

Notes on drama

Tragedy

Sophocles

The Oedipus Trilogy

Sophocles

- ✿ 496-406 BC
- ✿ Considered one of the fathers of Greek Tragedy
- ✿ Wrote more than 120 plays, but only seven have survived through history.
- ✿ His plays almost always won at competitive festivals.
- ✿ Was a talented, wealthy, and popular citizen in his own time
- ✿ Revolutionized tragic drama by adding a third actor, changing the role of the chorus, and experimenting with scenery.

Origins of drama

- ⚙ Drama is believed to have evolved from religious celebrations honoring the Greek god Dionysus.
- ⚙ These celebrations involved singing, dancing, drinking lots of non-alcoholic beverages, and reciting stories of gods and heroes.
- ⚙ Over time, the celebrations developed more formal rules, and instead of merely telling stories, performers began acting them out.
- ⚙ Theater was very popular and very important to the Greeks. It was a way to honor the gods and heroes, as well as an entertaining and artistic way to explore humanity.

Important terms

- ⊗ **Tragedy:** a dramatic work of art which features the downfall or destruction of the main character (the protagonist)
- ⊗ **Tragic figure/hero:** the protagonist in a tragedy who starts off in an “elevated” position (powerful, noble, dignified, potential for greatness) and loses everything or dies due to poor choices, bad luck, or destiny. Rather than blame others or resist the inevitable, the tragic figure accepts his fate with honor and dignity.

Important terms

- ☼ **Tragic flaw:** the inherent defect or weakness that brings about the destruction or downfall of the tragic figure. This weakness could be a negative trait, like greed, desire for power, or envy, or it could be an excess of a positive trait, like ambition, trust, or pride. It could also be an “error of judgment” (hamartia)
- ☼ **Hubris:** Excessive arrogance or prideful disregard for human limitations.
- ☼ **Catharsis:** the release of emotions. The ancient Greeks believed that watching a tragedy was like therapy, allowing the audience to purify themselves through the release of powerful emotions like pity and fear. By experiencing these emotions vicariously through the tragic figure, the spectator gains insight into his own humanity.

Important terms

- ⚙ **The chorus:** A group of actors who usually stand off to the side of the stage and can comment on the plays actions and themes, sing songs or recite poetry between acts and scenes, and even interact with the characters. They often represent how the audience might (or should) feel and react, or sometimes represent a group of elderly men. Their function was to help the audience follow the play by providing necessary background information and additional insight into its meaning.

Important terms

- ⊗ The three Unities: (Aristotelian Unities): Rules or guidelines for drama.
- ⊗ Unity of Action: An efficient play should have one main plot, with few subplots or characters who don't advance the main action.
- ⊗ Unity of Time: The action in the play should take place within 24 hours.
- ⊗ Unity of Place: The stage should represent one place.

The Oedipus Trilogy

- ☼ Oedipus Rex
- ☼ Oedipus at Colonus
- ☼ Antigone
- ☼ Although Antigone is the third play in the trilogy, it is believed to have been written first.

The Oedipus Trilogy

- ☼ King Laios and Queen Jacosta of Thebes learn from an oracle (fortune teller) that their son would eventually kill his father and marry his mother.
- ☼ They give the baby to a shepherd with orders to kill it.
- ☼ The shepherd takes pity on the baby and instead gives it away.
- ☼ The baby ends up being adopted by the childless king and queen of nearby Corinth.
- ☼ Oedipus grows up never knowing he is adopted.

The Oedipus Trilogy

- ☼ Oedipus eventually learns that he is supposed to kill his parents, so he runs away to avoid this terrible fate.
- ☼ During his travels, he encounters an arrogant old man on the road, they argue and fight, and Oedipus kills him.
- ☼ He ends up at Thebes, which is being terrorized by a mythological monster, the Sphinx.
- ☼ Oedipus defeats the Sphinx and saves Thebes. He is hailed as a hero and savior, and is offered the crown.
- ☼ He also gets to marry the queen, and they have two boys, Polynieces and Eteocles, and two girls, Ismene and Antigone.

The Oedipus Trilogy

- ⊗ Things were fine for many years until a terrible plague struck Thebes.
- ⊗ Oedipus learns that the plague is a curse from the gods, and will only end when the murderer of old King Laios is caught and punished.
- ⊗ Oedipus vows to save Thebes again and catch the murderer, who is living among them undetected.

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- ⊗ Oedipus eventually learns the entire truth.
- ⊗ Jocasta, his wife and mother, hangs herself in horror.
- ⊗ Oedipus gouges out his eyes and is now blind.
- ⊗ Creon, the queen's brother, temporarily takes over as acting ruler of Thebes, and banishes Oedipus.
- ⊗ Oedipus and Antigone wander the countryside as beggars until he dies, and Antigone returns to Thebes.

The Oedipus Trilogy

- ☼ King Oedipus' sons, Polynieces and Eteocles, are now old enough to rule, and agree to rule in alternating years.
- ☼ Eteocles goes first, but refuses to relinquish the throne at the end of his turn.
- ☼ Polynieces is angered, flees the city, raises an army, and attacks his brother and the city of Thebes.
- ☼ Thebes is able to withstand the attack, but the brothers kill one another in battle.

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- ☼ Creon becomes the ruler of Thebes again, and is left to clean up the mess.
- ☼ He decides to give Eteocles a hero's ceremony and burial.
- ☼ He considers Polynieces, who attacked his hometown and family, a traitor, and will not allow anyone to perform the burial ceremony.
- ☼ Antigone begins the morning after Thebes' victory, the brothers' deaths, and Creon's decree.