man's courage to talk plainly to Creon (323). At first naïvely joyful at having caught Antigone, he later feels some pity for her, but not as much, he simply admits, as he would have felt for himself if he had not apprehended her. Such a figure, with a touch of the comic and something more than a touch of the humorous, is rare in Greek tragedy. He is reminiscent of the garrulous old Nurse in Aeschylus' *Choephoroe*, and he anticipates the Phrygian eunuch in Euripides' *Orestes*. These figures are as near to Shakespeare's simples as the Greek dramatists ever approached. But the function of the Guard here at the opening of the play is obviously not primarily to furnish a touch of comedy but to bring out the heroism of Antigone.

The character of Antigone is brought out also by the description of others. Very effective is the Guard's description of her discovery of the uncovered body of Polyneices: "and she cried aloud with the sharp cry of a bird in its bitterness,—even as when, within the empty nest,

it sees the bed stripped of its nestlings" (423-25, Jebb). More important is Haemon's description of the townspeople's praise of Antigone. The scene with this description and the obvious devotion of Haemon prepares for Antigone's farewell scene and adds greatly to its pathos.

In her farewell scene Antigone as before is a strong character, but she has none of the inhuman and dramatically ineffective stoicism of certain characters in Seneca, and none of that fanatic passion for death which characterizes the Christian martyr. She is thoroughly human in her reluctance to die and pitiful in her loneliness—even the gods seem to have deserted her. She is pitiful, too, in her repeated references to death before marriage—obviously she is thinking of Haemon—and in the injustice which decrees her death. The chorus do not relieve her isolation. They had no enthusiasm and only reluctant obedience for Creon's edict concerning Polyneices (211-20), and now they are inclined to think Antigone's act, even if rash and foolish, a righteous one (cf. 505-9). But this is a chorus composed of men, and they are only distantly sympathetic with Antigone. Although Antigone is painfully conscious of her isolation, now that her deed is done and its result is immutable, she need no longer maintain the cold fanatical determination which characterized her in the earlier scenes, and her thorough humanity is now displayed.

One speech of Antigone in this final scene has greatly puzzled critics. She declares that she would not have made an attempt to bury her own child or husband in defiance of the laws of the city but that she did bury her brother because, with parents dead, no other brother could ever again be hers (904-20). These strange lines have been considered spurious by many scholars. They cannot, it seems, be independent of the story which Herodotus (3. 119), the friend and contemporary of Sophocles, tells of the wife of Intaphrenes, and which breathes a very Oriental atmosphere. But Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 3. 16 [1417 a]) quotes two of these lines of Antigone, and there seems no cogent reason for assuming that Sophocles did not write them. In this speech Antigone is thinking of the dear ones who will meet her in the world of the dead, and especially of the brother for whom she has sacrificed her life. It is altogether natural, therefore, that she should here dwell upon the intimate relationship of those who come from the same womb and from the same sire. There is here no real contradiction of her earlier lines (450-60), in which she cites divine law as the motivation for her act; for this divine law devolved primarily on the closest of kin and, as she here points out, she will never again have anyone more closely related to her and therefore more worthy of her sacrifice

(913). It is quite sound psychologically, furthermore, that a character, after reaching a decision primarily through emotional channels and after performing an act, should rationalize and invent all possible intellectual justifications for this act.³³ It is not unreasonable, therefore, to assume that these lines of Antigone are genuine and that Antigone is sincere in speaking them, but that actually she would have performed the same service for child or husband which she has performed for her brother.

Though human and pathetic, Antigone is gloriously defiant to the very end: "Behold me, princes of Thebes, the last daughter of the house of your kings,—see what I suffer, and from whom, because I feared to cast away the fear of heaven!"³⁴

Creon is no monster such as Lycus in the *Heracles* of Euripides. Creon's attitude toward government and patriotism are not unlike that of Eteocles in the *Seven against Thebes* of Aeschylus. We may be sure that there was much in his attitude of which Sophocles would approve (cf. 175-90); but times and ideas were changing rapidly in Athens of the fifth century, and Sophocles' patriotism is not the patriotism of Aeschylus. He stands midway between his predecessor and his younger rival, Euripides. Either Sophocles or Euripides might have written Haemon's ringing words (737, Jebb): "That is no city, which belongs to one man." Or again (757, Jebb): "Thou wouldest speak, and then hear no reply?" As Hippolytus accuses Theseus in the later play of Euripides (*Hipp.* 1056), Haemon here accuses Creon of being an unjust judge—a weighty crime in one whose judgment is subject to no appeal, and often a crime of fatal consequences. The simple Guard has already indirectly accused Creon on this score (323), and Antigone, of course, repeats the charge. Especially offensive to an Athenian audience would be Creon's contention that the ruler of a city must be obeyed "in small things and in just things and in the opposite" (667). The sophistic wording here adds to the statement's offensiveness. Ruler and judge are one in the city of a tyrant, and in a way the charge of being an unjust judge embraces all the other charges against Creon.

The charge of impiety is denied by Creon. He angrily rejects the suggestion of the chorus that a god may have buried Polyneices—a suggestion made plausible by the fact that no beast or dog has maimed the corpse. Creon insists that the gods can have no concern for the body of a man who came to burn their shrines (280-89). This contention is not wholly without specious justification.

Proper burial of the dead, according to Greek religious thought, was prerequisite to the soul's immediate entrance into its permanent

abode in the underworld. Proper burial, therefore, was of the greatest importance and devolved as a prime duty upon the closest surviving relative. Denial of such burial was sacrilege. In Attic law, furthermore, anyone passing an unburied corpse was required to cast earth upon it.³⁵ Certain exceptions to these rules, however, were commonly recognized. Temple robbers and some other types of criminals were normally denied burial.³⁶ In the *Electra* of Sophocles (1487–88) *Electra* insists that the corpse of Aegisthus be cast forth to dogs and carrion birds; in Euripides' *Electra* (896–98), also, Orestes intimates that Aegisthus has been slain in circumstances which justify the denial of burial. The Dioscuri at the end of Euripides' play, however, command the burial of both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra; and this was in accord with popular legend; for centuries later, as Pausanias (2. 16. 7) records, the grave of Aegisthus was still pointed out. In another play of Euripides, the *Heracleidae* (1050–51), a character makes a command similar to that of the Sophoclean *Electra*. The denial of burial in extreme cases, therefore, is not without precedent in Greek law or in Greek tragedy.

But Creon's assumption that Polyneices should be treated as one who has desecrated the temples of the gods is not borne out by the facts, and his whole case against Polyneices is founded upon very sophistic reasoning. He repeatedly insists that the wicked should not have equal honor with the good even in death. He seems possibly to intimate that the burial of Polyneices is an impious act (301). Later, Creon is himself obviously guilty of impiety when he declares that he will not allow the burial of Polyneices even though eagles defile the throne of Zeus himself (1039–43; cf. 780). Sophistically he attempts to justify these words by claiming that no mortal can defile a god.³⁷

Sophistry, of course, has always existed; but those professional teachers and rhetoricians known as the Sophists were just beginning to play an important role in Athenian life when the *Antigone* was produced, and some scholars think that Sophocles by means of the figure of Creon is here attacking their methods and their ethics.³⁸ Especially shocking to many Athenians, as we may readily observe in Aristophanes, was the brazenness of the Sophists in indulging in all sorts of devices and practices with no consideration for moral implications, and their bold claim that, in any given case, they could make the better side appear the worse or the worse appear the better. So Creon here not only attempts to justify his sacrilegious decree but possibly intimates that disobedience to his decree would be sacrilege.

Before Antigone is apprehended, Creon seems to have a legitimate excuse for his severity. A state of emergency exists at Thebes, and

certain factions seem to be dissatisfied with him—he is a comparatively new ruler. This is the implication of his first speech to the chorus, and he later tells us that certain people have muttered against him (289–92). The fact that Antigone is so closely related to him and a member of his household adds to the inhumanity of his judgment, however, when he discovers that actually the breaking of his edict has no political implications. But, instead of realizing this, Creon perversely insists that the close kinship of Antigone aggravates her crime of disobedience. Creon adopts much the same attitude toward his son; and his injustice here is made to appear in an even worse light because of the extreme tact with which Haemon approaches his father. It is typical Sophoclean irony that in the end Creon himself must do that which he has gone to such lengths to prevent others from doing.³⁹

Creon has one characteristic in common with Antigone: he is very headstrong. Indeed, both Creon and Antigone are repeatedly charged with folly. Haemon, for instance, uses practically the same argument—that stubbornness is a dangerous vice—against Creon (712–18) that Creon earlier used against Antigone (473–83). Creon and Antigone charge each other with folly (470, 562), and the chorus sooner or later agrees with both (383, 1348–53). But there is a vast difference. Creon's perverse maintenance of his error, as Teiresias bluntly points out, is a fatal vice, whereas the steadfastness of Antigone, if not wise, is at least admirable.

Some critics have maintained that Creon and not Antigone is the main character of the play.⁴⁰ In the dramatization of an ethical problem there naturally arises an opposition between the character who takes the better point of view and the other who takes the worse. Naturally the fate of Creon, who has taken the worse point of view, is much more dreadful than that of Antigone, and the last of the play is concerned with Creon's tragedy. The introduction of Eurydice and her suicide concerns Creon alone. But Creon's tragedy is dwelt upon at such length not because Creon is the main character of the play—he is vastly overshadowed by Antigone—but because the dreadfulness of his fate is the final justification of Antigone.

3. **OEDIPUS THE KING

(Perhaps about 430 B.C.)

The date of this play is highly disputed. Athens was the victim of a devastating plague in 430–427 B.C., soon after the Peloponnesian War began. Some scholars think the description of the plague in this play

was suggested by the plague at Athens; others, recalling the unfortunate experience of Phrynichus (who was fined for presenting a play which reminded the Athenians of the misfortunes of their allies, the Milesians), think this play must have been produced before the plague. The *Iliad*, of course, opens with a description of a plague.

The titles of the other two tragedies produced along with the *Oedipus* are unknown, but an ancient commentator tells us that Sophocles was second in the contest, being defeated by Philocles, a nephew of Aeschylus.⁴¹

In order to appreciate the irony of the play, the modern reader must know, as the ancient spectator certainly did, that Oedipus has slain his own father, Laius, and is now married to his mother.

From the time of Aristotle, the *Oedipus the King* has frequently been taken as the perfect model of Greek tragedy. But this does not mean that the *Oedipus* is a typical Greek tragedy. No one play, indeed, could be called typical of all Greek tragedy, for the plays vary greatly in type; but if we were forced to choose one play as most representative, we should probably choose the *Bacchae* of Euripides. Nor is the *Oedipus* superior to other Greek tragedies in all respects. The *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, for instance, is superior to the *Oedipus* in the grandeur of its poetry. Indeed, it is unfortunate that the *Oedipus* is so often taken as the model of Greek tragedy, for it is unusual in various important respects. The plot is unusual, for it does not concern any fatal error which occurs during the action of the play; this plot, like many of the plots of Ibsen, deals with the mere discovery of former errors and events. Here, the discovery of the identity of Oedipus constitutes and coincides with his reversal of fortune. Such coincidence, as Aristotle points out, is dramatically very effective; but it is not common in Greek tragedy, though mere recognition of identity, such as Electra's recognition of her brother Orestes, is frequent. In the *Oedipus* there is also greater dependence on the audience's previous knowledge of the story than in most tragedies. The exposition, as one would expect in this type of plot, is very slight and is diffused throughout the play.⁴²

The Greek conception of fate, furthermore, is likely to be misinterpreted by anyone who is familiar only with this play. The *Prometheus* and, in a different way, the *Ajax* are more enlightening in this regard.

Another reason why the play can hardly be called typical is because it has almost no etiological significance—no Greek custom or institution is explained.

The *Oedipus* does not, however, wholly lack typical features. It

exhibits strict unity of subject, effective use of dramatic irony, and characters who are thoroughly human. Its great reputation as a masterpiece is fully deserved; for in dramatizing this legend as a powerful illustration of the irony of Fate, Sophocles has come very close to perfection.

Legend.—The story of Oedipus and his sons was the central part of the Theban cycle of legends, which was second only to the Trojan cycle as a theme for Greek epic poetry. None of the early epics on the Theban cycle, however, have survived, and our present knowledge of them is slight. According to the brief account given in the *Odyssey* (11. 271–80, Butcher and Lang), where Odysseus sees the mother and wife of "Oedipodes" in the underworld, Oedipus had slain his father and married his mother, and then "straightway the gods made these things known to men." Oedipus remained the ruler of Thebes and, we may assume, did not blind himself. But Jocasta hanged herself; "for him she left pains behind full many, even all that the Avengers of a mother bring to pass." In a passage in the lyric poet Pindar (*Olympian Ode* 2. 42–46), a contemporary of Aeschylus, the sons of Oedipus are slain by the Avenging Fury of Laius.

In certain versions of the story the four children of Oedipus are born not from Jocasta but from another wife. This relieved of embarrassment those famous houses which claimed descent from Oedipus. The Attic writers, so far as we know, first presented the version wherein these children are born of Jocasta.⁴³ The existence of such children, of course, greatly increases the dramatic potentialities of the story.

Source and influence.—The story of Oedipus, according to our present knowledge, was dramatized more often than any other legend. Some thirteen different Greek authors, including Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, are known to have written plays on this subject.

