

Chapter 7.2: Sophocles

His Greatest Achievements

- prominent public figure in his day
 - **Sophocles** was chosen to lead the celebrations after the Second Persian War
 - when still young, he defeated the veteran Aeschylus at the Dionysia
 - won an unmatched number of victories there
 - elected *strategos* twice and **proboulos** (413)
 - after death, was made a hero (**Dexion**)

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His Greatest Achievements

- advances he introduced to theatre
 - focus on the “dramatic situation,” e.g. scenes where all three participants react differently
 - he made the **chorus** smaller in number and more of an interpreter than a participant in the dramatic action
 - cf. ***On the Chorus***
 - used simple but multi-layered **language**
 - wrote the first known “**unconnected trilogies**”

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His Greatest Achievements

- subverted the audience's traditional expectation of a character's behavior morality
 - **Deianeira**: confused, not vengeful
 - **Phaedra**: seeking a political, not an erotic connection with Hippolytus
 - **Oedipus**: ignorant and essentially innocent, instead a power-hungry tyrant who'd do the unthinkable to keep his throne

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His Greatest Achievements

- the superiority of the audience over the characters on stage
 - a reflection of their—and Sophocles’—position in *theatron*
 - cf. the gods in Homer on Mount Ida
 - especially Zeus in Book 16 of *The Iliad* who weeps “tears of blood” for his son Sarpedon whom the Fates have condemned to death

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The Seven Extant Tragedies

***Ajax* (ca. 440 BCE)**

- opening scene: Athena shows Odysseus how she has beguiled Ajax
- Ajax' suicide requires a change of scene
- Tecmessa's lament

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The Seven Extant Tragedies

***Antigone*, ca. 441 BCE**

- probably Sophocles' most produced play today
- who is the central character (hero):
Antigone or Creon
- the double burial?
- best character: the Guard, a comic figure which is a rarity in Sophocles

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Trachiniae (Women of Trachis)

- about the death of Heracles (Hercules)
- best scene: Deianeira's prologue (the reality of women's lives in antiquity)
- in the finale, the dying Heracles seems pointlessly long-winded and cruel

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The Seven Extant Tragedies

***Oedipus (Tyrannos)*, ca. 428 BCE**

- Sophocles' most famous and respected play, both in antiquity and now
- but exposition is problematic
 - why hasn't the truth surfaced earlier?
- does Sophocles' experiment (to reform Oedipus' character) work?
 - is that why it failed to win first prize?

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The Seven Extant Tragedies

***Electra* (420's BCE?)**

- in many ways his best surviving play, to judge by its current reception today
- Electra is psychologically (psychotically?) opposed to her mother
- two excellent scenes:
 - urn scene: Electra clings to Orestes' ashes
 - murder: Orestes murders Clytemnestra

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***Philoctetes* (409 BCE)**

- written in the wake of the Sicilian Expedition and the Oligarchic Revolution
- reflects a world fractured and disillusioned
- major question: should Philoctetes follow his mythologically predestined fate and return to Troy, despite all his suffering?
- *deus ex machina*: Heracles

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The Seven Extant Tragedies

Oedipus at Colonus

- Sophocles' last play, produced posthumously
- how much of it is by Sophocles?
- best scene: the messenger's report of Oedipus' apotheosis at Colonus who will subsequently bless Athens after death

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The Lost Sophocles

- very few papyri containing Sophocles
 - despite Aristotle and the approbation of later Roman critics and adapters, how popular was Sophocles really?
- *Niobe*: Apollo and Artemis shoot down the children of Niobe