Of the trilogy which Aeschylus wrote on this subject, the last play, the *Seven against Thebes*, is extant. This play concerns the fate of the sons of Oedipus, but from it we glean a few facts concerning the second play of the trilogy on the fate of Oedipus himself. Here Oedipus blinded himself and cursed his sons. The primary motivating force throughout the trilogy, as in the Orestes trilogy, was the curse and Avenging Fury of the house descending from generation to generation. In Aeschylus, furthermore, Laius was said to have been slain at a junction of roads, not in Phocis as Sophocles relates, but in Boeotia near a place sacred to the goddesses of the underworld and to the Avenging Furies. It may be that Aeschylus, like certain other writers, also gave the "original" home of Oedipus not as Corinth but as Sicyon, another

place associated with the worship of the Avenging Furies. Sophocles, obviously wishing to change the interpretation of the story, has carefully eliminated all associations with the Avenging Furies.⁴⁴

Of Euripides' *Oedipus* almost nothing is known except that in his version Oedipus was apparently blinded not by himself but by the servants of Laius. Little is known of the later versions, but it is obvious that Sophocles' play did not discourage later dramatists from attempting the subject.

Other extant Greek tragedies dealing with the story of Oedipus and his children are the *Antigone* and the *Oedipus at Colonus* of Sophocles, and the *Phoenissae* of Euripides.

The early Roman dramatists apparently neglected the story of Oedipus, but Julius Caesar as a youth tried his hand at a tragedy on this subject in the fashion of the day, doubtless with much more success than Cicero's brother had when he wrote four tragedies in sixteen days, or than Augustus had with his *Ajax* (his *Ajax* was forced to commit suicide!).⁴⁵ The *Oedipus* of Seneca is extant (see below).

The *Oedipus* of Sophocles was one of the most famous Greek tragedies in later classical, Byzantine, and medieval times. It seems to have been in the popular repertoire of Polus, one of the most famous actors of the fourth century B.C., and, later, the Roman emperor Nero is said to have played, among other roles, Canace in labor, Orestes the matricide, the blinded Oedipus, and the mad Heracles.⁴⁶ The *Oedipus* was the favorite Sophoclean tragedy of the humanists of the sixteenth century, and it has been imitated and adapted by various dramatists. For Racine it was the ideal tragedy.⁴⁷ It has frequently been produced in the original and in translation both in this country and abroad, including a production by Max Reinhardt and a presentation in Paris by the famous actor Mounet-Sully.⁴⁸

Modern adaptations.—A comparison of Sophocles' play with the modern adaptations of various authors is profitable and enlightening. The most striking difference, perhaps, is the sharp contrast between the severe classicism of the Greek and the extreme romanticism of the French versions. The length of a Greek tragedy, furthermore, is obviously not sufficient for a modern presentation, especially after the choral songs have been omitted. Every modern adapter, therefore, must add to the plot.

The Oedipe of Corneille (1659).—Perhaps the best criticism of Corneille's play is that which is made in the brilliant preface to the *Oedipus* of Dryden and Lee:

In our own age, Corneille has attempted it, and, it appears by his preface, with great success. But a judicious reader will easily observe how much the

copy is inferior to the original. He tells you himself, that he owes a great part of his success to the happy episode of Theseus and Dirce; which is the same thing as if we should acknowledge that we were indebted for our good fortune to the under-plot of Adrastus, Eurydice, and Creon. The truth is, he miserably failed in the character of his hero: If he desired that Oedipus should be pitied, he should have made him a better man. He forgot that Sophocles had taken care to show him, in his first entrance, a just, a merciful, a successful, a religious prince, and, in short, a father of his country. Instead of these, he has drawn him suspicious, designing, more anxious of keeping the Theban crown than solicitous for the safety of his people; hectoring by Theseus, condemned by Dirce, and scarce maintaining a second part in his own tragedy.

The Oedipus of Dryden and Lee (1679).—The play of John Dryden and Nathaniel Lee very clearly illustrates the vast difference between a Greek tragedy and an English tragedy of the long and elaborate Elizabethan type, although this play is obviously an inferior specimen of the type. It fails primarily for the same reasons which the authors so brilliantly pointed out as the causes for the failures of Seneca and Corneille; for here, too, there is too much pompous rant, and the hero is almost lost in the complicated and endless business of the minor plot. The melodramatic sensationalism of the play is its most striking characteristic. This begins with the first stage direction: "The Curtain rises to a plaintive tune, representing the present condition of Thebes; dead Bodies appear at a distance in the Streets; some faintly go over the Stage, others drop." Before our eyes, Oedipus must walk in his sleep and describe his terrifying dreams. The ghost of Laius, who was merely described by Creon in Seneca's play, is here brought on stage twice, and he calls out at numerous other times. He is first seen standing armed in his chariot as when he was slain by Oedipus. At the end of the play, the stage flows with blood in the general butchery.

Not only these incidents but the characters themselves are melodramatic, especially the villainous hunchback Creon. He is in love with Eurydice, an invented daughter of Laius and Jocasta, and is continually plotting to possess her against her will by fair means or foul and to overthrow Oedipus. Eurydice loves Adrastus, a captured prince of Argos. The scenes of love-making, though not especially crude, transgress the bounds set in Greek tragedy. Worst of all in this respect, but effective in its crude irony, is the scene between Oedipus in his nightshirt and Jocasta in her gown, wherein Oedipus, in order to allay his terrifying dreams of parricide and incest, insists that he must immediately exercise his marital prerogatives.

The tone of the play varies greatly. It descends to low comedy when Eurydice in the first act revilingly describes the deformed Creon to his face.

Some brilliant strokes, however, are found in the play. The best of these, perhaps, are the ill omen of Jocasta's speeches upon her first entrance and the motivation of Oedipus' ignorance of the circumstances of Laius' death (end of Act I):

a confused report
Passed through my ears, when first I took the crown;
But full of hurry, like a morning dream,
It vanished in the business of the day.

In Dryden and Lee, as in Seneca, the story of Oedipus is a tragedy of fate; but the English authors are obviously unconcerned with moral interpretations.

The Oedipe of Voltaire (1718).—Voltaire's play is perhaps the best of the more famous modern versions. To provide a minor plot he has invented a frustrated love affair between Jocasta and Philoctetes. This exalts the virtuous character of Jocasta and creates a minor climax after Philoctetes is accused of the murder of Laius. This climax is reached in the third act and is relieved when the process of Oedipus' discovery of his real identity begins. From this point on, the minor plot almost wholly disappears, although Oedipus near the end of the play (V, i) recommends that Philoctetes succeed him as king of Thebes.

Oedipus and Jocasta both are here very admirable characters, and Voltaire interprets their downfall as exhibiting the injustice of fate and the cruelty of the gods. "Impitoyable dieux, mes crimes sont les vôtres," cries Oedipus (V, iv). The last line of the play by Jocasta is very similar, and the chorus, of which Voltaire has retained a vestige, voice the same sentiment.

Of the changes made in the Sophoclean material itself perhaps the final scenes, which have been influenced by Seneca, are the most successful. Here Oedipus is forced himself to reveal his identity to Jocasta, and at the very end Jocasta commits suicide on stage.

The unquestioned popularity of Voltaire's play in Paris may have been due in part to certain scandals concerning incest in contemporary court circles.⁴⁹

Aristotle's criticism.—It is easy to understand why such a skillfully articulated play should appeal to the systematic Aristotle. In the *Poetics*, the *Oedipus* is cited more frequently and praised more highly than any other play.

The best type of plot, Aristotle maintains (*Poetics* 1452 b), is one

which is complex, that is, one containing a sudden reversal of fortune (peripety) or a discovery of identity or both, arising as a necessary or probable consequence of the antecedents. The plot is especially neat, in his opinion (1452 a), when the discovery constitutes the reversal, as in the *Oedipus*; and the tragic effect in this play is very powerful in that the messenger who comes from Corinth thinks that he is bringing good news for Oedipus but actually reveals the dreadful secret of his birth. The fortunes of the main character, Aristotle continues (1453 a), citing Oedipus and Thyestes, should change from happiness to misery (that is, the ending should be tragic rather than happy); and the cause of this change must not be extreme depravity of character but rather some great error on the part of a man who is outstanding in reputation and prosperity.⁵⁰

There are various devices by which a discovery of identity may be made. The clumsiness of Aeschylus in managing the recognition of Orestes in the *Choephoroe*, most modern critics assume, was criticized by Euripides. Now the best of all discoveries, according to Aristotle (1455 a, Bywater), is that "arising from the incidents themselves, when the great surprise comes about through a probable incident, like that in the *Oedipus* of Sophocles . . ."

Tragic fear and pity, Aristotle points out (1453 b), may be aroused not only by the spectacle but also—and this, he says, is more effective—by the very structure and incidents of the play, as in the *Oedipus*, because the mere recital of this story would have such an effect upon one. This fear and pity are strongest when the tragic deed is done within the family. Aristotle is here referring to the fact that Oedipus has slain his own father.

Further, Aristotle states, there should be nothing improbable about the incidents of the play; but if improbabilities are unavoidable, they should be outside the action proper of the play as in the *Oedipus* (1454 b). A later reference (1460 a) shows that Aristotle here is thinking especially of the lack of plausibility in the assumption that Oedipus should have remained ignorant of the circumstances of Laius' death during all the years with Jocasta.

The *Oedipus* is cited also in connection with Aristotle's contention that tragedy is superior to epic poetry (1462 b).

Subject and theme.—The subject of the play is Oedipus' discovery of his identity and his consequent realization that he has slain his father and married his mother. In the course of the play, he does not, like Antigone or Medea or Pentheus, commit any act which results in his downfall. "Oedipus, by Zeus, never enjoyed good fortune," Aristophanes makes his "Aeschylus" say in the *Frogs* (1183–85), "but he

was unfortunate in his very being; for before his birth Apollo had said that he would slay his sire" Such a conception of one's fate as unalterably determined before birth is not typical of Greek popular thought. Fate is something that is usually spoken of in the past tense; where the future is concerned, there is usually an alternative or an uncertainty. This is clearly seen in the *Prometheus*, and it was almost invariably the case in the oracles given at Delphi. Without such duplicity, this institution of Apollo would never have lasted for more than a thousand years. Sophocles places no emphasis upon determinism in this play, but he does stress the infallibility of the oracle of Apollo. This is obvious in the second stasimon and in the speech of the conservative Creon to Oedipus near the end of the play (1445, Jebb): "Aye, for thou thyself wilt now surely put faith in the god." The oracle at Delphi needed rehabilitation in Sophocles' day, for it was widely recognized to have been bribed in certain famous cases. Even the pious Herodotus reports this (5. 63; 6. 66), and he also shows that it had done considerable damage to the Greek cause in the Persian Wars by anticipating a Greek defeat (7. 148 and 169). The Delphic oracle predicted a Spartan victory in the Peloponnesian War, as Thucydides reports (1. 118); but Sophocles may have produced the *Oedipus* before this prediction was made. How Aeschylus and Sophocles could believe in the infallibility of such an institution is difficult to comprehend. We must not, however, assume that oracles and predictions have such an important role in the tragedies of Sophocles primarily because of the author's own religious convictions. Like ghosts and witches in Shakespeare, oracles and prophecies are employed primarily for purposes of foreshadowing, for dramatic irony, and for creating tragic atmosphere.⁵¹ Oracles not in the legendary tradition are freely invented by the dramatist.

The basic theme of the *Oedipus* is the irony of fate. No mortal man, however powerful and wealthy, can be pronounced happy until after he is dead; for no man, however wise, knows what the morrow will bring. This is the burden of the last complete choral song and of the last lines of the play (which are sometimes considered spurious). This was a basic conception in Greek popular thought, best illustrated by the story of Solon and Croesus as told by Herodotus. Croesus, the fabulously wealthy king of Lydia, thought that his power and fortune made him the happiest of all men, but Solon refused to pronounce him or any other man happy before the full course of his life had been run successfully. Herodotus closes his version of this story with the following remark (I. 34, Rawlinson): "After Solon had gone away a dreadful vengeance, sent of God, came upon Croesus, to punish him, it is likely, for deeming himself the happiest of men." Such belief in

the envy of the gods is not found in the *Oedipus*. Although it is typical of Greek popular belief, it contradicts determinism; for if one's future were really unalterably fixed, nothing that he or anyone else might say could change it.

The moral guilt or innocence of Oedipus has troubled many critics. Aeschylus interpreted his downfall as due to the sin of his father and the family curse. Sophocles has eliminated this and apparently has substituted no other moral justification. But, since the story is interpreted primarily as an illustration of the irony of fate, we should not expect any other justification than the portrayal of Oedipus as a character who might conceivably have committed his fatal errors even though the gods had not determined them in advance. The character of Oedipus is not ideal or perfect, and he does not appear an entirely innocent victim of circumstance. He has inherited the pride and uncontrollable temper of his father. His insolence, according to Euripides in the *Phoenissae* (41), was responsible for his clash with Laius at the junction of roads. Oedipus' anger and high spirit are cited as the cause of his misfortunes in the *Oedipus at Colonus* (855, 1195-98). In the present play Oedipus confesses that he slew the men at the crossroads in anger (807), and his excessive spirit is brought out in his clashes with Teiresias and Creon. Since the dramatist is not here exhibiting the fatal acts which Oedipus long ago committed, he cannot portray the particular emotional disturbances which led to these acts. But he can portray the inveterate moral faults or emotional weaknesses which were at least in part responsible for these fatal acts, and he must portray these unless the tragedy is to be governed by mere fate or by a malign demon. This is a principle of "dramatic justice" which critics often overlook. In the action of the play not only the pride and temper of Oedipus are exhibited but also his injustice as a ruler and his unorthodox attitude toward seers and oracles. Oedipus does not, therefore, appear to be a man pre-eminently virtuous and just.

Still, many critics insist that Oedipus is entirely guiltless and that the gods of Sophocles merely represent the universe as it actually is and that accordingly they are not subject to blame for the misfortunes of men.⁵² Greek gods, it is true, often seem only personifications of natural forces; but certainly prophecy presumes intelligence. This interpretation of the gods, therefore, does not seem wholly acceptable for the *Oedipus*. Nor can it be successfully maintained that the actions of Oedipus in the play are entirely just and proper.

When Oedipus first considers the possibility that he has slain Laius, and before he has the slightest suspicion of any kinship with Laius or Jocasta, he declares (828-29, Jebb): "Then would not he speak aright

of Oedipus, who judged these things sent by some cruel power above man?" But after the catastrophe, though his fate turns out to be far more dreadful than this, and though he does cite Apollo as the author of his misfortunes, he does not charge the god with cruelty or injustice (1329). His deeds, though unintentional, are so dreadful and his pollution so black that further opposition to Apollo is unthinkable, and he can only confess his utter ruin. His situation closely resembles that of Ajax, and the moral of the play resembles the moral which Odysseus draws from the downfall of Ajax: even the greatest of men and the greatest good fortune is but an unsubstantial shadow (*Ajax* 121-26).

It is possible—but most scholars do not think it likely—that the *Oedipus* was presented during the plague at Athens and constituted an indirect political attack upon Pericles. Pericles was the most powerful man in Athenian politics until his death in 429 B.C., a victim of the plague; and he had strongly advocated the war against Sparta. Just before serious hostilities were begun, the Spartans, wishing to avoid war and knowing that Pericles was its chief advocate, sent an embassy to Athens asking that they drive out "the curse of the goddess." The curse to which they referred was attached to the descendants of certain men who had committed acts of sacrilege some two hundred years previously.⁵³ Pericles was one of these descendants, and after the plague broke out his situation bore an obvious and striking resemblance to that of Oedipus in the play of Sophocles.

Dramatic irony.—Dramatic irony, as we should expect if the theme of the play is the irony of fate, is perhaps the most important element of the play. It begins with the first appearance of Oedipus in his kingly robes and with his first words, "I myself have come hither, Oedipus, famous among all men." Almost every speech in these first scenes is charged with irony, as every situation is charged with it. The pitiful townspeople have appealed for aid to the one who in reality is the cause of their woe. Teiresias is the blind man who sees, Oedipus the seeing man who is blind.

With pity the enlightened spectator witnesses Oedipus' welcome of the information which Creon has brought from Delphi. With pity we view his optimism and his zeal to carry out all the commands of Apollo and punish the murderer of Laius. Oedipus fears that this same murderer may wish to slay him! But at the beginning of the next episode it is with horror that the spectator hears Oedipus curse the murderer of Laius and say (258-65):

"But now, since it has been my lot to possess the powers which he once held and to possess his bed and the wife who has received the seed of both of us [*homosporon*], and since children kindred and common to both of us

had been born of the same mother if offspring had not fared ill for him—But, as it is, fortune has struck him down. I shall be his champion, therefore, as though he were my father . . ."

Such irony is truly dreadful. Oedipus has begotten children that are all too much his own kindred, and he thinks that Laius has had no offspring; but his words are frightfully ambiguous. In the next scene, Teiresias casts at Oedipus words which recall the irony of this passage, especially the phrase, "sower of seed where your father sowed" (*homosporos*, 460). Later in the play, when Oedipus begins to suspect that he is himself the murderer of Laius, to describe his possible fate he uses in part the same words that he previously used in pronouncing the interdiction of the murderer (817-19; cf. 238-41).

Discussion.—The chief virtues of the plot structure of the *Oedipus* are the rapidity and the inevitability of its progression. Nothing can be omitted; nothing really pertinent could be added. Each incident, with the one exception of the entirely plausible arrival of the messenger from Corinth, follows naturally from what precedes and leads inevitably to what follows.

The play is marked off into six sections by five choral songs. These sections vary in length from seventy-six lines to three hundred and fifty. This unevenness in length is characteristic of the episodes in Greek tragedy, and is a much more natural type of division than the modern convention of having three acts of about equal length. Characteristic also is the adaptation of the number of sections—the other Greek tragedies have from four to seven sections—and of the function of each section in the individual play. There is no regularity such as the rule of five divisions or acts, which is usually observed in Seneca. In the *Oedipus*, as frequently, it is obvious that great artistry has been employed in constructing each section as a unit and in placing the choral songs at precisely the proper points. The choral songs themselves are strictly pertinent to the subject of the dramatic action, and they are important in reflecting or modulating the tone of the play. The meter, also, is skillfully adapted to the content of these songs. So were the dance movements which accompanied them.

The opening scene of the *Oedipus* (prologos, 150 lines) plunges into the midst of things—to use the famous phrase of Horace—and the small amount of exposition given is wholly incidental. The appeal of the townspeople to Oedipus really begins the action of the play, and the complication starts with the entrance of Creon and his report. This entrance, however, is somewhat abrupt, for it takes place almost immediately after Oedipus has informed the townspeople that he has sent

Creon to Delphi and that he is troubled over the long delay. Naturalness has here been sacrificed to rapidity. Characterization of Oedipus, also, is an important function of this scene. Sophocles has taken care, as Dryden and Lee remark in the preface to their *Oedipus*, to show Oedipus "in his first entrance, a just, a merciful, a successful, a religious prince, and, in short, a father of his country." The pride of Oedipus, also, is evident from his first lines. After the report of Creon, Oedipus expresses his suspicions that bribery from Thebes emboldened the thieves who slew Laius, and he suspects the same party would like to put him out of the way in similar fashion. These suspicions prepare for the later erroneous conviction of Oedipus that an intrigue exists between Creon and Teiresias. The first section of the play ends with Oedipus' resolve to search out and punish the murderer, and with his command that the Thebans be summoned before him—a nice motivation for the appearance of the chorus.

The chorus of Theban elders, loyally devoted to Oedipus, now enter (parodos, 65 lines). In solemn tones they first express their trepidation at the message from the oracle, and then they invoke various gods to come to their aid. Turning to the plague, and in somewhat more spirited measure, they describe the endless woes of suffering and death which it brings, and again they pray for succor. Then in still more excited measure they ask that the god of death be driven out and destroyed by Zeus, lastly invoking Apollo, Artemis, and Dionysus to fight in their behalf "against the god who has no honor among gods." These opening choral songs furnish what might be called the emotional exposition of the play.

The next section (first episode, 247 lines) opens with Oedipus reassuring the chorus somewhat too confidently, as if he could answer their prayers now as he did when he rescued them from the Sphinx. Exhorting them to aid him in the search for the murderer of Laius, he proclaims his curse upon the murderer with dreadful irony, interdicts him from concourse with Thebans, and emphasizes his own zeal in this cause. The chorus insist that they are without a clue, but they suggest that Teiresias be consulted. To this suggestion Oedipus replies that he has already sent for Teiresias on the instigation of Creon—an important bit of information, for the fact that Creon first offers this suggestion later makes Oedipus, already suspicious of political intrigue, surmise that Creon is the plotter, and this prepares for Creon's re-entrance.

Oedipus marvels that Teiresias has not already appeared, and the seer enters almost immediately. This is a precise repetition of the awkward technique previously used for introducing Creon. Another slight

blemish is found in the fact that Teiresias already knows of the interdiction of the murderer which Oedipus has just pronounced—for we can hardly assume that Teiresias is omniscient.⁵⁴

Just before Teiresias enters, the chorus praise his infallibility. This character preparation adds to his dignity and, by assuring us that Teiresias speaks the truth, emphasizes the irony of Oedipus' skepticism and suspicions of treachery. The bitter quarrel which follows has various important effects. It brings out certain unattractive features in the character of Oedipus, his wrath and his unjust haste to condemn without evidence. The portrayal of these features is of the utmost importance, for they perhaps explain in part his slaughter of Laius, and they certainly furnish some moral justification for the downfall of Oedipus. The quarrel serves also to recall Creon into the action, who, in turn, naturally brings in Jocasta, his sister and the wife of Oedipus; and it furnishes the motivation for Jocasta's all-important story of the death of Laius. Most significant of all, perhaps, the dire predictions of Teiresias first name Oedipus himself as the slayer and prepare Oedipus to be thoroughly shaken when he hears that Laius was slain where three roads meet.

It has been suggested that Sophocles may have intended this scene between Teiresias and Oedipus to level the differences of knowledge of the story among the spectators;⁵⁵ but since the most powerful dramatic irony of the play precedes this scene, we must assume that the dramatist takes for granted a full knowledge of the story from the very beginning of the play.

One of the main problems which the dramatist faced in this play was the difficulty of maintaining Oedipus' ignorance of his identity with plausibility. The suspicions of Oedipus concerning political intrigue, false but not implausible, constitute one of the devices for maintaining his ignorance and motivating his disregard for the pronouncements of Teiresias. Another is found in the circumstances of the quarrel itself. Oedipus loses all patience and without the slightest shred of evidence accuses Teiresias of the murder. Teiresias responds by immediately accusing Oedipus. His accusation, therefore, seems not a seer's prophecy but the mere return of Oedipus' angry abuse. So the chorus at this point interpret the accusations of both Oedipus and Teiresias (404-5).

The episode ends with Teiresias pronouncing his prophecy—though for Oedipus this is essentially a repetition of the oracle given him long ago at Delphi—now for the third time, in language as ominous as it is plain and unmistakable. Thus the emphasis of the whole episode is placed upon its most significant content.

The chorus now sing their first song after completing their entrance (first stasimon, 50 lines). In spirited measure they wonder who the murderer may really be and poetically imagine his futile efforts to escape the inevitable vengeance of Apollo. In more passionate strain, they confess that they are dreadfully troubled by the words of Teiresias but know of nothing that confirms the charge; the gods have true knowledge, but there is no certain evidence that seers know more than other men; and they will never condemn Oedipus without proof, for he has formerly been the savior of the state.

The second episode (350 lines) begins with the quarrel between Oedipus and Creon. Here Oedipus expresses a very tyrannical and offensive theory of autocratic rule. His words remind us of those of Menelaus in the *Ajax* and those of Creon in the *Antigone*. (Creon there, though "historically" the same person, is an entirely different character from Creon in the *Oedipus*.) The injustice of Oedipus here is very different from the calm and pious justice of Creon in the final scene of the play. This characterization of Oedipus continues that of the former scene; and although this quarrel seems to threaten a complication extraneous to the basic plot, it really advances the plot, for Jocasta very naturally comes in as an arbiter between her brother and her husband.

The scenes of the quarrel differ in tone and subject from the revelations of Jocasta, but all three scenes are properly included in one section of the play. If they had been divided by a choral song, the smooth transition from the quarrel to the more pertinent story of Jocasta would have been disrupted, and the plot movement would have been retarded here where rapidity of action is highly desirable. Choral interruption would also have given an improper emphasis to the quarrel and Creon. Still, a break in the rhythmic monotony of the iambic lines is desirable, and this is obtained in two ways. First, iambic lines are divided between two speakers (*antilabe*). This division indicates extreme excitement, and here it marks the climax of the quarrel. It is at this point that Jocasta enters. The monotony of the iambic lines is again broken by agitated lyric exchanges (*kommós*), in which the chorus entreat Oedipus most earnestly not to condemn Creon on an unproved charge, and they swear that they are not devising Oedipus' overthrow. After Oedipus has somewhat grudgingly acquiesced, there is another interchange, corresponding precisely in meter and division of lines, except that Jocasta now takes part. The chorus urge her to take Oedipus within, but she insists on hearing an explanation. Oedipus angrily protests the intercession of the chorus on behalf of Creon, and they respond with another assurance of loyalty and gratitude.

Jocasta's intervention leads to Oedipus' reviewing his case against Creon, especially the declaration of Teiresias that Oedipus is the murderer of Laius. It is noteworthy, incidentally, that the other prophecies are not related. They might more quickly suggest the true identity of Oedipus to Jocasta. Mention of Teiresias' prophecy leads to Jocasta's ironic effort to prove that prophecies and oracles are all untrustworthy by citing the oracle given to Laius. In her story Jocasta mentions one fact which strikes Oedipus most forcefully: Laius was murdered where three highways meet. Oedipus' optimism has been checked by the quarrels with Teiresias and Creon; but now, though Jocasta's story was designed to allay all these fears, he conceives his first real apprehension. Now he realizes that he is within the toils, and the remainder of the play is taken up with the frantic and pitiful efforts of Jocasta and himself to free him. But with growing horror the audience realizes that every move, though it may seem to promise release, really binds the victims all the more tightly. If Jocasta had not long ago resolved to put no faith in oracles and if Oedipus had not been so prejudiced and infuriated at the pronouncements of Teiresias, one or both must have seen that the oracle which Oedipus now relates supplements the oracle given Laius. It also agrees with the prophecy of Teiresias; but this fact might have caused Oedipus to be even more skeptical of Teiresias—as if the seer were repeating an old oracle to embarrass him. Now, however, Oedipus has begun to suspect that he is the murderer of Laius: the place, the time, and the appearance of Laius and his followers all coincide, but Oedipus was traveling alone and thought that he slew every man of the party, whereas Laius was said to have been slain by a band of robbers or wayfarers (cf. 292) and one member of the party escaped. Even the language in which Creon has first reported the oracle suggests that more than one man was responsible for the murder (107). We must not forget, furthermore, that Oedipus still believes himself the son of Polybus and Merope of Corinth. Oedipus, thoroughly shaken, anticipates his own wretchedness if the man whom he slew was "akin to Laius." His anxiety naturally leads to the summoning of the one surviving witness. Jocasta, however, insists that the man's story, known to all, cannot now be changed; and, instead of recognizing the whole truth, she here sees further proof of the untrustworthiness of oracles—for Apollo said that Laius must die by the hand of his own child! Here, on a note of false and ironic optimism, and as we await the story of the witness of Laius' death, the second episode ends with fine dramatic effect.

In reflective mood, the chorus now pray that they may ever keep the divine and deathless laws of heaven (second stasimon, 48 lines).

Insolence begets the tyrant, but at the very moment of its triumph insolence is hurled to utter destruction. Here the chorus is reflecting upon the insolent manner in which Oedipus has brought his unfounded charges against Creon, upon the unorthodox attitude of Jocasta toward oracles and prophecy, and upon the discussion of the pollutions of blood guilt and incest. In their second strophe and antistrophe, which continue in the same meter and tone, they curse those who show no reverence for the gods. Where such a person dwells, who can be safe from the avenging wrath of Heaven? Zeus must not allow the oracle concerning Laius to go unfulfilled, for faith in the gods would thus be destroyed!

Jocasta's orthodox prayer to Apollo, which begins the third episode (175 lines), shows that she has faith in the gods themselves and adds a necessary corrective after the extreme criticism of the chorus. The joyful messenger from Corinth appears immediately, as if in answer to these prayers. Some preparation for his appearance has been made in the repeated mention of Polybus and of Corinth and in the story which Oedipus related of his early life. Jocasta is elated at the news of the death of Polybus, "father" of Oedipus and king of Corinth, for she interprets this news as releasing Oedipus from his predicted fate and as further proof that all oracles are false. Now for the third time Jocasta has cited such "proof," and with each repetition the irony of her words has become more apparent and more dreadful. But Oedipus is convinced that she is right, though he still fears wedlock with his mother. Jocasta again attempts to reassure him by pointing out that many men in dreams have lain with their mothers, but that such dreams and thoughts are best disregarded and forgotten (981-82).⁶⁶ This is the only hint of an "Oedipus complex" in the play, and the adoption of this ugly phrase by modern psychology is unfortunate and misleading.

The joy at the news of the death of Polybus is stifled when the Messenger, like Jocasta earlier and with similarly ironical result, attempts to reassure Oedipus and to remove his fears concerning his mother. Oedipus was not the son of Polybus and Merope. He was exposed by a servant of Laius on Mount Cithaeron with his ankles pierced. ("Swellfoot," as Shelley translated it, is the real meaning of the name Oedipus.) The effect which these words have on Oedipus stands out in strong contrast with that which they produce on Jocasta, since this information constitutes full recognition for her, and she rushes into the palace with ominous words. Such an exit was a favorite device with Sophocles. So Eurydice withdraws in the *Antigone* just before her suicide, and Deianeira in the *Trachiniae*.

For the moment, Oedipus is saved by his pride. Curiosity about his birth has been a primary motive in his life. It caused him to leave Corinth; it made him for an instant forget his wrath at Teiresias (437); and now, in his turmoil of spirit, it prevents him from recalling Jocasta's story of Laius' child and its exposure on a "lonely mountain" with its ankles pierced. The episode ends with Oedipus rejecting the ominous warning of Jocasta and expressing his determination to solve the riddle of his birth.

Thus the subject of Oedipus' inquiry has shifted from the identity of the murderer of Laius to his own identity. But the audience hardly realize this, for they know that the answer to both questions is the same. The change is almost imperceptible, furthermore, because the preparation for it has been so subtle. Reference has been made to the birth of Oedipus by Teiresias. Then, too, Oedipus himself has related his history. But, most important of all, the dramatist has facilitated this shift by making the servant who exposed the infant identical with the surviving attendant who witnessed the death of Laius. Thus the resolving character of both inquiries is the same person, and both inquiries are solved at the same time, so that an earlier and unnecessary discovery, as in Seneca's *Oedipus*, is avoided and the plot is more neatly unified. Sophocles has also made the shepherd who gave the infant Oedipus to Polybus identical with the messenger from Corinth. This could be rationalized by assuming that the man who originally found Oedipus would be most interested in his future welfare and in bringing the good news to him. Still, we must admit that the dramatist in making use of both these combinations has employed the long arm of coincidence to facilitate ease and rapidity of plot progression. Simplification of minor details adds greater emphasis to major ones.

The following choral song is very short (third stasimon, 24 lines), since Oedipus remains on stage, tensely awaiting the arrival of the shepherd who exposed him at his birth and who witnessed the death of Laius. To a gay and lively measure, the chorus dances and sings of Mount Cithaeron as the nurse of Oedipus, and then they speculate on which of the gods was his sire and who was his mother. An ironically joyful song just before the catastrophe, such as this, is a favorite device of Sophocles.

The fourth episode is the shortest section of the play (76 lines). Jocasta is gone, and Oedipus faces his cruel destiny alone—a magnificent climax to the play. The tortured reluctance of the herdsman—nicely contrasted with the eagerness of the messenger from Corinth—is finally overcome. Again at the climax the iambic lines are divided between speakers, and most skillfully divided. Of the first divided line,

Oedipus is given two-thirds and the reluctant slave only two words; the next two lines are divided approximately into halves; but of the following line the horrified Oedipus has only a single word, while the slave completes the recognition with the rest of the line. Oedipus winces in this scene, but nowhere is his masculine honesty more clearly portrayed. Unlike Jocasta in her final words, Oedipus is determined to have the whole truth, however disastrous it may be. His recognition of his identity constitutes the reversal of his fortune (peripety). From his final lines, in which he prays now for the last time to look upon the light of day, we might expect his suicide if we had not heard the prophecy of Teiresias.

The chorus begins the lament for the fate of Oedipus in unusually weighty and solemn measure (fourth stasimon, 37 lines). As frequently in Greek tragedy, the fate of the hero is generalized into the fate of all mankind. No human lot can be counted surely blessed if such a one as Oedipus, after achieving the pinnacle of worldly good fortune and saving the state, is thus destroyed. The second part of the song is a dirge over the dreadful fate of Oedipus, ending in the wish that they had never laid eyes upon him; for, though he once saved them, he has now brought them to grief.

The final section (exodos, 308 lines) is essentially an epilogue to the main plot, for the tragedy is practically complete with Oedipus' discovery of his identity. The Messenger reveals that the house is polluted with such ills that not even the great rivers of the Danube and the Rion (Phasis) could wash it clean—a simile that flows through Seneca to *Macbeth* (II. ii. 60).⁸⁷ This report prepares for the shocking sight of the blinded Oedipus.

Here again a lengthy section includes several scenes. Rapidity is highly desirable after the catastrophe. But again the rhythmic monotony of the iambic lines is broken by a lyric exchange between Oedipus and the chorus. A more important result of employing lyrics here, however, is the raising of the tone to suit the wild grief of Oedipus, and the meters here, as elsewhere, are most subtly adapted. At the first horrifying appearance of the blinded Oedipus, the chorus breaks out into a lament in simple anapestic meter. The woeful cries of Oedipus begin in the same meter—primarily a marching meter and well suited to accompany an entrance. The chorus now drops back into the simplest subdued iambic meter, whereas Oedipus, in sharp contrast, laments in a most passionate measure (dochmiac). Verbal gemination adds to the pathos of the meter.

At one point Oedipus predicts to Creon the strange manner of his death: "... neither sickness nor aught else can destroy me; for never

had I been snatched from death, but in reserve for some strange doom."⁸⁸ These lines suggest the supernatural death of Oedipus at Colonus, a tradition dear to Sophocles, since he was born in the district of Colonus. This death is the subject of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, which was written in the last years of Sophocles' long life. The unity of the play is not disturbed, however, by any mention of the famous quarrel of the sons of Oedipus or of the heroism of Antigone in burying her brother.

At the very end of the play, Creon and Oedipus break into animated trochaic measure. The same shift in meter is made near the end of the *Philoctetes*, when Neoptolemus finally agrees to take Philoctetes home.⁸⁹

These final scenes are designed primarily to impress upon us the full import of the tragedy. They suggest the miserable future of Oedipus and his children. The young girls add pathos to his downfall by their very presence and by bringing out the more kindly aspects of his character. Thus after the catastrophe Sophocles here, like Euripides in the *Bacchae* and elsewhere, presents his main character in the most favorable light.

4. *TRACHINIAE* ("MAIDENS OF TRACHIS")

(Possibly about 413 B.C.)

The *Trachiniae* appears to be an inferior play. Euripides' *Heracles* probably preceded and inspired it. Both plays concern the final return and suffering of Heracles; but Euripides boldly invents, whereas Sophocles reverts to the established legend. It has been suggested that Sophocles may here be "correcting" Euripides.⁹⁰ All the characters except Heracles himself are entirely different in the two plays, and there is also wide divergence in the characterization of the hero.

The events of the *Trachiniae* are the subject of Seneca's extant *Hercules on Oeta*.

Discussion.—The theme of the play is perhaps the irony of the inglorious death of Heracles, the great warrior and benefactor of Greece. The theme has sometimes been taken to be the destructive power of love, and certainly Heracles is destroyed by the women whose captive he has become; but this is not emphasized or generalized at the end of the play as we might expect if the author intended it as the theme.

The most difficult problem which the play presents, however, is the problem of its structure. Many critics have felt that the play presents

two tragedies, that of Deianeira and that of Heracles. Some have gone so far as to insist that Deianeira's tragedy alone is effective. It is true that Deianeira dominates the scene during most of the play; but the author possibly intended her dominance, like that of Amphitryon and Megara during the earlier part of Euripides' *Heracles*, to be physical only. The main concern of Deianeira and of everyone else is the fate of Heracles. The oracle that is several times repeated during the first scenes concerns Heracles and stresses the fact that the crisis of Heracles' life has come. The danger is his, and the foreboding concerns him first of all, although it is made obvious that the fate of his family is involved (85). After the entrance of Lichas, furthermore, the arrival of Heracles is awaited. There is no hint of any physical danger to Deianeira before she has discovered the ominous potency of the ointment used on the robe. This foreboding comes late in the play (720) and is not maintained for long, for her suicide is reported shortly afterward. In this interval the misfortune of Heracles is described at length and his imminent arrival announced by Hyllus. Thus the death of Deianeira is treated as incidental. Still, it must be admitted that her tragedy has greatly detracted from the tragedy of Heracles.

The differences between this play and the *Heracles* of Euripides are noteworthy, for the plots have basic similarities; but Euripides has not allowed any minor character to overshadow Heracles. In his play, two characters rather than one dominate the scene before the arrival of Heracles. Both these characters are passive sufferers and comparatively colorless. Their immediate safety depends upon the early arrival of Heracles. Megara, the wife of Heracles, is later slain by her husband in his madness; but she is an entirely innocent victim, she has been maintained as a distinctly minor character, and, even in the account of her death, interest is centered upon Heracles. In Sophocles, however, Deianeira has been made the most active character, whereas Heracles himself is passive. She alone dominates the scene during most of the play. Lastly, she has been made a very appealing character. A conservative critic has said that by general consent she has been recognized "as one of the most delicately beautiful creations in literature."⁶¹

But here as elsewhere in classical literature, the modern reader must guard against being prejudiced by romantic sentimentalism. Deianeira is devoted to her husband, kind to the captives brought into her house, sympathetic with all human suffering. But she is no paragon of virtue, no perfectly innocent character brought low by fate. Her intentions are good from her own selfish point of view, but she is lacking in foresight. She employs deception, furthermore, when she inveigles Lichas into confessing the truth. That this deception is de-

liberate is shown by her previous and by her subsequent speeches, in which there is no hint of vacillation or sincere change of purpose. Deianeira assures Lichas that she will not offer any opposition to Heracles' latest fancy, and Lichas compliments her for "thinking mortal thoughts." The audience, however, knows that she is not thinking mortal thoughts but only saying them, and she strikes a very ominous note when she intimates that she would be vainly struggling against the gods if she did not accept her husband's unfaithfulness with resignation.

Deianeira's experiment, furthermore, is not as innocent as the modern reader may assume. The use of magic and witchcraft, though common among certain classes, was dangerous. It was always suspect and publicly condemned.⁶² Deianeira knows that her attempt is a bold one (582-87), and she seems actually base when she enjoins the chorus to silence and adds that even if one does disgraceful things one will never be disgraced provided they are kept secret (596-97).⁶³ Still, she intends no evil. She later sums up her action very correctly when she realizes that out of fair hope she may have done a great wrong (667; cf. 1136). Deianeira is essentially a good and admirable woman, but she is ruined by a fatal error.

Heracles himself is a pitiful but not very appealing character. Indeed, as critics have pointed out, Heracles is not a character who lends himself to effective tragedy. Though the *Trachiniae* is written about his fate, he is on scene only during the last quarter of the play. Even before he enters, the catastrophe is practically complete; and there is no dramatic action after he is brought on. This final scene is largely etiological. It explains the circumstances of Heracles' death and the marriage of Hyllus to Iole. Mount Oeta was an important site in the later cult of Heracles;⁶⁴ it has been mentioned repeatedly in the earlier part of the play,⁶⁵ and we are now told of the pyre that is to be built there.

The play has its technical weaknesses. There are too many long narrative speeches, and there is too much talk of oracles and prophecies. The exposition is awkwardly managed. It is patently implausible that Hyllus should have so much news of his father which he has never told Deianeira. Hyllus' entrance at this point also is too mechanical, and later his movements are confused—he should enter from the house at verse 971, but, if he does so, his appearance again seems too pat.

Various indications of Euripidean influence upon Sophocles are noteworthy. Besides the play's general indebtedness to the *Heracles*, certain motifs seem to have been taken from that play,⁶⁶ and one line which Heracles speaks is almost the same in both plays.⁶⁷ Another line

in Sophocles' play perhaps was taken from Euripides' *Suppliants*.⁶⁸ The prologue, however, is the play's most obvious Euripidean feature. It is very similar to the prologue of the *Heracleidae*. There too the character begins with a proverbial commonplace followed by a personal application. There too the speech is essentially an expository monologue, though other characters are on the scene. Various other features have been considered Euripidean,⁶⁹ including the tone of the final lines. These lines of protest against Zeus have a bitterness that does resemble the bitterness of the protests of Amphitryon and Heracles in Euripides. In neither play, however, can these protests be fairly interpreted as serious indictments of the gods by the poets themselves. The characters speaking them are humanly blind, as Hyllus himself points out (1270), and they do not see the whole scheme of things. The audience knows that through his suffering Heracles rose to the level of the gods themselves.

5. *ELECTRA*

(Possibly about 410 B.C.)

This play dramatizes the same events as those of Aeschylus' *Choephoroe* and Euripides' *Electra*. For various reasons, to be presented below, the present writer assumes that Euripides' production preceded that of Sophocles.⁷⁰ Several scenes of Sophocles' play, especially those between Electra and Orestes and those with Aegisthus, are masterpieces; but the play as a whole is an inferior work.

Source.—Sophocles' *Electra* follows the main lines of Aeschylus' *Choephoroe*. In the play of Aeschylus, however, Orestes is the chief figure, and the role of Electra is comparatively a minor one; Orestes' nurse appears, and there is no Chrysothemis or Paedagogus; the scene of recognition and reunion is very brief; the dream of Clytemnestra is somewhat different, and it is differently exploited by the dramatist; a considerable portion of Aeschylus' play is taken up in invoking the spirit of Agamemnon, whose grave is represented before the audience; Orestes' report of his own death, very casual and brief, arouses the suspicions of Clytemnestra, which threaten the success of the plan; Aegisthus is the first to be slain; Orestes then faces his mother in a powerful scene in which Pylades speaks; and after her slaughter Orestes is profoundly shaken. Aeschylus, furthermore, views the slaughter of Clytemnestra by Orestes as an evil deed which must be done, and which is inevitably followed by retribution. Examining the plays either from the logical or from the moral and psychological point of view,

we can hardly avoid the conclusion that the changes of Sophocles, with the possible exception of his removal of the grave of Agamemnon from the scene, are not improvements. Aeschylus' play, however, appears somewhat archaic because of the simplicity of its action and a certain clumsiness in handling its characters. In these technical matters, of course, Sophocles shows great improvement.

Sophocles' *Electra* exhibits many striking similarities to the *Electra* of Euripides, but these should be viewed without prejudice before one undertakes to decide which poet is following the other.

Considerable influence of Homeric and later epic, also, is observable in the play of Sophocles. Homeric is the detail of Agamemnon's having been slain at a banquet (203), also the contention of Electra and the chorus that Clytemnestra's main motivation for slaying Agamemnon was lust and the persuasion of Aegisthus (197). Electra's insistence that the body of Aegisthus be cast out unburied has a Homeric ring (*Odyssey* 3. 258). Homeric, too, is the moral interpretation of Orestes' deed as praiseworthy and followed by no punishment or suffering, although the manner of Clytemnestra's death is not told in Homer—she may possibly have committed suicide. From later epic is taken the assumption that Agamemnon had four daughters, and perhaps the story of Agamemnon's offending Artemis by slaying a stag in her grove and boasting about it. The role of the old man, also, occurs in previous versions, although he was sometimes identified as the herald of Agamemnon rather than as a *paedagogus*.

Sophocles' one important change in these previous events is noteworthy: Electra was responsible for Orestes' being saved from the murderers (12).⁷¹ Thus begins Sophocles' glorification of Electra.

Influence.—The Latin dramatist Atilius made an adaptation of Sophocles' *Electra*. Cicero's brother, a literary dilettante, wrote a play on this subject—one of four written in sixteen days. Many modern and contemporary versions have been attempted with varying success.⁷²

Theme.—Throughout the play the vengeance which Orestes takes upon the murderers of his father is considered an obligation as just as it is inescapable. Apollo has commanded it, and his wisdom is beyond question (1425). Even the ax with which Agamemnon was slain longs for vengeance.⁷³ Sophocles, himself, therefore, interpreted the act of Orestes as an entirely admirable one.⁷⁴ In so doing, he clashes with Aeschylus, who viewed the deed as necessary but dreadful; he clashes even more violently with Euripides, who considered the act an evil one which should not have been committed.

Generalizing at the end of the play, Orestes insists that summary execution should be meted out to all who transgress the laws, in order

that others may be deterred from crime. Electra has earlier made essentially the same contention (1382).

Recognition and intrigue.—Electra's speech over what she believes to be the ashes of her brother is undeniably a masterpiece. Naturally this scene, and indeed the whole role of Electra, were favorites with great actors. Polus, the most famous actor of the later fourth century, is said to have done this scene with an urn containing the ashes of his own dead son!⁷⁶

The recognition which follows arises from this probable incident. It belongs, therefore, to that category of recognitions which was considered the most natural and effective by Aristotle (*Poetics* 1455 a).

The deception by which Orestes gains entrance to the palace is here essentially the same as in Aeschylus and involves the assumption that Clytemnestra does not recognize her own son. The device of announcing one's own death was employed in Euripides' lost *Cresphontes*, also, and elsewhere in Greek legend. In Sophocles' play, the plan is explained to the audience beforehand, and the Paedagogus is sent ahead to make the first announcement. That Clytemnestra should not recognize the Paedagogus is extremely improbable, though a weak effort is made to excuse this (42-43). The story which the Paedagogus tells, furthermore, was criticized as improbable by Aristotle (*Poetics* 1460 a), perhaps because the Pythian games did not exist in the time of Orestes or more probably because it was extremely unlikely that such a falsehood could successfully be told about a public event.⁷⁸

This false tale does not excite the least suspicion in Clytemnestra or in Aegisthus, and no complication threatens the success of the intrigue. In Aeschylus' play, the suspicions of both are aroused; but there, it is true, the account is much simpler and is casually reported by Orestes himself. No urn is produced. In Sophocles' play, furthermore, Clytemnestra may reasonably be supposed to accept the news with no misgivings, for the Paedagogus enters immediately after her prayer to Apollo, as if in answer to it, and her dream has been much less ominous than it was in Aeschylus.⁷⁷

Discussion.—The *Electra* of Sophocles opens with a scene in which Orestes explains to his Paedagogus and the supernumerary Pylades the deception to be employed against Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Instead of executing their plan immediately, however, Orestes and Pylades go off to the tomb of Agamemnon and do not reappear until two-thirds of the play is completed. During much of this interval, all action essential to the plot is suspended.

The cries of Electra have been heard by Orestes before he hastily leaves the scene, and thus Sophocles avoids the awkward vacant stage

which occurs at this point in the very similar opening of Euripides' play. Electra enters with slow marching anapests. These and her following lyric exchange with the chorus are devoted mainly to an exposition of her grief and misfortune and to her desire for vengeance. The general form of this entrance and duet, though not precisely that of Euripides' *Electra*, is typically Euripidean, as one may see from the *Trojan Women*.

The first episode continues on this expository theme and introduces Chrysothemis, who plays the foil for Electra as did Ismene for Antigone. Especially reminiscent of Ismene is Chrysothemis' insistence that she is subject to superior force and hence that she will be forgiven if she makes no futile attempt to avenge Agamemnon's murder (400; *Antigone* 65). Here the contrast between the two sisters is exaggerated by dress and appearance. But Electra is not wholly unsuccessful in her pleas to her weaker sister, and at the end of the episode Chrysothemis agrees to cast aside the funeral offerings of Clytemnestra and to take instead those of Electra and herself to the grave of Agamemnon. We naturally expect her to meet Orestes there or at least to see his offerings.

After a choral song in which the punishment of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus is anticipated, Clytemnestra enters. Her clash with Electra is a pertinent scene if her murder is to be justified. At the end of the scene, Clytemnestra fulfills the original purpose of her coming forth by offering a prayer to Apollo, the very god, as the audience realizes, who has sent Orestes. Immediately afterward, as if in answer to this ambiguous prayer, the old Paedagogus enters and recites his false story of Orestes' death. His brilliant description seems to be elaborated partly for its own sake—the Athenian audience was tremendously enthusiastic about such speeches. Two minor points may be noted: the old man does not give a false oath, as Orestes directed (47), and in his fictional chariot race, an Athenian is the winner! The important effect of this scene is found in its contrast between the reactions of Clytemnestra and those of Electra and in the irony of both series of reactions. Clytemnestra is further condemned, for she obviously wishes Electra as well as Orestes dead.

The scenes which follow are not strictly pertinent to the revenge of Orestes except in that thoughts of vengeance are still dominant; for Electra, as the audience knows, is laboring under a false grief, and her laments and actions have no effect upon the plot as a whole. Her grief is sharply contrasted with the joy of Chrysothemis, who now enters with what she considers very happy tidings. An ironic and melodramatic clash between the two sisters ensues, in which Electra to no avail

urges Chrysothemis to undertake the murder of Aegisthus with her. This scene is very similar to the opening scene in the *Antigone*, even in details such as the strong sister's spitefully bidding the weak to betray her secret (1033; *Antigone* 86). The episode ends, as in the *Antigone*, with the warnings of the weaker sister and with the stronger sister determined to act alone. But in the *Antigone* this determination is immediately translated into action, whereas here neither Electra's resolve nor the ominous warnings of Chrysothemis have any consequence. The minimum change necessary to make them pertinent to the plot would have been definitely to state or imply that Orestes himself could not accomplish the murders without great danger. But this is not done. The warnings of Chrysothemis in their context are hardly sufficient for this (cf. 1001-2), and in the subsequent action there is very little emphasis upon the danger of the undertaking. This scene, however, does increase the dramatic height of Electra; and Sophocles, as we may observe most clearly in the *Philoctetes*, likes very much to force his characters to the extreme limit. The true explanation of this scene, therefore, may be that Sophocles, deceived by a specious similarity between Electra and Antigone and lured by the theatrical effectiveness of a powerful heroine, has more or less unconsciously followed his earlier masterpiece too closely.

The next episode opens with the entrance of Orestes. Electra's speech over the urn and their recognition follow. This whole episode has the pathos and seriousness of tragedy; but it has the sudden shifts in emotional tone characteristic of melodrama, and it is drawn out to a length which in such a dangerous situation is proper only to melodrama. It shows marked similarities to the recognition scene in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, where the melodrama is quite in place. The excitement at the climax of the *Electra* is heightened by the entrance of the nervous and worried Paedagogus, at whose insistence Orestes and Pylades resolutely march into the palace to slay Clytemnestra—but only after another melodramatic scene in which Electra takes the hands of the old man and doubtless kisses them in gratitude for his services. The efforts of the old man to cut the episode short, like the earlier efforts of Orestes, increase the tension and suspense.

Sophocles makes short shrift of the murder of Clytemnestra. Electra follows Orestes and Pylades into the palace but returns almost immediately to punctuate the cries of her dying mother with the most bloodthirsty encouragement to the slayers. Orestes reappears, only to retire within a few lines when Aegisthus is seen approaching.

The scene with Aegisthus is one of the most dramatic of the play, but it has the implausibilities and technical weaknesses characteristic

of melodrama. Sophocles has not explained how the news of the Phocian strangers could have reached Aegisthus. Although the absence of Aegisthus has been mentioned repeatedly and his return has been anticipated throughout the play, still his entrance at precisely the most convenient moment appears too pat, "like the catastrophe of the old comedy." It is obviously implausible, furthermore, that Electra without prearrangement and without exciting suspicion should lead Aegisthus to believe that the body of Orestes is within. It was not the Greek practice to transport corpses great distances, and the Paedagogus in giving the news to Clytemnestra clearly stated that the body of Orestes had been burned (757). But the coincidence of Aegisthus' pat entrance is hardly noted in the excitement of the scene, and the implausibility of pretending that Orestes' body is present can be forgiven because of the dramatic and powerful scene which it makes possible. The body is revealed, and Aegisthus utters an ironic boast over it. It has not fallen "save by the doom of jealous Heaven" (1466-67, Jebb). He then uncovers the eyes to find those of Clytemnestra.⁷⁸

The problem of the *Electras*.—Our consideration of the structure of Sophocles' play reveals several astonishing features. Like the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides, this play seems to be constructed to lead to the death of Clytemnestra as its climax. The process of blackening her character is carried far beyond the limits set by the other dramatists. The woes and complaints of Electra, which directly forward this process, constitute a large part of the play. Any blackening of Aegisthus, of course, is wholly superfluous. From the Greek point of view, his death needs no justification; it is without question a commendable act in the view of every writer who treated the subject. Electra speaks only of slaying Aegisthus, it is true, when she is making her resolve to avenge the murder of her father (956-57). For her the slaying of the man, of course, would loom as the more difficult task. Earlier she has intimated that she would like to see her mother slain (583), and the chorus certainly assume that both are now included in her plan (1080-81). The action of the play, also, is concerned much more with Clytemnestra than with Aegisthus.

The play of Sophocles, therefore, is constructed to lead to the slaying of Clytemnestra as its climax. The reason for the actual subordination of her slaughter to that of Aegisthus, in the opinion of the present writer, lies in Sophocles' adoption of incompatible elements in the play. He has taken certain features from Aeschylus and perhaps some from Euripides which are not really compatible with his Homeric interpretation of Orestes' deed as a thoroughly commendable one. In the *Odyssey* the climax of the return of Orestes is the slaughter of Aegis-

thus; but there the vengeance of Orestes seems to involve only the physical difficulties of a lone exile's slaying a king. Sophocles, too, might have presented the matter in this way; but he has not. In his play there is no emphasis placed upon the physical difficulties or dangers of Orestes' slaying Aegisthus. Indeed, this slaughter seems unrealistically simple in plan and execution. Simple as it is, the slaughter of Clytemnestra is even simpler, apparently because Sophocles wishes to give the impression that the justice of her death is unquestioned and unquestionable. Thus her death is passed over here almost as nonchalantly as in the *Odyssey*, although here this is not consistent with the great pains which have been taken in describing and portraying her in the earlier scenes of the play.

Sophocles' acceptance of the Homeric interpretation of Orestes' deed as wholly commendable involves another serious difficulty. Sophocles doubtless thought that Orestes was presumed to have slain his mother in the Homeric version, and he may have been correct in so thinking. But in the Homeric version, greed and lust are the motivations of Aegisthus; lust and jealousy over Cassandra are the equally obvious motivations of Clytemnestra. Homer says nothing of a delay or human sacrifice at Aulis or of a daughter of Agamemnon named Iphigenia.⁷⁹ The introduction of this sacrifice into the story inevitably brings with it a motivation for Clytemnestra which cannot be dismissed as lightly as Sophocles has dismissed it. It still may not wholly justify the murder of Agamemnon; but, as we see in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* (1146-1208), it can be made a defense of tremendous power. Certainly the sacrifice of Iphigenia, fairly viewed, makes the Homeric interpretation no longer valid according to either the Homeric or the later Athenian moral code. Sophocles has not, therefore, been successful in his effort to combine the antecedent data of Aeschylus and perhaps that of Euripides—Iphigenia was now, of course, an indispensable element of the legend—with the Homeric interpretation.

Equally strange are other aspects of the structure of Sophocles' play. Although Electra herself dominates the scene throughout the play, entering before the chorus and remaining on stage continuously except during one short choral song, yet she performs no important function in the machinery of the plot. She does not devise the deception. Orestes needs no urging to slay his mother, and surely he stands in no great need of Electra's bitter plea that Aegisthus be slain and cast forth unburied. Orestes, though on stage for only one-third of the play, performs all the important action practically unaided except for the important role of the Paedagogus.

Why should Electra become the central figure in a plot which con-

cerns the return and vengeance of Orestes? She is not such in the play of Aeschylus, although her importance there might readily have been increased, especially by giving her the role of Pylades at the climax. In the play of Euripides, however, Pylades has lost his importance as the representative of Apollo, and Electra has quite properly become the central figure because there she devises the deception by which Clytemnestra is lured into the hut and slain; there Orestes by his own admission needs her aid from the very first. At the climax he falters and is overwhelmed with revulsion at the thought of slaying his own mother; but Electra repairs his resolution and actually grasps his sword at the crucial moment. Afterward, Electra takes the main responsibility for the act. It is only by making the slaughter of Clytemnestra a dreadfully difficult task—a feature essential to Euripides' interpretation of the murder as a dreadful act which should not have been committed—that the author can present Orestes as sorely needing his sister's aid and encouragement and thus can play up Electra into the main role of the drama. The *Electra* of Euripides not only utilizes all the power and force built into the figure of his Electra; his play, because of its interpretation of the slaughter, demands such a figure. A play such as Sophocles' *Electra*, which interprets the slaughter of Clytemnestra as an easy and noble deed, does not demand such a figure and cannot, it seems, be made properly to include such a figure.

Some critics are of the opinion that Electra's strange dominance of the scene can be explained only by assuming that Sophocles, in his fondness for his Antigone, wished to insert such a type into the present legend. To make Electra's resolution to slay Aegisthus plausible to an Athenian audience, these critics contend, Sophocles has increased her pious regard for her father and her hatred of her mother to the highest possible degree. Sophocles, they necessarily conclude, was interested primarily in the character of Electra.⁸⁰

The character of Electra is indeed a memorable one. Sophocles doubtless intended it to be an admirable one as well, but few modern readers are able to admire her. The comparison with Antigone was made inevitable by the author himself, but this comparison is all to the advantage of Antigone. Electra's personality has been distorted by years of mental suffering and an obsession for vengeance. Antigone, in contrast, acts from a resolve as spontaneous as it is determined. The purpose of Antigone, furthermore, is one which all must consider righteous and glorious. Electra's purpose is so considered by the chorus (1095-97) but with doubtful justification. Quite different from Antigone (*Antigone* 523), Electra seems to have been born to hate rather than to love. She admits that she is ashamed of her behavior toward

her mother, but she insists that such behavior has been forced upon her (616-21). She is capable of genuine tenderness toward Orestes, although even in the scenes in which she weeps over his death she weeps for the loss of an avenger as much as for the loss of a brother (808-12); and she lacks that pathetic humanity which Antigone so beautifully portrays in her contemplation of death. Worst of all is Electra's callous delight at the death of her mother. Her hatred of Aegisthus pursues him beyond the grave. This Electra is truly the daughter of the Aeschylean Clytemnestra.

Other considerations make Electra's dominance of the play dramatically effective. The dreadful tragedy of this house can be portrayed most powerfully through her figure.⁸¹ She was a sensitive girl old enough to appreciate what was happening when Clytemnestra first began her affair with Aegisthus. Electra has been forced all her life to live in this house of crime with these loathsome creatures. Because of the torture to which she is being subjected, especially the imminent threat of imprisonment in a dungeon (381), a major interest tends to develop about her own rescue and delivery. This theme is repeatedly stressed, and it must be allowed considerable importance.⁸² In Sophocles' play, therefore, Orestes is playing not only the proper role of Orestes but the role of Perseus as well. In 412 B.C. Euripides created a tremendous sensation at Athens by producing a brilliant romantic melodrama on Perseus' rescue of Andromeda, and it is not impossible that Sophocles is adapting the motive of that play to the story of Orestes. Electra moping at the gates is not so very different from Andromeda chained to the cliff.

We have already observed how Sophocles, deceived by a specious similarity between Electra and Antigone, distorted his plot for the effective second clash between Electra and Chrysothemis. Theatrical effect, to be sure, is a prime consideration of Sophocles, and although the relative merits of the three plays on the vengeance of Orestes may be endlessly debated, there is no question as to which play a great actor would choose for the display of his talents. Few if any figures in extant Greek tragedy remain so continuously on stage and traverse the whole gamut of the emotions as does the Electra of this play. Sophocles certainly had his better eye on the theater in composing it. We are reminded of Aristotle's remark: "I call a Plot episodic when there is neither probability nor necessity in the sequence of its episodes. Actions of this sort bad poets construct through their own fault, and good ones on account of the players."⁸³

Still, we cannot accept the contention that Sophocles was interested only in theatrically effective individual scenes and cared little or nothing

for moral interpretation.⁸⁴ Although this play has many of the features of melodrama, the opening and closing scenes make it undeniable that Sophocles, like Aeschylus and Euripides, was greatly concerned with the moral interpretation of the vengeance. Piety for the father and hatred of the mother who murdered him are stressed throughout the play and are strictly pertinent to this moral interpretation. Nowhere else in Sophocles, furthermore, do we find great care and attention expended upon a character who does not materially affect the development of the action. Sophocles is not a photographer but a portrait painter: every line in his other compositions has an artistic meaning and result. Critics may claim that in the *Trachiniae*, Deianeira overshadows Heracles and spoils the unity of the play. There are some grounds for denying this; but, even if it is admitted, the second half of the play obviously follows as a consequence of the first, and the first is determined by the actions of Deianeira. The *Trachiniae* and the *Ajax* in reality have a logical unity but do not appear unified because no one character dominates the scene during the whole play. The *Electra* is not strictly unified but seems so because one character does dominate. In the theater this semblance is doubtless more important than the fact.

But there is another more plausible explanation of Electra's dominance in Sophocles' play, if we assume that the play of Euripides preceded it. This is essentially the same type of explanation as that given for the extended second clash between Electra and Chrysothemis. Just as Sophocles there followed his own *Antigone* too closely, so perhaps in the dominance of Electra, again deceived by a specious similarity and lured by the theatrical effectiveness of a powerful heroine, he has followed the *Electra* of Euripides too closely. Such dependence, as already pointed out, would also explain the anomaly of the climax of Sophocles' play. General Euripidean influence is obvious in the opening duet and in the sentimental and melodramatic elements of the play. Euripides and not Sophocles, we should like to assume, was the creator of an Electra who appears with shorn head, half-starved, and miserably clad.⁸⁵ It seems unlikely, furthermore, that Sophocles would have been driven to his extreme moral interpretation—inconsistent with the data and structure of his play—by the interpretation of Aeschylus; but it seems altogether likely that the bold interpretation of Euripides would have elicited such a reaction. That Sophocles should follow in the wake of Euripides need occasion no surprise. In his *Philoctetes*, he rewrote and reinterpreted a story dramatized by both Aeschylus and Euripides.⁸⁶ Lastly, it seems incredible that such an elaborate character as Electra should have originally been designed for any plot except that into which she fits so perfectly and effectively—the plot of Euripides.

6. *PHILOCTETES

(409 B.C.)

Sophocles was awarded first prize. The titles of the other plays which he produced at this festival are unknown.

Staging.—It is obvious from the first lines spoken by Neoptolemus that the cave of Philoctetes was located above the level of the orchestra. This is a clear example of a raised position (but not a stage) being used during the fifth century. We may assume that scenery was employed to suggest a wild and rugged cliff. The scene is reminiscent of the *Prometheus Bound*.

Legend.—The story of Philoctetes is briefly sketched in the *Iliad* (2. 721–25), and it was told at greater length in various epics now lost. In these epic versions, Diomedes, not Odysseus, was sent to bring Philoctetes to Troy; Lemnos was always known as an inhabited island; and, at least in one late account, many of the fellow countrymen of Philoctetes were left with him as attendants when he was abandoned.⁸⁷

Philoctetes was the intimate friend of Heracles; and when Hyllus refused to light the pyre of his suffering father, as foretold in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (1193–1216), Philoctetes performed this service. As a reward he received the famous bow and arrows with which Heracles had once taken Troy. So the prophecy that these weapons could again take Troy seemed a very natural one.

Source.—The story of Philoctetes was one of the most popular subjects of Greek tragedy. Besides this extant play, Sophocles himself wrote a *Philoctetes at Troy*, the situation of which is suggested by the speech of Heracles at the end of the present play. We hear of plays entitled *Philoctetes* by five or six other dramatists, including Aeschylus and Euripides. The play of Euripides was produced along with his extant *Medea* in 431 B.C. Besides a few fragments of these plays by Aeschylus and Euripides, we very fortunately have preserved two essays by an ancient rhetorician, Dio Chrysostomus, one of which is a comparison of the three plays on Philoctetes by Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, and the other is a paraphrase of the opening scenes of the play of Euripides. Dio thought each of the plays admirable in its way: that of Aeschylus for its simplicity, its heroic greatness of soul, and the boldness of its thought and language; that of Euripides for its keen rhetoric, its subtlety, and its choral exhortation to virtuous deeds; and that of Sophocles for its dignity and plausibility.⁸⁸

Aeschylus was the first writer, as far as we know, to have Odysseus

rather than Diomedes go to Lemnos for Philoctetes. Since Odysseus was the most hated enemy of Philoctetes and the most crafty of all the Greeks, this change obviously made a complex and dramatic situation out of a comparatively simple one. But it also introduced the improbability of Odysseus' facing Philoctetes without being recognized. Aeschylus seems to have ignored this improbability, although Dio thinks that it might have been excused by assuming that the memory of Philoctetes had been impaired by the years of solitude and by his long suffering. Euripides resorted to having Odysseus disguised by the divine aid of Athena—a device used in the *Odyssey* and to a very minor extent in Sophocles' *Ajax*. At first glance this may seem a lame device; but of course Odysseus was famous for his cleverness in disguising himself, and perhaps Euripides meant little more than that Odysseus used this gifted cleverness.

In Aeschylus' play, it seems, Philoctetes was overcome by a paroxysm of suffering, as he is in Sophocles and in a later play, now lost, by Theodectes.⁸⁹ In Euripides, however, the diseased heel of Philoctetes had greatly improved with time. From the scientific point of view this improvement may be more plausible, but from the dramatic it is certainly less effective.

Euripides fused the Aeschylean with the epic version by having both Odysseus and Diomedes come for Philoctetes. Philoctetes was miserably clad in the skins of animals which he had slain, for his clothes had long since worn out! This realistic touch may be an indirect criticism of Aeschylus,⁹⁰ as the remarks on clothes certainly are in Euripides' *Electra* (539–44); but such meticulous attention to petty details was despised by the more conservative Greeks, and the costume of Euripides' Philoctetes is satirized by Aristophanes in the *Acharnians* (424). Still, Sophocles, we may note, is careful to explain why his Philoctetes wears ordinary clothes—occasional unwilling visitors to the cliff have given him food and clothes (308–9). The Roman Accius in his *Philocteta* (frag. 543, Warmington) had the hero dressed in the feathers of birds which he had shot!

Euripides began his play with a typical Euripidean monologue-prologue by Odysseus, in which the whole situation was explained and stress was placed upon the precariousness and the importance of the mission. The most significant innovation of Euripides, however, was the introduction of a rival embassy from the Trojans, who wished to secure the famous archer for their own forces. The main part of Euripides' play seems to have consisted of a brilliant debate between Odysseus and the Trojan ambassadors when each side attempted to win over Philoctetes. The disguised Odysseus pretended that even though he

had been wronged by the Greeks he was unable to stand silently by while the Trojans urged Philoctetes to join their forces against the Greeks. Patriotism, therefore, seems to have been the theme of Euripides' play—a very timely theme, since his play was produced in the first year of the great Peloponnesian War.

In the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides, the chorus consisted of inhabitants of Lemnos. This introduced the improbability that Philoctetes should have been neglected so long by the Lemnians. Again Aeschylus ignored the improbability, and Euripides tried to improve upon Aeschylus by having his chorus, immediately upon its entrance, make apology for their long neglect. Euripides also introduced a certain Lemnian who had been a friend and visitor of Philoctetes. These lame devices, however, instead of explaining and removing the improbability, really called attention to it and made the situation of Philoctetes less forlorn and pitiful. Another improbability inherent in a chorus of Lemnians consisted of Philoctetes' reciting his woes to them as if they had never heard of him before, although, as Dio remarks, it is the character of those who suffer from a chronic illness to dwell upon their troubles even to people already well acquainted with them.

In Sophocles, Odysseus does not face Philoctetes until the bow has been stolen, and the chorus consists of followers of Neoptolemus. Thus the main improbabilities of Aeschylus and Euripides are eliminated; but a new minor one has crept in, for the island of Lemnos is spoken of as utterly deserted and harborless, although the audience knew that Lemnos, or at least parts of it, had always been inhabited since epic times and was well supplied with good harbors. Granting the poet some indulgence, however, we may assume that the desolate cliff of Philoctetes has been approached only by sailing vessels in distress and that Philoctetes, because of the pain which made even a few steps excruciating torture for him (285-99), was unable to reach the inhabited parts of the island. The great innovation of Sophocles, however, is unquestionably the substitution of Neoptolemus for the comparatively colorless Diomedes.

Theme.—Dio remarks the loftiness and nobility of the characters in Sophocles' play.⁹¹ It seems clear from the development of the play and from the changes which Sophocles has made in the story that his *Philoctetes* is designed primarily as a character study of Neoptolemus and Philoctetes. Nowhere in Greek tragedy is a moral dilemma more clearly pointed or more honestly decided than is that of Neoptolemus. The whole action of the play progresses on his moral choices. Philoctetes, however, is the most tragic figure of the play, and his own moral dilemma of willingly going to Troy or stubbornly refusing to do so

even at the cost of his life becomes one of the main interests of the play after Neoptolemus has revealed the intrigue. The immediate point of the outcome of the play is not only the fate of Philoctetes but also the fate of Neoptolemus and the Greeks at Troy. Since the story of Philoctetes was so famous, naturally the play must bear his name; and from the actor's point of view his role clearly offers the greatest possibilities.

The theme of the play may perhaps be stated as the principle that to be just is better than to be worldly wise (1246), and that true nobility of soul must triumph over baseness. Another moral lesson of the play is found in the words of Heracles that virtue is achieved through labor (*per aspera ad astra!*).

Some critics have discovered a political allegory in the *Philoctetes*. When it was presented in 409 B.C., Athens was in desperate straits in her long war with Sparta. A revolution had taken place two years previously. The oligarchical party had seized power in the city of Athens, but the main fleet and expeditionary force had remained loyal to the democracy. The leaders of these forces had recalled Alcibiades, the brilliant and erratic nephew of Pericles and probably the one living man who might have won the war for Athens. Formerly he had been under sentence of death and exile. In 409 B.C., after the democracy had been re-established in the city, Alcibiades was anxious to return to Athens.

While Sophocles may have had this contemporary political situation in mind when he composed the play, and although he may have intended to suggest that the internal quarrels of Athens should be forgotten for the common good, no elaborate allegory seems to be intended—Alcibiades in character had not the slightest resemblance to Philoctetes but was as unscrupulous as Odysseus himself. Although Agamemnon and Menelaus, and to a lesser extent Odysseus also, suggested and symbolized the Doric enemies of the Athenians, still Sophocles is not here primarily concerned with patriotism as was Euripides and perhaps Aeschylus.

Discussion.—Sophocles, as we should expect, begins his play not with a monologue, as did Euripides, but with a very natural dialogue between Odysseus and Neoptolemus. Thus he distributes the exposition and—a result which is even more important—allows Philoctetes himself to relate his own pitiful history.

The first scene and the first chorus furnish unusually elaborate preparation for the entrance of Philoctetes.

The intrigue, or at least part of it, including the appearance of the Merchant, is carefully explained to the audience before it is put into

execution. This is the normal procedure in all classical drama. The intrigue is entirely plausible. In fact, Dio remarks that Sophocles' arrangement of the details of his play is the best and most plausible.⁹² But we should not be misled, as some critics have been, into thinking that the whole intrigue is explained by Odysseus in the first scene. Here, as in various other plays, enough information is given so that the audience can understand the development and appreciate the dramatic irony. The real intention of Odysseus is apparently first to gain possession of the bow and then to persuade or force Philoctetes to accompany them to Troy.⁹³ Some critics have complained that the episode with the Merchant is impertinent to the plot and that there are inconsistencies in the play, especially in regard to the prophecy of Helenus. But these complaints are due to a failure to understand the intrigue. The prophecy of Helenus stated, as the Merchant says (612-13) and as we know from Dio's account of Euripides' play, that Philoctetes himself must be brought to Troy. In the opening scene of Sophocles' play, it is true, Odysseus seems to suggest that the weapons alone are necessary. Odysseus here, however, is intentionally vague, for he does not care to risk offending the honest and intractable Neoptolemus even more by revealing the whole disgraceful procedure. This procedure as Odysseus has planned it becomes clear later when Odysseus falsely declares to Philoctetes that the weapons alone are sufficient. Odysseus has surmised that the promise of health and fame will be sufficient to win over Philoctetes, especially when the alternative is loss of the bow to the hated Odysseus and slow, self-willed death. Odysseus' reasoning fails, and perhaps its baseness contributes to Neoptolemus' final decision to return the bow; but this reasoning is nevertheless powerful, and to an Odysseus it would naturally seem irresistible. That Odysseus is dissembling when he says the weapons alone are necessary should be obvious and would doubtless be made more so by a skillful actor. If the weapons alone were necessary, Odysseus would not order his men to prevent Philoctetes from committing suicide (1003).

The episode of the Merchant is designed by Odysseus to prepare Philoctetes for the future development of the intrigue. According to the Merchant's story, both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are being pursued by a Greek embassy. Thus both are placed in the same precarious situation and would naturally be inclined to unite against their foes. So Neoptolemus is given another opportunity—he has already agreed to Philoctetes' request to be taken home—to appear as the friend and champion of Philoctetes. Because of his own helplessness, Philoctetes now throws himself wholly upon the protection of Neoptolemus. The Merchant's story has other desirable effects. It is essential to the final

persuasion of Philoctetes to go to Troy that Philoctetes should learn of the prophecy that he is fated to play an important part in taking the city. This prophecy is genuine; but, in order that Philoctetes may believe it, he should hear it from an apparently disinterested party such as the Merchant. Lastly, the information of the Merchant adds a compelling urgency to Philoctetes' situation and prepares for the appearance of Odysseus. Just when this appearance was to take place according to Odysseus' plan is uncertain, but he must have anticipated such an appearance sometime after the bow was in the possession of Neoptolemus. Thus if Neoptolemus had played his part well, the Merchant's information might have enabled Odysseus and Neoptolemus to conceal the whole amazingly clever intrigue from Philoctetes.

In the latter part of the play Odysseus twice makes very sudden and sensational entrances at crucial points (974 and 1293). These are not unnatural in a play of intrigue, where Odysseus may be conceived as always lurking in the background, and where the scenery may have facilitated such action.

In such plots of intrigue it is usually necessary to delay the solution by introducing various minor complications. This naturally results in the maintenance of a certain amount of suspense. The intrigue of the *Philoctetes*, furthermore, demands certain delaying action and complication in its own development. Unforeseen complications are produced by the paroxysm of pain which overcomes Philoctetes and by the moral vacillation of Neoptolemus after he has the bow in his possession. Philoctetes himself wavers in similar fashion when Neoptolemus makes a final appeal for him to come to Troy of his own free will. Suspense and uncertainty over the moral solution of the plot is maintained until the very end.

The dialogue of the *Philoctetes* is perhaps as close to actual conversation as any found in Greek tragedy. The language is simple, and the iambic lines are very frequently divided between speakers. Indeed a single line is sometimes divided into three or even four parts (753, 810). In Philoctetes' most agonized moments his cries of pain interrupt the iambic meter. The dialogue line by line (stichomythia), as normally in Sophocles, is handled in a very natural fashion, since there is no monotonous regularity of distribution. One of the sudden entrances of Odysseus occurs in the middle of an iambic line (974), as does a sudden entrance in the *Iphigenia at Aulis* (414), where the interruption is even more abrupt. At the final climax of the *Philoctetes*, precisely when Neoptolemus agrees to take Philoctetes home, there is a shift to the excited trochaic meter (1402). This meter occurs with some frequency in early tragedy and in the late plays of Euripides, but

in the extant plays of Sophocles it is used only here and at the end of the *Oedipus the King*. The metrical structure of the iambic lines, also, is very free in the *Philoctetes* and is similar to that of the later plays of Euripides.

The importance of the chorus is sharply reduced in this play. As the retinue of Neoptolemus it naturally tends to become a minor character, and the rapid and complex intrigue make interruption highly inadvisable. There is only one formal choral song (stasimon) after the parodos. This song comes when Neoptolemus has successfully deceived Philoctetes; and, somewhat like the parabasis of an Aristophanic comedy, it divides the play into two parts. Other lyric passages, however, relieve the monotony of the iambic meter without breaking the continuity of the action. In the first long scene between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, corresponding lyrics are interlarded in the dialogue and become integral parts of it (epirrhetic construction). In the second half of the play there are lyric exchanges (*kommoi*) between Neoptolemus and the chorus and especially between Philoctetes and the chorus.

The inconsistency of the attitude of the chorus toward Philoctetes has troubled some critics. But such inconsistency is a frequent phenomenon. The chorus in Sophocles' *Electra* acts in similar fashion (1015-16 and 1058-97). There at one point the chorus urges Electra to follow the baser course, as here the chorus urges Neoptolemus. Thus the moral strength of the main character is brought out.

Neoptolemus, although physically the mightiest warrior of all the Greeks, is very young and inexperienced. He is addressed as "my son" (*teknon* or *pai*) throughout the play. In disposition, he closely resembles his father, whose regular characterization in drama Horace (*Ars Poetica* 120-22) describes as follows: "Let Achilles be a man of action, quick to wrath, inexorable, and fierce; let him declare that laws were not made for him, and let him have recourse to arms to settle every dispute."⁴ So Neoptolemus in this play is a man of action. He is quite ready to use force against Philoctetes, but he has only contempt for the mental and moral gymnastics at which Odysseus is so expert.⁵⁴ Nor is this honesty of Neoptolemus caused by a mental simplicity which would prevent him from being clever in dishonesty, for when he once is won over to the intrigue by Odysseus he carries through the deception in its initial stages with skill and tact. Indeed, he never quite fully confesses all his deception to Philoctetes; for near the end of the play, when Philoctetes brings up again the false story of Neoptolemus' being robbed of his father's armor, the young man is not so simple as to disillusion his friend at this crucial point (cf. 1364-67), since he still

hopes to persuade Philoctetes to go willingly to Troy. But we can readily believe Neoptolemus when he tells Odysseus that he prefers to act justly and fail rather than to act basely and succeed (94-95). Odysseus tries to dismiss this as merely the idealism of youth, claiming—but not convincingly—that he, too, was such a one when he was young. In the very act of persuading Neoptolemus, Odysseus offends him. Very offensive is the word for thief or thieving, which is used several times (55, 57, 77, cf. 968). Unfortunate, too, are the words "baseness" (80) and "shamelessness" (83). Most offensive of all, perhaps, is the brazen assumption of Odysseus that virtue, as if it were a cloak, can be doffed or donned as the occasion requires: "We shall show ourselves as just men some other time," he tells Neoptolemus.⁵⁵ To all this Neoptolemus fittingly responds that he shudders to hear such words and loathes the thought of indulging in such deeds. Odysseus urges the patriotic argument that Neoptolemus' refusal will cause the Greeks much pain, but the really convincing argument is the assurance that thus and only thus will Neoptolemus obtain the glory of being the conqueror of Troy. Ambition to be known as a great warrior, the true successor of Achilles, the father whom he never saw alive and whose memory he worships (350-51), is obviously the most important weakness of his character.

The motivation of Odysseus more nearly approaches patriotism; but Odysseus is so lacking in any moral or religious consciousness that he can hardly represent the true patriot. Even in Sophocles' own day, furthermore, there was little unity among the various city states, and Panhellenic patriotism did not flourish. Never has rugged individualism been carried to such an extreme as among the Greeks, and never have its results been at once more glorious and more disastrous. The two great heroes of the victories over the Persians, Pausanias of Sparta and Themistocles of Athens, "the two most famous Hellenes of their day,"⁵⁶ were both accused of high treason and died in disgrace; Pausanias was starved to death in a temple at Sparta in which he had taken sanctuary, and Themistocles died at the court of the greatest enemy of Greece, the king of Persia!

For Philoctetes, likewise, patriotism is not a prime consideration. When Neoptolemus makes his final appeal near the end of the play, his strongest arguments are fame and restoration of health for Philoctetes. Loyalty to the Greek cause, though perhaps the winning argument in the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides, is not given any emphasis. We must not forget, of course, that Philoctetes had been foully mistreated by the Greeks and that his most outstanding characteristic is an obsession of hatred for the Greek leaders who caused this mistreatment.

The character of Neoptolemus is brought out more clearly by the contrast with that of Odysseus. In the first scene of the play this contrast points up the utter duplicity of the one and the essential honesty of the other. Once Neoptolemus has resolved to undertake the deception, the play becomes a study of how he succeeds with Philoctetes but fails with his own conscience. The characters of both are nicely designed to supplement each other and to make this development of the plot seem inevitable. The character of Neoptolemus inspires confidence in Philoctetes, and that of Philoctetes appeals to the sympathy of Neoptolemus. Neoptolemus, of course, was not a member of the original Greek expedition; he is unknown to Philoctetes, therefore, and free of any possible implication in the original injustice done. Achilles, his father, was the bitter enemy of subterfuge and device. The son is himself a young and mighty warrior. All these qualities recommend him to the confidence of Philoctetes. To increase the appeal of Philoctetes to Neoptolemus, on the other hand, Lemnos has been made, at least for Philoctetes, a deserted island, so that he may be utterly desolate and forlorn. Philoctetes is allowed to recite his own pitiful story. He moans at the news of the death of Achilles and equates Achilles with the god Apollo (336). Up to this point, Neoptolemus has been hard and calculating, but here he is obviously moved. Philoctetes then learns of the death of Ajax, and he bitterly contrasts the loss of these good men with the preservation of the evil Diomedes and Odysseus. The justice of this Neoptolemus is forced to admit, remarking that war ever likes to take away the good man and spare the evil (436-37), and he doubtless is again reminded of the evil character of his associate Odysseus. Philoctetes' abject plea to be rescued drives further into the compassion of the younger man. But still stronger appeals are to come: the confidence of Philoctetes and his willingness to let Neoptolemus alone of all men handle the bow—we should note the pathetic and profound gratitude of Philoctetes at this point. Then comes his paroxysm of pain, perhaps the strongest appeal of all to Neoptolemus. When Philoctetes revives, his gratitude to Neoptolemus is boundless. Last of all, his pitiful pleas—his life depends on the bow—and his disillusioned revilings after Neoptolemus has confessed his treachery would affect anyone except an Odysseus. Philoctetes strengthens his appeal also by citing Neoptolemus' promise and by mentioning the name of Achilles.⁶⁷ At this point, the resolve of Neoptolemus to go through with the intrigue is utterly broken, but he cannot bring himself to take the last irrevocable step of returning the bow. Odysseus enters, and, far from restoring the resolve of Neoptolemus, makes the return of the bow inevitable; for Neoptolemus, who stands silent throughout the bitter clash

between Philoctetes and Odysseus, cannot fail to see the cruel injustice and baseness of the one contrasted with the nobility of the other—the character of Odysseus is again used to bring out the character of another by contrast—or fail to admit the irony and injustice of the good fortune of Odysseus and the misery of Philoctetes (cf. 1019-28). The scene ends with an ambiguous speech of Neoptolemus, who still hopes somehow, it seems, to reconcile honor with expediency and cannot yet bring himself to reveal the duplicity of Odysseus.

After Neoptolemus has decided to return the bow, the clash between him and Odysseus brings out in action the same qualities of character which were revealed in their words during the first scene. We can hardly call Odysseus' refusal to fight the son of Achilles cowardice; his original challenge of the younger and mightier man was mere duplicity.

The influence of long suffering upon the character of Philoctetes is depicted with remarkable psychological acumen. Typical of one with a chronic and offensive illness is his fear that strangers will shun him (225-31), as, of course, he actually has been shunned in the past. He is disillusioned, and his pessimism extends to bitter condemnation of the gods (446-52). When Neoptolemus urges him to go willingly to Troy, he seems to take a spiteful child's delight in refusing fame and restoration to health because with these would inevitably come the triumph of Odysseus and the Greeks (cf. 1316-20). But in reality his hatred of those who have caused his long suffering has become an obsession which overwhelms his reason. Still, we can hardly fail to admire his steadfastness of purpose and his stubborn unwillingness to give way before misfortune, as we admire the same characteristics in Antigone and Prometheus,⁶⁸ although Philoctetes is defending a cause less admirable than theirs.

The *Philoctetes* reminds one somewhat of the *Iphigenia in Tauris* in its use of the *deus ex machina*. Near the end of the play Neoptolemus presents very strong arguments why Philoctetes should go with him to Troy, and Philoctetes is on the point of deciding to do so. Indeed, a final weakening of Philoctetes, while morally perhaps somewhat disappointing, might have been made plausible. Such a decision was the solution of the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides, in which it was doubtless made entirely plausible. A willing decision to lay aside personal hatred for the common welfare was obviously the only satisfactory solution in a play where patriotism was the primary theme. Sophocles, however, chooses a different solution, for the theme of his play is not patriotism but nobility of character. By making Philoctetes remain steadfast and Neoptolemus choose justice rather than apparent expedi-

diency, and then by employing the *deus ex machina* to end the play as legend demanded that it end, Sophocles is enabled to present both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus as stronger and more admirable characters. Neoptolemus, in choosing to fulfill his promise and take Philoctetes home, forfeits his hope of becoming the glorious conqueror of Troy—obviously the greatest of all his ambitions. This choice is the final triumph of justice in his character. If Sophocles had presented Philoctetes as weakening and going to Troy of his own accord, Neoptolemus never would have been forced to make this final moral choice. Thus the *deus ex machina* in this play seems to be employed primarily to perfect the characterization of these two men.

7. *OEDIPUS AT COLONUS (OEDIPUS COLONEUS)

(401 B.C.)

Sophocles died in 406 B.C., and the *Oedipus at Colonus* was produced after his death by his grandson and namesake, who was himself a writer of tragedies. First prize was awarded this play and those produced with it.⁹⁹

Deeply concerned, perhaps, over the desperate situation of Athens when this play was being written, Sophocles here is apparently attempting to revive the confidence of the Athenians in themselves and to restore their belief in the destiny of their city.¹⁰⁰ The poet's concern with contemporary Athens, which naturally has discouraged ancient or modern adaptations of this play, and his religious mysticism may somewhat repel the modern reader. The play is nevertheless an artistic work of universal significance and beauty—a dramatic and poetic masterpiece.

The *Oedipus at Colonus* does not form a connected and wholly consistent story with the much earlier plays of Sophocles dealing with these same characters. In general, however, the action of this play is supposed to follow that of the *Oedipus the King* and to precede that of the *Antigone*. The action of the *Antigone* is here adumbrated repeatedly by Antigone's championship of the cause of Polyneices, by Polyneices' plea for burial rites if he is slain, and by the sisters' return to Thebes at the end of the play.

Legend.—The location of the grave of Oedipus was a much-disputed point in ancient times. Euripides in the *Phoenissae* (1703–9), a play produced only a few years before the *Oedipus at Colonus*, is the first author definitely to place his death at Colonus.¹⁰¹ Euripides, however, gives no hint that Oedipus found refuge in a grove of the Eumeni-

des or that his death was accompanied by supernatural phenomena. Graves of heroes were often considered protective influences for the land in ancient times. Near Colonus in 407 B.C. the Athenians had actually defeated a Boeotian detachment in a skirmish. This defeat of the Thebans, of course, is the benefit which Oedipus in Sophocles' play repeatedly promises Theseus and Athens. The reference of Euripides and this actual battle may have inspired Sophocles to write the play.

One minor but dramatically significant change in the legend may be noticed: Sophocles makes the exiled Polyneices the older son. Since this is contrary to the versions of Aeschylus and Euripides, the point is made repeatedly and very clearly. The obvious purpose of this change is to strengthen the appeal of Polyneices and his cause.

Discussion.—Written when Sophocles was almost ninety years old, the *Oedipus at Colonus* in a way sums up the work of his whole life. Like the *Triptolemus*,¹⁰² which was perhaps one of the plays produced for his first victory in 468 B.C., the *Oedipus at Colonus* is primarily an etiological explanation of an Athenian religious belief and a glorious tribute to Athens and Colonus, the district of Sophocles' own home. In this play, furthermore, reappear those two characters which were probably the greatest creations of his career: Oedipus and Antigone.

The figure of Oedipus is one of extraordinary impressiveness. He retains the heroic grandeur which Sophocles originally gave him. He continually insists upon his moral innocence, but he still exhibits his great weaknesses—high spirit and passionate wrath—and these are pointed out as the curse of his life.¹⁰³ They are most evident in the appalling scene with Polyneices. Still, the nobility with which Oedipus has weathered the most dreadful calamities and years of suffering makes him, though obviously cruel in cursing his sons, at once a more appealing and a more impressive character than he was in the *Oedipus the King*. He rises to his greatest height in the mystic finale of the play. "Magnificent are the images which Sophocles has conceived of the death of Oedipus," says "Longinus" (15.7, Rhys Roberts¹⁰⁴), "who makes ready his burial amid the portents of the sky."

The figure of Antigone also is a memorable one. She is clearly the more spirited of the two daughters, but there is no suggestion that Ismene lacks courage or devotion. Antigone here appears somewhat more feminine than in the earlier play. The portrayal of her distracted grief in the final scenes is profoundly moving and deserves the highest praise.

The unity of the play has sometimes been impugned, but adverse criticisms on this point are unjustified.¹⁰⁵ The subject of the play is Oedipus' search for peace in a befitting death. Although the oracle

(87-90) assures his eventual success, three main obstacles arise: threatened expulsion from Attica, the efforts of the present Theban government to gain control of him, and the efforts of the opposition under Polyneices to do the same. The second obstacle and, by implication, the third (392, 417) are skillfully announced before the first has been overcome. If Oedipus had been expelled from Attica, furthermore, he would obviously have fallen victim to one of the two contending parties at Thebes, who are not beyond the use of force. The action of the play is closely knit, therefore, as well as rapid and dramatic. The play is some two hundred fifty lines longer than any other extant play of Sophocles and is filled with spirited action. Indeed it can be presented by three speaking actors only with great difficulty. Oedipus himself, like Sophocles' Electra, remains on the scene almost continuously and dominates the action throughout.

The continuous presence of Oedipus, the desire for rapidity, and the high pitch of the emotional tone are well served by the unusually large number of lyric exchanges between characters and chorus (*kommoi*). At the exciting climax when Antigone is being dragged away by the henchmen of Creon, such lyrics are employed with iambic lines separating strophe and antistrophe (epirrhetic construction). As Theseus here rushes in to the rescue, his first lines are in the excited trochaic measure. The final scenes after the Messenger's speech, also, are wholly in anapestic or lyric measures. Such metrical fluidity, to a certain extent characteristic of this period, adds to the theatrical effectiveness of the presentation, and the lyrics thus allowed add to the poetic qualities of the play.

The poetry of the *Oedipus at Colonus* is unsurpassed in Sophocles. The choral lyric in praise of Athens (668-719) ranks with the speech of Pericles in Thucydides (2.35-46) and with the choral lyric in Euripides' *Medea* (824-45) as one of the most glorious tributes ever made to the most deserving of all cities. The lyric on old age, also, is noteworthy (1211-48). Depressing in its profound pessimism, this poem is very different from Euripides' enthusiastic verses written on his sixtieth birthday, so to speak, in the *Heracles* (637-700). Euripides, however, was writing when Athens despite some ten years of war was still a powerful city, Sophocles when Athens was face to face with defeat and ruin. Euripides' zest for life was still that of a youth ready to live life over again; Sophocles was an old man ready to die. But perhaps it is unfair to attribute the sentiments of this lyric in any part to Sophocles himself; certainly this lyric is closely knit with its dramatic context and effectively prepares for the coming death of Oedipus.

Like the other late plays of Sophocles, the *Oedipus at Colonus* is

heavily indebted to Euripides. Besides being inspired perhaps by the *Phoenissae*, the poet owes much to plays like the *Suppliants* for the figure of Theseus and the theme of Athens as the refuge of the persecuted and oppressed, although Euripides himself found this theme in Aeschylus. Indebtedness might be pointed out in metrical and various other aspects, but these obligations are of trivial importance in this instance; for the *Oedipus at Colonus* has been so heavily charged with Sophocles' own genius that essentially it is an entirely original and harmonious production.